

"Fundamentalist" Backlash and Muslim New Challenges for International Women's

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Cet article met l'emphase sur le rôle des femmes musulmanes pendant la conférence de Beijing. L'auteure fait état de la

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diversité des opinions et des préoccupations des femmes musulmanes à la conférence et elle explique la montée du militantisme des femmes musulmanes, tant à l'intérieur des communautés féministes non-croyantes que des communautés réformistes, féministes et islamiques.

I found the Beijing Conference to be distinct from the three previous world conferences on women in several interesting ways. For one, this was an action-oriented conference; practicality overriding ideology and theory. One of the main challenges for many women's rights advocates remains the gap between what is formally accepted by the United Nations member states with regard to women's rights and what is actually implemented towards the real empowerment of women. The final document of the Conference, the Platform for Action, reflects this objective. Although member states do not have to legally abide by the Platform, this document provides women with, at the very least, a propaganda tool for exerting pressure on their respective governments, a model that moves beyond consciousness-raising and demands concrete action.

Another factor that made the Beijing Conference different was the overall political mood of the post-cold war world community. Compared to the three previous conferences, there was a relatively stronger sense of commonality and solidarity and much less political tension or ideological division. Apparently, the increasing international dialogue between women of the world, and the stronger voice of women from the "Third World" as well as women of colour in the "First World" in recent decades, has somewhat succeeded in bridging the conceptual gap between western feminists and women's groups from the developing countries.

Women of the global North and South (or First World and Third World) came closer together not only because of a better appreciation of their differences in economic, socio-political, and cultural priorities, but also because, today, many First World and Second World women are finding more common ground with Third World women on economic issues. Sharp cuts in public expenditures on health, on education, and on welfare, the shrinking middle class, and the widening economic gap between the rich and the poor, as well as the adverse effects of structural adjustment policies¹ are being felt by women throughout the world in varying degrees. Confronted with the adverse implications of globalization, "romantic sisterhood" is giving way to "strategic sisterhood" (Agarwal 2).

Differences and dissension

However, the absence of clear ideological divisions is not necessarily a testimony to the "end of ideology." Actually as early as the preparatory conferences, a number of divisions and voting blocs started to take form. One area of conflict, basically of a political nature (more pronounced at the governmental conference than in the NGO gatherings) was between authoritarian states and democratic or pluralistic ones. The principal issue of debate was over human rights and the role of NGOs vis-à-vis the state, specifically NGO's access to resources and opportunities for participating in the Conference and having independent input in its final decisions.

The second division, basically of an economic nature, was between the advanced industrial countries (the G-7) and developing countries. The debt crisis and policies like the structural adjustment programs that the International Monetary Fund and World Bank propose for ailing economies (which usually have adverse effects on women and other vulnerable social groups), as well as the allocation of resources for the implementation of the Platform for Action, made up the issues of debate within this division.

The third division was between religious states, "fundamentalist" and conservative forces on the one hand, and the secular liberal, socialist, democratic, and feminist groups on the other. These voting blocs started forming during the preparatory meetings for the Cairo conference on population and development. On the one side was a coalition of delegations from the European Union (EU) led by Swedish and Finish delegates, and on the other side was a coalition from culturally diverse states such as Shi'a-Muslim Iran, Sunni-Muslim Sudan, Libya, Egypt, and Kuwait; and Catholic states of the Vatican, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Ireland, and the

Women in the Beijing Conference

Movements

Philippines jointly led by the Holy See and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Woodman; Moghadam). The clearest clash between these two blocs was expressed in fierce debates over such key areas of concern as gender versus sex, equality versus equity; women's health, sexual and

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reproductive rights, including abortion rights; and women's rights/human rights.

The diversity in the cultural and civilizational components of each side of this third division is an interesting challenge to the simplistic and stereotypical formula of the East versus West or Islam versus Christianity. But, as usual, the mainstream media preferred to highlight the “clash” of Islamic delegations with the European ones, playing down the interaction and even collaboration between the representatives of supposedly “clashing civilizations.” The areas of consensus among conservative Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic groups were specifically over the divinely ordained and biologically determined different yet complementary masculine and feminine roles; the definition of the “holy institution of the family”; the primacy of women's role as mothers; confinement of sexuality to marriage; opposition to abortion; the central role of religion in society, emphasis on spiritual values; and opposition to pornography and degrading images of women in the mass media (see Moghadam).

