



WHAT IS ISLAMIC FEMINISM?

A Colloquium at UNESCO, 18-19 September 2006

18 September: Salle XII

19 September: Salle IV

UNESCO, 7 Place Fontenoy, Paris 7e

The status of women in the Muslim world has been the subject of considerable study and debate, often provoking polemics, nourishing prejudices, and evoking stereotypes that are often disconnected from a far more complex reality. Less known or discussed is the discourse and emerging movement known as Islamic feminism.

The colloquium seeks to draw attention to the work of the increasing number of Islamic feminists – among them Americans, Pakistanis, Indians, Spanish, Nigerians, Malaysians and French – and their involvement in social change, particularly in connection with the struggle against patriarchy and gender inequality, which is carried out from within a Muslim framework but is part of the global women's rights movement. The colloquium will provide insights from research and personal experiences, presented by participants from different parts of the world who will engage in an intercultural dialogue while also sharing their reflections on Islam and women's rights with the public.

Around the world, women intellectuals and activists search for and develop strategies to challenge inequalities in their societies. Strategies and priorities may differ, but there is consensus that education is the key to women's empowerment. Islamic feminists question women's status in Muslim societies and provide an alternative concept of women's rights in Islam, based on a return to the original sources and their own reading and interpretation of the holy texts. This is an endeavor by women that has taken place in other religions, too. As such, the colloquium provides insights into the dialogues that have occurred among religious women and secular feminists from diverse social and national backgrounds, who have addressed concepts of rights and freedoms in religion and in society.

It is important to follow the debates on Islam and women's rights, and in particular to familiarize more people with Islamic feminism. In Europe, the issue of women's position and role in Muslim society often has been misunderstood or misrepresented. Deconstructing the stereotypes and

understanding the discourse and emerging movement of Islamic feminism is an objective of the colloquium.

PROGRAMME

Monday 18 September, 2.30 p.m. – 5.30 p.m. UNESCO Fontenoy, Salle XII

Opening of the Colloquium by Wataru Iwamoto, Director of the Division of Social Sciences Research and Policy, Social and Human Sciences Sector at UNESCO, and Alain Gresh, President of the Commission Islam et Laïcité

Women, Religions, and Rights: Examining Discourses and Movements

- Françoise Gange
- Mathilde Dubesset
- Margot Badran
- Valentine Moghadam

Moderator: Bénédicte du Chaffaut

Tuesday 19 September, 10 a.m. - 5.30 p.m. UNESCO Fontenoy, Salle IV

Testimonies and Points of View: Muslim Women Interpret the Texts

10 a.m. – 1 p.m.

- Amina Wadud
- Asmaa Bekada

Moderator: Valentine M. Moghadam

2.30 p.m. – 5.30 p.m.

- Norhayati Kaprawi, Sisters of Islam
- Nouzha Guessous
- Malika Hamidi

Moderator: Marie-Agnès Combesque

About the Participants

Françoise Gange, philosopher and sociologist, has studied myths. She is the author of many books such as *Avant les Dieux, la Mère universelle*, and *Alphée*.

Mathilde Dubesset, historian, lecturer at the *Institut d'études politiques* of Grenoble, is a specialist in women and gender history, especially in the domain of religion.

Margot Badran, researcher at the Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University and Associate Professor at Northwestern University. She is the author of *Feminism beyond East and West: New Gender Talk and Practice in Global Islam; Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*; and, as editor, *Gender and Islam in Africa: Discourses, Practices and Empowerment of Women* (forthcoming). She also is the co-editor (with Miriam Cooke) of the celebrated book *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing* (2nd edition).

Valentine Moghadam, is a sociologist and chief of the Gender Equality and Development section at UNESCO. She is the author of *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (1993; second edition 2003), *Women, Work and Economic Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* (1998), *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (2005). Her 1994 edited book *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* was the first to examine fundamentalisms in a comparative and cross-cultural approach. Her article on the Iranian debate on Islamic Feminism appeared in the American feminist journal *Signs* (2002).

Bénédicte du Chaffaut, sociologist and Catholic theologian specialized in Islamic studies, is a member of the *Commission islam et laïcité*.

Amina Wadud, Professor of Islamic studies in the United States, is the author of the new book *Inside the Gender Jihad*, OneWorld Publisher, and the much-discussed book *Qur'an and Woman*.

Asmaa Bekada, producer of TV programs on *Al Jazeera*. Between 2001 and 2005 she directed the TV program « For Women Only », where she treated subjects such as Muslim feminism, which she also presented at various international conferences. She has studied political science and international relations.

Siham Andalouci is a member of *Présence musulmane*, *Collectif des Féministes pour l'égalité* and *Commission islam et laïcité*.

Norhayati Kaprawi or Yati, is an artist and the program director of the Malaysian association Sisters in Islam, in charge of education, communication and media. She has undertaken research on misogyny and recently coordinated an exhibition of women artists that will be soon sponsored by Sisters in Islam.

