

From the construction of a European feminine Muslim identity to the emergence of a feminist consciousness.

Malika Hamidi,

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I welcome such an initiative in organizing a public meeting about this topic, because it seems so essential today to exchange feelings and experiences between women and to share it in a genuine climate of mutual confidence.

I will present a viewpoint of a Muslim activist who is in-between the grass roots level and the academic level on the issue of Women and Islam in the West.

I don't aim at questioning the controversial concept of « Muslim/Islamic feminism » in this presentation, but to focus on the emergence of a Muslim feminist awareness in Europe today. This new “model/profile” of European Muslim women is half-way between the western model of emancipation and the traditional model of the Muslim woman.

They are reshaping a European feminine Muslim identity in a new way, being between two systems of values. Thus, they are developing a double strategy of liberation: On the one hand, they are promoting an autonomous interpretation of the Scriptural Sources (Koran and Sunnah) from a feminine perspective; and on the other hand, they are developing a citizen's discourse against all forms of discriminations they are facing in the civil society, a discourse faithful to the universal values.

My speech is about 3 main points :

1 The emergence of a new feminist consciousness, this movement of Muslim women crossing European societies today.

2 The discriminations these women are facing from within their community of faith as well as in the civil society.

3 What kind of actions to fight these discriminations here in Europe? Can we speak about “Gender solidarity” for a real equality whatever is the ethnic, cultural, social or religious background of these women?

1 – The emergence of a “new model” of Muslim women activists and intellectuals, claiming for their rights in their own community of faith and in the civil society:

The newness at the heart of the debates is that women are mobilizing relevant religious strategies to escape to the discriminations.

Often, they wear a headscarf and they stand out by their religious practices and their citizen's discourse from the traditional Islam of the previous generations, confirming clearly their opposition to a certain form of patriarchy sacred by the religion.

There is a re-appropriation of the religious debate as a means of confirmation of their being. One of the objectives will be to promote an autonomous interpretation and a contextualized approach of the Scriptural Sources.

Therefore, they decide to rethink and reshape a “New model” of “Muslim women” in a European context, elaborating a new reflection of their religious belonging as a European citizen, going from their religious principles to the Universal Values.

The challenge is to face the discriminations they are victim of, not from a communitarian but from a citizen's speech, arguing it is the human dignity which is under threat.

These speeches have been qualified as “Muslim feminism/Islamic feminism” everywhere in the West and in the Muslim, because it’s a new way of thinking: feminist in its demands and deeply rooted in the Muslim tradition.

There is a will to promote the Gender justice and equality for women even if there is not always agreement in the definition of certain concepts such as the issue of “equality” (some women situate themselves in the “differentialism” that places women in their physical and psychological difference). They have a feminist stand to gain political, social and economical equality, which must not lead to the negation of the femininity. It’s equality in the difference.

Thus, by involving religious debates, they denounce the inequalities in the Islamic law, arguing it’s a human construction. They are denouncing traditional and cultural practices as well, which have nothing to do with religion.

Islamic knowledge serves as a tool to counteract traditional practices in the Muslim tradition.

This brings me to my second point:

2 - Thanks to the Islamic knowledge, the re-appropriation of the religious debates and local initiatives at the grass roots level:

On the one hand and from within their community of faith: they are questioning some cultural practices, that have nothing to do with Islam such as the issue of forced marriages, excision, domestic violence, honor killings ... There’s a will to be considered in the Islamic discourse through their own nature, in their femininity, their sensitivity as a woman, and no longer just as a “mother or a wife”.

In short, they refuse to be taken into hostage by a literalist approach of the Scriptural Sources.

On the other hand, they have to fight to demand equal citizenship in the civil society having the feeling to be considered as second class citizens.

They also refuse the political manipulation on the issue of “Women and Islam” to demonize Islam in political debates. This fight will operate itself in the name of citizen's values and human dignity. They no longer wish to be perceived as a minority that demands to be recognized. They are actors of their own history and destiny on the side of other women.

They are mobilizing themselves in order to develop alliances with women from diverse backgrounds, because the strategies for emancipation are diverse and the egalitarian spirit of the Koran can marry the feminist quest, but above all they face the challenge of proving a liberation of women from the inside of Islam is possible. They can get involved with the Western feminist movement as their struggles are the same: fighting against all kind of discriminations and subordinations women are victim of. In other words, struggling for social, economic and political equality.

We are really attending the emergence of a Universal feminist discourse. This movement seems to be on the move.

3- Finally, how leading common actions when dealing with “Gender solidarity”?

From within the Muslim community:

- We need a reassertion of the « feminine Muslim memory ». We may find in the Muslim civilization and in the literature dedicated to “women in Islam”, important figures of mythical women, who had taken part to the Golden Age of Islam. By promoting those Women, a lot of feminists denounce the fact that the banning of women from religious sphere is an injustice and a recent phenomenon.
- Establishing an inventory as to the situation of Western Muslim women from a woman point of view, asking audacious questions that could help in changing mentalities by promoting the use of *Ijtihad* (the effort of interpretation of the Sources) and according to the western context in order to extract the traditional practices from the Message.
- The question of education and training :

A woman is deprived of her rights and freedom when she doesn't have any access to education and knowledge of her religion. There's an urgent need to promote education for young Muslims and parents (who still have a cultural practice of Islam because of a lack of education and knowledge).

In the civil society, on the side of women from different backgrounds:

We need to create platform of discussion and action at local and national level in order to bypass fears and stereotypes, that enable any dialogue, and therefore any mutual knowledge.

Therefore :

- A deeper analysis of the colonial past and the relationship governments entertain with Islam, which is somehow responsible of ethnic, racial and religious discriminations on the ground towards Muslim community.
- fighting against all discriminating laws (in the field of work, housing, education ...)
- To quest and look back to concepts such as modernism, universalism; “laïcité”, equality, citizenship and creating a debate with figures of the civil and political society.

- Studying religions and trying to be included in the elaboration of the programmes.
- Denouncing the fact that some women in Europe are still being victims of personal status in their original countries, which is sometimes discriminatory (e.g. : Morocco)
- Questioning the western universal model of liberation that seems to be the only source guarantor for universal values, and promoting the plurality of feminism, which is the only means of being able to collaborate on common grounds in order to create a “universal and transnational feminist movement” in a wide world scale.

To conclude with, this presentation may seem optimistic and one should bear in mind that there are many obstacles, because all women who wear the Hidjab and who claim for their religious rights don't always identify themselves as feminists. There is a misunderstanding on the concept of “feminism” related to the colonial period when using it. Some Muslim women have a negative view seeing this movement as a struggle against Men. There is still a minority in Europe who defined themselves as Muslim feminist even if the concept seems to emerge more and more around Europe and further afield..

Nonetheless, these emerging feminist voices are in a unique position to improve their condition everywhere in the world. It's a transnational feminist movement of resistance which is on the move. The consequences may be important from a social and political point of view in the West and in the Muslim world as well. They wish to fight for a more justice and equality: for a society with a more human outlook. The aim is important, because this is the Western model of liberation which is questioned by those Muslim feminists, who define themselves from a religious point of view, as the Moroccan intellectual Asma Lamrabet has already highlighted.