After 15 days of heated debates, hard lobbying, as well as compromises over the disputed issues, the conference succeeded in producing the final form of the Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration. However, the delegations from Iran and 22 other countries maintained reservation with respect to certain paragraphs of the final document. The Iranian delegation, while making some critical compromises, retained its opposition or reservation with regard to a number of sections, including the section on women's human rights, specifically Paragraph 97 pertaining to women's sexual and reproductive rights, and the section on women and the media, Paragraphs 234-237.

Diversity and change within women of the Muslim world

The large, diverse, and active participation of Muslim women from different parts of the world evident in over 300 workshops/panels on various issues concerning them, as well as plays, films, cultural exhibits, musical performances, political demonstrations, and press conferences, demonstrated the visibility and agency of Muslim women during this historic event. Sondra Hale has in fact referred to this conference as “the year of the Muslim woman” because of the unprecedented active part that Muslim women played in this world-wide gathering. The most visible among them were women from Iran, Sudan, Egypt, and Algeria. One significant plenary panel, the “Parliament of Muslim Women,” organized by the women of Maghreb (the Collectif '95 Maghreb Egalite) which tackled family law in Muslim countries, was the outcome of a two-year effort initiated by women lawyers from Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Saudi women, however, were absent as the conservative government of Saudi Arabia boycotted the Conference altogether.

The heated debates *within* Muslim women's groups over controversial issues like compulsory *hijab* (attire covering the head and/or body), sexual apartheid, polygamy, *seegheh* (temporary marriage), the role of *Shari'a* in family law, and the relationship between Islam and the state, clearly demonstrated the diversity of views and interpretations of Islam among Muslims. Both pro- and anti-fundamentalist panels and demonstrations were organized by different types of women from Muslim countries.

I found the majority of Muslim women present at the conference to be determined in asserting their own distinct national/ethnic and cultural identities. At the same time, many of them, in particular women from Algeria and Iranian exiles, raised a firm and strong voice against conservative “fundamentalist” backlash. This was reflected even in the speech of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, who denounced the extremist fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Ethnicity, nationality, class, and political differences intersected with religion, diversifying any attempt for an Islamic-based unity. For instance, in order to provide an alternative to the Platform for Action and discuss problems and concerns of Muslim women and Muslim regions at large, a “Muslim NGO Caucus” was formed in haste. Its exclusionary practice was, however, disappointing and many saw it as “about someone's agenda, and not the views of the Muslim community as a whole” (Choudhury 2). Some non-Shi'a and non-Iranian Muslim women resented the Iranian delegates' attempt to represent “the true Islam” through

Ayatollah Khomeini. They argued that, if the propagation of Islam and its egalitarian ideals was the real intention of the Iranian delegation, why did not they post verses from the Qur'an instead of displaying the pictures and quotations of Khomeini at their exhibitions?

The Iranians present at the NGO Forum also represented a wide spectrum of views; from the Marxist, anti-religious, radical feminists, liberal, and socialist feminists, Baha'is, and the eclectic Islamic Mujahedin (representing the exile and immigrant Iranian communities in Europe and North America), to the conservative Islamicist ("fundamental-

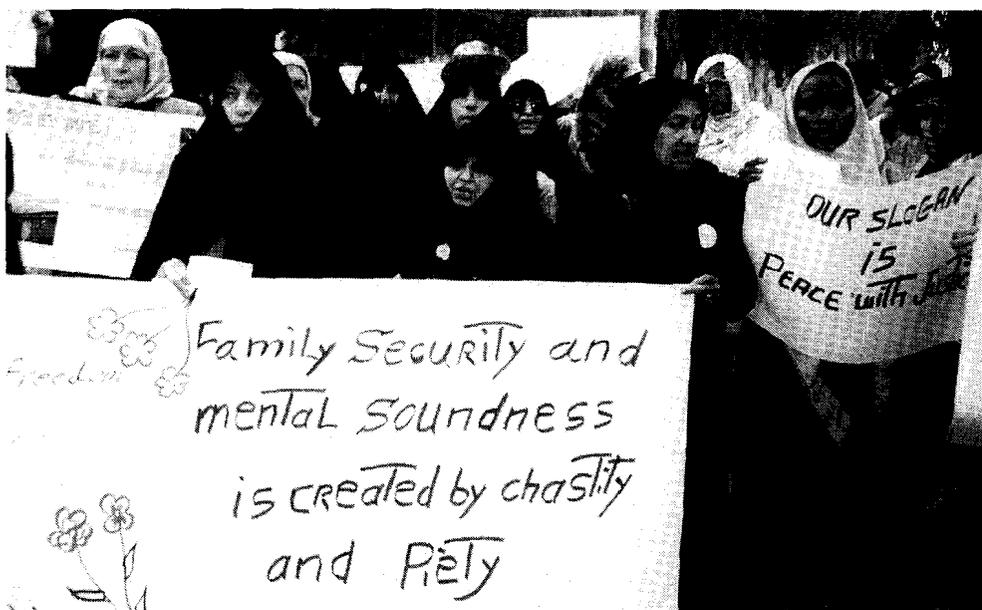
within this large delegation. For instance, a careful comparison between the composition, presented literature, activities, and even the form of *hijab* and attire of the Iranian delegations in the Beijing Conference with the ones at the Nairobi Conference of ten years ago, indicates a significant change. This time, they displayed a relatively higher level of gender consciousness, more tolerance toward difference, and better public relations and diplomatic skills. For instance, not all members of the delegations were covered in the black *chador*. The acceptance of diversity and variation in the form and extent of

