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Women, war and Fundamentalism in the Middle East

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A constructive discussion and dialogue about Islam and gender has never been free of its controversies. The task has been how to explain the stubborn survival of traditions and practices hostile to women in Islamic societies without adding to the arsenal of racist imagery about Islam and Muslim women, targeting diasporic communities in the West. How to challenge the inferiorizing stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women without resorting to apologetic and self-glorifying accounts of Islam and Muslims.

But taking up this subject is a daunting job particularly in post- September 11 events. No doubt the tragic events of September 11 traumatized many people and the horrifying loss of life of so many innocent people robbed everyone off our sense of security. But this has been particularly true of those of us who are of Middle Eastern origin. Many feel that they have all been implicated in this tragedy in one way or the other. Many of us have gone through the experience of having lost loved ones as a result of different forms of violence and terrorism in our home counties. What was the first direct experience in North America of feeling that their cities are under attack, has been a way of life for many people from the Middle East. But the continued harassment of people who are or appear to be Muslim or of Middle Eastern origin has for ever damaged our sense of belonging. A feeling of shame and responsibility for what

happened on September 11 has been imposed on all diaspora of Middle Eastern background. As if it is wrong to be concerned that many innocent people in Afghanistan have become the target of retaliation for a crime they did not commit. If you stand against war and in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan, the citizens of a poor and devastated country who have for many years suffered terribly under various brands of Islamic fundamentalism and foreign intervention, you may risk being accused of supporting terrorism.

In this context, it is indeed a formidable job for any individual from Islamic cultures to keep focus. For all this, unfortunately has created a sort of defensiveness in many individuals coming from the region which discourages critical thinking and critical analysis. As a gender-conscious woman from an Islamic culture who has experienced, first hand, the consequences of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in my home-country, I feel agonized by this observation. For, as I have argued elsewhere ¹ I do not believe the political choice facing intellectuals in the Middle East is as limited as it is often implied. We can keep our critical stance against various forms of violence and terrorism that has engulfed Islamic societies and, against foreign interests and policies have which in fact nourished and sustained them. We should be able to clearly and unconditionally condemn the horrifying loss of life of innocent people in the World Trade Center as well as the wanton bombing of innocent people of Afghanistan.

However, what we have heard and seen since September 11, from the Muslim communities in the West and from anti-imperialist intellectuals, has been mostly justificatory accounts about Islam and its practices, included the much popularised concept

¹ H. Moghissi (1999) *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism, The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, (London: Zed Press).

of Jihad that has been used abundantly on both sides. Ziauddin Sardar is right in criticizing Muslims from Egypt to Malaysia for denying to see terrorism as a problem in the Islamic world and for blaming everyone but themselves and not seeing own mistakes and shortcomings, such as the absence of political freedom, open debate, civility, and pluralism as the breeding ground for Islamic movements.

It should go without saying that I am not disputing the need for countering the recurrent Islamophobia of media and governments in the West and the racist imagery about Islam and Muslims – the imagery that reduces the life experiences of people from the region to religion and religion alone. Underlying such images is the assumption that Islam is a blanket under which people from Islamic cultures are huddled together regardless of their regional, ethnic, cultural, class and gender differences. However, the best way to counter this imagery is not to deny the more punishing features of Islamic practices and traditions, particularly for women, and focusing, instead, on the positive aspects of Islamic culture. To unconditionally defend Islam in its totality is the wrong strategy for countering these views. It is to defend the un-defendable. In fact, nothing would contrast the stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims better than raising one's voice against oppressive features of cultural traditions or the inhumane practices of Islamist movements and fundamentalist regimes. To keep an open mind and not fear critiques and self-critique would discredit the monolithic, static conception of Islam promoted by both leaders of fundamentalist movements and rulers that there is one 'true' and 'authentic' Islam based on the 'correct' interpretation of the scripture. It would also be the best way to counter

the homogenizing perceptions about people from the Middle East advertised by governments and the media in the West which obscure the profound heterogeneity of peoples from Muslim societies within or without the Middle East and their differing understanding and interpretations of Islam(s) and *Shari'a*. To offer apologetic accounts of *Shari'a* does the opposite.

Which is to say that to defend Islam and Muslims against the well-stocked arsenal of anti-Islamic, anti-Arab/Iranian stereotypes can hardly be done through apologetic accounts of women's rights in Islamic *Shari'a*. To argue, for example, that there are preconditions, including the testimony of four eye witnesses, for carrying out the *Shari'a* sentence of flogging or stoning to death of women and men on charges of adultery, or legally sanctioned murder of a wife accused of adultery by her husband (honour killing), can hardly convince us that the provisions of *Shari'a* are compatible with the principles of human rights. If all the pre conditions of these punishments are met, they cannot make legally sanctioned violence against women acceptable and just. And let us not obscure the fact that the testimony of four eye witnesses required by law, is admissible only from *four men* or two men and *four women*, as according to the Islamic *Shari'a*, the testimony of two women equals that of one man. No amount of twisting and bending can change the fact that if the principles of the *Shari'a* are to be maintained, women cannot be treated any better. Indeed, if religious texts and instructions are taken literally, gender equality cannot be achieved in any society, Islamic or non-Islamic.