Nouzha Guessous, member of the advisory commission in charge of the reform of the *Moudawana* in Morocco, is a professor, medical biologist, president of the International Bioethics Committee (UNESCO), and member of the *Comité d'éthique de la recherche biomédicale* of Casablanca and the Moroccan Association of Bioethics.

Malika Hamidi, researcher in Education and Social Science at University of Lille 3, is coordinator of the European Muslim Network, the working group on Islam in Europe, and an activist.

Ismahane Chouder, member of *Participation et spiritualité musulmanes* and *Commission islam et laïcité*, is Vice-president of the *Collectif des Féministes pour l'égalité*.

Registration:

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Background Note

What is Islamic Feminism? Promoting Cultural Change for Gender Equality

Valentine M. Moghadam

Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO

“Islamic feminism” has been the subject of analysis and debate for close to a decade. The term was coined by expatriate Iranian feminists in the early 1990s to describe a new discourse among believing women in the Islamic Republic of Iran, who put their ideas in print in a magazine called *Zanan* (Women). A debate ensued, revolving around questions such as: Is Islam compatible with feminism? Can there be such a thing as a feminism that is framed in Islamic discourse? Is Islamic feminism an alternative to fundamentalism, or is it a threat to secular discourses and movements?

Scholarly research came to define Islamic feminism in Iran as a reform movement that permitted dialogue between religious and secular feminists while also opening the door to new possibilities for gender equality and women’s involvement in religious doctrine and practice. In the pages of *Zanan*, it was argued that gender asymmetries had a social rather than a natural (or divine) basis, and that much of what was known as Islamic law constituted patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an and early Muslim history. This raised the issue of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning, religious interpretation) and the right of women to (re)interpret Islamic law. In Iran and elsewhere, the discourse of Islamic feminism was accompanied by movements to challenge discriminatory Islamic family laws.

Islamic feminism is a discourse of educated urban women (and a few men) who re-read the Qur’an and early Islamic history to recuperate their religion from patriarchal interpretations and violent practices, to make the case for women’s participation and rights in a religious idiom, and to give theological legitimacy to the movement for women’s rights in the Muslim world. Islamic feminists claim the right to *ijtihad* along with the right to take part in prayers and even to lead prayers. This trend is not accepted by all within the Islamic community. But it is part of a larger reform movement within Islam.

Along with Islamic feminists, many Muslim scholars are engaged in a kind of religious reformation, some of which is Qur’an-centered and some of which addresses issues such as Islam and democracy, Islam and human rights, and Islam, science, and philosophy. Islamic feminism has arisen on the cusp of this new alternative formulation and religious reformation.

In addition to its theological enterprise, Islamic feminism may be seen sociologically as a response or a reaction on the part of women who have been either disappointed with the promises of Islamic movements or who rejected the fundamentalist project at its inception and sought to recuperate their religion from what they regarded as a flawed or dangerous political movement.

Among the most prominent Islamic feminists are Shahla Sherkat and Azzam Taleghani of Iran; Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Azizah al-Hibri, Leila Ahmed, and Margot Badran, who are based in the United States; and Ziba Mir-Hosseini of the UK and Iran. Important scholarly contributions have been made by the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi. The Malaysian women’s group Sisters in Islam and the Nigerian women’s group Baobab are affiliated with the transnational feminist network Women Living under Muslim Laws. In working for women’s human rights, they draw on both Islamic norms and international conventions.

The First International Congress on Islamic Feminism was organized in Barcelona, 27-29 October 2005, by the Junta Islamica Catalan with the support of the UNESCO Catalan Center in Barcelona. Women and men from Muslim communities across the globe came to discuss – with their Spanish co-religionists – the need for a liberal, pluralist, egalitarian and emancipatory Islam. In the same spirit, Junta Islamica calls for a *gender jihad*.

In March 2005, and at the invitation of the U.S.-based group Muslim Wake-Up, the African-American Muslim scholar Amina Wadud led a mixed prayer service in New York. This path-breaking act was criticized by conservatives and applauded by reformists. Professor Wadud attended the Barcelona congress, and her presentation there showed the depth of her faith along with her strong belief in women's equality.

Reflecting the continuing analysis of Islamic feminism, the promotion of women's participation and rights, and UNESCO's interest in cultural diversity and change, a conference on Islamic Feminism is being held at UNESCO Headquarters on 18-19 September 2006, co-sponsored by UNESCO and *Commission Islam et Laïcité*. Participants will come from Egypt, France, Iran, Morocco, Malaysia and the United States. Associations represented will include Sisters in Islam, Commission islam et laïcité, Collectif des Féministes pour l'égalité, Participation et spiritualité musulmanes, Présence musulmane, the European Muslim Network, and the Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

At the dawn of the 21st century, a "critical mass" of educated, enlightened, and empowered Muslim women has emerged, and their fundamental questions about Islam, women, and rights may help to realize gender justice, transform Islamic laws, and bring about modern, egalitarian Muslim societies.

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