the *hijab*, the presence of four minority women as representative of the Iranian Christian-Armenians, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities, a group of young women musicians performing Iranian classical music, a woman film director, several women journalists busy behind their cameras, an exhibition displaying colourful Iranian costumes for women as well as handicrafts, and the recitation of secular poetry including the popular secular-patriotic anthem (*Ay Iran*) by some of the Iranian women during one of the sessions, were all indicative of a subtle shift from strict Islamicism towards a secular, nationalistic, and moderate mode. Despite the presence of a number of male and female chaperons guarding every word, action, and behaviour of the Iranian delegations,

some members could and did cross over the dictated boundaries by signaling a more genuine face and voice of Iranian women.

All this can be attributed to the dynamism of the post-revolutionary Iran, the raised consciousness of Iranian women (including the ones presently in power), and the internal and international outcry against the violations of Iranian women's democratic rights. Thanks to the 1979 revolution, the female family members of the present ruling stratum, who are basically of a traditional middle-class background, have enjoyed—for the first time in their lives—the opportunity for social and political praxis and international exchange of ideas and conferences. Though limited under the control of the ruling clergy and a patriarchal Islamicist ideology, the socio-political activism of these women has, nevertheless, left a positive impact on their self-perception as women. The traditional assumptions about women's place, including their own accustomed views towards gender roles, have been constantly challenged and problematized through their own confrontations with the ruling men on the one hand and with the secular feminist critics on the other.

This may also be attributed generally to the growth of a reform-minded moderate trend within the present ruling stratum. However, I go beyond this by attesting to not



Pro-fundamentalist demonstration by some Iranian "NGOs." NGO Forum '95.

Photo: Nayareh Tohidi

ists"), the Islamic-reformists and/or "Islamic-feminists" (coming from inside Iran). Most noteworthy was the existence of a considerable level of diversity even within the NGOs (over 100 individuals) coming from inside Iran. The official delegation from Iran was headed by Shahla Habibi who represents a relatively moderate voice within the Islamicists of Iran. Some of the few independent women NGOs, like the *Zanaan* journal, known for their bold Islamic-feminist critical position against the conservative ruling clerics, could not take part in the conference because of political and financial pressures. The ones who did were, for the most part, representative of the female-family members of the ruling Islamicists, hence far from being real NGOs. They were obviously careful not to sound critical of the Islamicist government in Iran. Actually some of them seemed to have attended the conference for a purely missionary purpose. Ironically, the main speakers of the Iranian NGOs seemed more conservative than the official/government delegation possibly because the latter represented a less rigid faction and did not have to confront the critical questions and the more challenging atmosphere of the NGO Forum.

Yet, one familiar with the political rhetoric and cultural nuances of Iran and of Islamicism could easily detect the growing contradictions and heterogeneity

only the dynamic diversity and contradictions within the Islamicists of Iran, but also to the profound disillusionment of many of them with the very nature of Islamicism ("fundamentalism") altogether. The idea of separation of religion from the state and the necessity of breaking the deadlock of the political and totalitarian interpretation of Islam is gaining a growing support not only among the believing male and female Muslim intellectuals, but also many clergymen. I see the performance of the Iranian delegations at the Beijing Conference as yet another testimony to the ideological, political, and economic

few days later, during an open session of the parliament, Vahid Dastgerdy, a woman parliamentarian, congratulates the government for appointing Dr. Sanei—a woman—to such a high public office. After a long and passionate appraisal of women's role in the Islamic revolution, she denounces those who denigrate women and labels them as "nothing more than a bunch of vile and despicable individuals." She goes on addressing the statesmen in the following words:

