

IV International Congress on Islamic Feminism, 21-24 October 2010, organized by Junta Islámica Catalana (JIC) [Catalan Islamic Council], Madrid-Spain

The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), the Women's Institute (Ministry of Equality), the Madrid Autonomous Community, Casa Árabe, and Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia Casa Asia hosted, in cooperation with Junta Islámica Catalana (JIC) and with the collaboration of the United States Embassy in Spain and the Iranian Embassy in Spain, the fourth congress on "Islamic Feminism" from October 21 to 24. The organizers placed the emphasis of the proceedings on the analysis of the present status of the movement and future perspectives. They sought to understand the reasons for opposing Islamic feminism – on the part of both non-Muslims and Muslims – and to seek ways to appropriately counteract such trends. The congress attempted to explore the potential of Islamic Feminism to change the experiences of Muslim women in the different contexts in which they face discrimination.

Focusing on these issues, the participants offered a number of different analytical solutions. Some participants, such as Omaima Abou Bakr (Egypt), critiqued the hegemonic discourse of scholars, the main approaches of which in Islam are hermeneutics (*tafsīr*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*), methods pursued at institutions such as al-Azhar University and elsewhere.

The core idea, for Abou Bakr, is to free the reading of Islamic texts from mostly male-dominated interpretation or simply dominant cultural traditions so as to enable gender-neutral and equitable interpretations of the Qur'ān.

Other participants, such as Houria Bouteldja (France) and Zahira Kamal (Palestine) are better categorized as activists and have a more significant practical relevance. They reported on the status and situation of Muslim women in their respective regional contexts of action and showed how the tools of Islamic feminism can be used in women's rights discourse to address issues such as raising the age of marriage in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Laure Rodríguez Quiroga (Spain) described the problems that Spain's approximately 1.5 million Muslims, whether Spanish-born or otherwise, experience as minorities in a Western European country

and the stereotypical perceptions of Muslims due to media coverage and the excessive focus on rather statistically insignificant phenomena, such as the *burqa*. Arzu Merali (England) highlighted differences in the development of Eurocentric feminism and the existing feminism movements in decolonized developing countries.

In another panel, Durre S. Ahmed (Pakistan) highlighted the relationship between masculinity and spirituality in Islam from a psychoanalytic point of view, closely following the concepts of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud.

Later there was a reading of a paper by Fariba Alasvand (Iran), as she could not attend because of visa problems. She presented the doctrine of the Iranian theological center of Qum, according to which gender roles are fixed. She addressed the incompatibility of Islam and feminism but said that in the Islamic understanding of human nature, there is no essential gender difference, except in the context of the family organization, in which different roles are assigned. However, Ziba Mir Hosseini, who is also from Iran but lives in England, argued that the combination of the Islamic legal tradition and feminism enables a new dialogue, pointing out that in Iran, secular and religious feminists now work together more closely than ever before as they pursue the same goals.

Mir Hosseini, and later the theologian Juan José Tamayo-Acosta (Spain), referred to the importance of the approach of liberation theology, which is equally important for Islam as it is for Christianity. She even took the view that the concepts of Islam and feminism overlap, pointing out links between liberation theology and Islamic feminism. However, she also said political engagement is necessary to highlight grievances.

Another panel focused on the relation between Qur'anic hermeneutics and women's rights as human rights, as well as the importance of interreligious feminist hermeneutics for Islamic feminism. The disparity between the self-descriptions of the female speakers, who introduced themselves sometimes explicitly as either Muslim feminists or Islamic feminists, led on several occasions to requests by other participants for more precise definitions.

Margot Badran, who was unfortunately unable to participate in this conference, could have certainly contributed here. Instead, Mir Hosseini found herself asked to make a statement. For her, there existed no actual difference between Islamic and Muslim feminism in

objectives, but only in strategy, which is why they also saw no great need to anchor or manifest this conceptual distinction in their discourse.

Another focus of the conference was Sufi perspectives on the topic of gender and Islam. Here, Sa‘diyya Shaikh presented a very sophisticated account of the spiritual dimension in relation to gender and the “greater Jihad” with reference to Ibn al-‘Arabī. At this point, Maryam Faye (EEUU), Sheikha of the Muşţafawiyya Sufi Order, had the opportunity to present her specific vision and approach.

“We miss diversity!” said many of the participating women and I. There was not much progress observable in the discourse of the event. The state of “Islamic feminism” is still the same as it was 10 years ago, and it is still not clear whether it is now actually a social project or “only” a scholar’s in-house discussion. The heterogeneity among Muslims and within Islam is certainly relevant to why the Islamic feminism movement has not advanced as much as some of its representatives would like.

In that regard, one can agree with Omaima Abou Bakr: the diffusion of the discourse has now led to a point at which it is not clear what is actually meant by the term “Islamic feminism.”

For many, this term has always been misleading, perhaps because this ambition is seen as genuinely rooted in Islam or because it suggests too strongly an association with the West and thus the feminism of the Christian and Jewish traditions. Perhaps this term is actually only appropriate for self-description. It certainly cannot describe a closed or objective-based project.

The term is only useful if the global network of Muslim women and women’s activists is being promoted. Committed *Muslimas* have long known this. Whether a generic term that is also still in dispute is necessary remains to be seen. Presumably, sociologists and politicians need such a term so that they can talk about something “special.”

Women and committed *Muslimas* participating in the discourse are thereby exposed to the danger of becoming unable to conduct internal dialogue and constructive debate because of the problem of naming and defining an identifier. Thus, they further separate instead of moving toward each other.

The conference did not determine precisely who belongs in the

category of Islamic feminism and who does not. Can a *Muslima* count as a feminist who advocates women's rights as human rights but at the same time holds the opinion that the woman's role is at the side of the man and so deriving from this in an essentialist manner her primary duties as a mother and wife? A discussion of such basic questions did not take place, not even when a young *Muslima* urged participants not to define the obligation to wear the headscarf from the perspective of a Western feminist conception of freedom.

It remains to be seen whether a unified understanding of feminism will take root in Islam or whether, instead, different feminisms will appear. As an internal scholarly discourse, as understood by Abou Bakr, Islamic feminism certainly exists. However, whether it reaches and appeals in this respect to the entire community of Muslims is questionable. Theologically, it is obviously having an effect. From a sociological point of view and considering the different conditions in individual countries in terms of the economic, cultural and social contexts, there are many other factors and "feminist" mechanisms at play than those that are singled out as "Islamic feminism."

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