To be sure, fundamentalism in all religions is a deadly force that uses every possible means to carry its messages. In North America it shows no mercy for the

innocent lives lost in abortion clinics; in Israel it doesn't hesitate to open fire on Muslim worshipers who stand in the way of the creation of a Jewish "promised" land; and in Muslim societies Islamic fundamentalism, that has victimized more people inside the region than outside it and more women than men, takes its most passionately articulated mission to be restoring conservative religious doctrine and teachings on women's status. Indeed, contempt for women's intelligence and emotional and moral stability is the marker of Fundamentalists' religious instructions and moral regime. The archaic provisions of Islamic legal codes and criminal justice, such as the barbaric form of prescribed punishment (including stoning to death) violates the basic human rights of both sexes. But Islamic legal practices are clearly and unapologetically harsher on women. To such ends, they dig up medieval Islamic texts prescribing moral codes or invent rules of conducts when the need arise. Afghanistan under Talibans and present-day Iran provides numerous examples of 'Islamic traditions' whose origin, Islamic or otherwise, cannot easily be traced.

Given these facts, the struggle against this formidable force cannot be postponed until the situation calms down. Such a strategy would only help the region's reactionary religious and political establishments to wall themselves off against internal challenges and popular demands. When even doubting the rationality of the application of Islamic *Shari'a* at this time and age can be a life-threatening activity (as is the case in many Muslim countries) are women not justified in refusing to cheer for "democracy" as one Islamic force, replaces another? Should they not feel "outsiders" to the patriotic and nationalist projects in

the region? The latest show staged by US-led anti-terrorist coalition and Afghan male elite and the response to it by Afghan women's organizations such as Afghanistan Feminist Association, Afghan Women's Network, WAPHA and RAWA are a clear manifestation of the future prospects for women in Afghanistan.

Not even fully in control of the state power, the authorities of Afghanistan's interim government are trying to curb expectations with regard to women's rights and status in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Indeed the statements such as those made by new Justice Minister that the country's legal system and new justice will continue to be based on "traditional Islamic law, not an imported, Western-style system"² leaves no room for speculation as to what will survive and what will change in "liberated" Afghanistan. Time and time again we have seen that Western governments concern themselves with violations of women's rights in Muslim societies whenever a defiant client state has to be punished by the stick of women's rights, as presently is the case in Afghanistan. It is then reasonable to assume that once the US-led strike in Afghanistan come to an end and the Northern Alliance forces are fully and firmly in control, rhetoric about Afghan women's human rights will also end. Chilling statements by the "moderate" fundamentalists now in power confirm a reality already known to women living under rigid Islamic rule – that women will continue to be brutalized and caught in a deadly crossfire between the competing Islamists forces who each claim to be the bearer of "true" Islam.

Today, the fallacy of the promise that women's demands will be met, automatically, when the movement for democracy succeeds is clear to many

² The Globe and Mail, Toronto, December 27, 2001.

women. Women's experiences of the last two decades in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region have made it abundantly clear that the meaningful change for women only will begin when the clerical grip on political institutions and the law-making processes is broken and a clear separation of state from religion is materialized. Only with such developments (which include the removal of Shar'ia from the legal system) women will begin to gain full citizenship status and legal equality with men. The same is true for religious minorities against whom Shari`a-based laws un-apologetically discriminate. In this context, a most urgent question would be what is the most reasonable and effective way to defend the rights of women in Islamic cultures to autonomy, dignity and self-fulfillment? We may not have a response to that question. But we know for sure that defending outdated practices and traditions because they are home-grown, non-Western and non-Eurocentric will not take us in that direction.

Within this context, the choice of gender-conscious women from the region is clear. That is to go beyond "us" and "them" and to refuse self-glorification or self-pity. The choice is to free ourselves from "unreal loyalties" which spring from pride of nationality, religious pride, family pride and all other sorts of pride, as Virginia Woolf wrote over half a century ago.³ Writing from the stand point of an "outsider" to social, political and cultural life in England of her time, she declared that her sex and class had very little to do with patriotic and nationalist projects of the "educated" men who were preparing for the Second World War in her country.

[I]f you insist upon fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot

³ Virginia Woolf, (1977) Three Guineas, London, The Hogarth Press, p. 146.

share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share..... [I]n fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.⁴

This statement is as true now as it was then.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 196-197.