As an Islamic right and a human right of Muslim

women, we demand from the respectful heads of state to employ competent and strong women to ministerial positions. In principle, it is more appropriate for those ministries that deal with many women clients or women-related issues to be headed by women ministers. Given the present performance of gentlemen in our ministries, it seems that the situation cannot get any worse than the way it is now by letting women govern. In any case, dear and respectful President of the Islamic Republic, Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani, it is not too late yet to bring about a courageous and revolutionary change in the administrative system of our country. At the threshold of the birth of the Muslim woman into

the world of today, only such a move can revive the spirit of Iranian women who have been the pioneers of the Islamic movement. ("Competent Women Should Be Appointed as Ministers")

Beyond the Beijing Conference

The historical and practical significance of this event lies in the *process* that preceded it and further changes that can follow. It was during the preparatory process that grass-roots women at local, national, and regional levels could have their input and the NGOs and governments of each country could interact. I personally witnessed this mobilizing, consciousness-raising, and at times empowering process in two Muslim countries: the newly independent republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the past ten years, the Iranian government, as admitted by Shahla Habibi (the Presidential advisor on women's issues), did almost nothing with respect to the implementation of Nairobi's Forward-Looking Strategies. Yet, in the one year of intensive preparatory efforts of women for the Beijing Conference coordinated by Ms. Habibi's office, a significant process was inevitably set in motion. Most of the women's "NGOs" that emerged during this preparatory process are under direct or indirect



Anti-fundamentalist demonstration by Algerian NGOs and others. NGO Forum '95. Photo: Nayareh Tohidi

failure of Islamicism and the strategic impossibility of an Islamic state in a modern era.

The case of Iran and a few other Muslim countries seem to be suggestive of two things. One is that Islamic gender activism or "Islamic feminism" in the Muslim world is a growing and potent force that should be taken seriously not only as one of the various voices and discourses present within the women's movement in the Muslim world, but also—and this is the second point—as a force that promotes change, reformation, democratization, and ironically even secularization of the Muslim societies. In the long-run, the Islamic feminists have to confront the theocratic state and the monopolization of the interpretation of religion by clerics. Thus, for Islamic feminists, like their Christian and Jewish feminist sisters, demanding separation of mosque and clergy from the state is inevitable.

As evidence of this trend, I refer to an astonishingly bold public statement made by a woman Islamist in the Islamic Parliament (Majlis) of Iran in the aftermath of the Beijing Conference. Only about one and a half months following the Beijing Conference, the Iranian Islamic government, for the first time in its 17-year history, appointed a woman to a deputy ministerial position; Ashraf ul Sadaat Sanei, a medical doctor and associate professor became the Deputy Minister of the Health. A

control of the government. Nevertheless, some of these, along with a number of others created independently, are apt to develop on the basis of their own praxis and genuine objectives, eventually at odds with dominant patriarchal doctrines.

The eye-opening and moving impact that the Iranian women (like most other delegations) experienced during the Beijing Conference shall inevitably contribute to the further growth of the reformist, feminist, and secular tendencies within and without them in Iran. Perhaps it was exactly out of the fear of the enlightening and empow-



Fundamentalist women from Iran. NGO Forum '95.

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¹Mandated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and adopted by many developing countries since the 1980s, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and policies are supposed to invigorate stagnating economies, by boosting tradable supply and productivity. A common emphasis on SAPs (based on neoclassical economic assumptions) has been on reducing the role of the state and public sector and increasing the role of the market and private sector in resource allocation. The adverse impact of some draconian gender-blind measures of SAPs has been harsher on women and the poor, especially peasants and public sector employees.

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ering impact of such international gatherings on women that the conservative government of Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan boycotted the NGO Forum altogether. It is interesting to note that while the conservative positions taken by the delegations from the Islamic Republic of Iran received a wide, and at times exaggerated, media coverage in the United States, the absence of Saudi women in the Forum—as another instance of the Saudi government's blatant violation of women's rights—was completely overlooked by the same media.

In short, Muslim women have held a prominent place in the process of the Beijing Conference and they have serious challenges in front of them. Given that one of the main foci and loci of the international conservative backlash is in the Muslim world and the fact that as usual this conservatism include attempts to control women's lives, there is a need for a yet larger presence, more active contribution, and a louder voice of the Muslim women throughout the international women's movements, and a better understanding, collaboration, and interaction between women from the Muslim world with women's rights advocates in other parts of the world, especially in the West.

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