

Images of Women and Women's Rights in Islam and in Islamic Communities

A summary by Dalma Feró

The Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung Budapest held its dialogue forum “**Images of Women and Women's Rights in Islam and in Islamic Communities**” on 14 September 2016 within the framework of its regional program “Gender equality in East-Central Europe.” Motivated by the revival of debates on the effects of migration on women and gender relations in Europe upon the events of New Year’s Eve in Cologne and other German cities, the program set out to provide a platform for a differentiated debate on the connections between Islam, Islamic law, Islamism, the refugee crisis and women’s rights. The dialogue forum raised questions about the relationship between Western secular feminisms and Islamic feminisms, what the roots of our differences are, to what extent we are facing a challenge and how we are to combat women’s disadvantages in this situation. Because these questions have become the subjects of heated political debates, the forum also raised the question how these topics are discussed in Europe and in the Visegrád countries more specifically and how we can talk about them without tabooing and also without essentializing and stigmatizing cultures.

In her opening remarks, **Eszter Kováts** (FES Gender program) emphasized the difficulties of discussing the forum’s topic. In political discourses, discussions about Islam, Muslims, Islamists, Arabs, immigrants, darker skinned people, terrorists, asylum seekers and refugees are often jumbled. Besides generalizations, numerous myths, fallacies, faux experts as well as strong passions make it difficult to raise the right questions, pinpoint the real problems and have differentiated debates about them: thus, to avoid both simplification and polarization on the one hand but also tabooing on the other. The forum reacted to these problems without digressing on current political questions like the quota referendum or the migration crisis. Sticking to the subject of the relationship between women’s rights and Islam, the discussion forum set out to cover this relationship from both sides: first, the colonial overtones of (Western) feminism in many Muslims’ perception and the meager visibility of Muslim women’s struggle against the patriarchal structure of their communities, and second, European views on Islam and our coexistence with Islamic practices from a women’s rights perspective. This topic necessarily entails the question of what Islam is: the forum also sought to set it apart from other cultural and social factors and to look at fundamentalist interpretations of ‘the Islam’. While reflecting on the dangers of femonationalism (the rhetorical use of women’s rights as an indicator of supremacy in the service of nationalism), the forum also endeavored to discuss the actual conflicts arising from our differences, but also possibilities for coalitions between European feminists and Muslim women. Kováts expressed the need to avoid cultural relativism, as, she cited Pascal

Bruckner's critique of multiculturalism, the absolute criterion of respect for difference erases criterions like rightful and inequitable.

Moderator **Andrea Pető** (historian, professor of Gender studies at the Central European University) framed the forum by highlighting the four reasons that make it important. First, basic knowledge about Islam is lacking while discussions about the so-called real Islam abound and get linked to security policy discourses. Who gets the right to define and what they use it for is a question of power. Second, political powers fighting for women's rights rarely get any role in discussions about Islam, as the male-centric fundamentalist wing demands the exclusive right over interpretation. Third, the gender equality discourse has become a justification for anti-Islam discourse for politicians who otherwise curtail women's rights, a technique that European colonizing powers used before. Fourth, the question of Islam and feminism is also about Europe, its identity and interaction with others. The hierarchical relations of the colonization paradigm have framed Europe's relationships and self-definition thus far, which is restrictive and dangerous for Europe as well, Pető contended.

Riem Spielhaus (professor of Islamic Studies at the Göttingen University) delivered the keynote speech. She stated that debates about Islam and women's rights are old, although they have changed in the past decades in both political discourses and the academia. First, Islam and Muslims have become more central in political discourses while debates about Islam have become entangled if not synonymous with debates about terrorism, migration and integration, and refugees and asylum seekers. Second, new ideas about feminism have emerged accompanied by debates between people who call themselves feminists, with new emphases on solidarity, coalition building and the intersections of different axes of oppression from a global historical perspective. Third, debates about Islam and women's rights have also changed while Muslim women have become more outspoken in fighting for their rights.

The relationship between Islam and feminism is marked by tension, support, impulse and mutual change at the same time, contended Spielhaus. She cited Ziba Mir Hosseini (Iranian-British scholar of Islam and women's rights activist) to illustrate many Muslim women's reservation to use the word feminism. When Muslims hear the word feminism, which has no equivalent in the Persian language for instance, they tend to think of the struggles of the educated and Westernized elite aligned with the Western conception of women's rights rather than the long-existing local consciousness and awareness of women's oppression and actions aimed at improving their situation. The word feminism also evokes colonialism in many Muslims because of a recurring pattern of legitimizing colonial power and foreign

interference with gender equality arguments. For instance, Evelyn Baring, British diplomat, Consul-General of Egypt suggested that the women of Egypt had to be freed from the oppression of Egyptian men by the British men, while he actively fought against women's suffrage in the United Kingdom. Similarly, women's emancipation was used against the Algerian independence struggle by the French in the 1950s, while more recently Laura Bush rationalized the Afghan war with the alleged aim of freeing Afghan women.

Against the mindset that Western men need to save Muslim women from Muslim men, Spielhaus cited the inferences of Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnography-based work. According to Abu-Lughod's findings, the livelihoods of women in different Muslim-majority countries depend not solely on religion, but also on poverty and authoritarianism, which are not only not unique to the Islamic world but have also partially been shaped by global interconnections that implicate the countries upholding the narrative of the oppressed Muslim women. Spielhaus suggested, citing Jennifer Selby's research in the suburbs of Paris, that Muslim women want to decide themselves about their lifestyles and clothing, and for instance their biggest problem with the French burqa ban was that no one asked their opinion and no one cared about the actual problems they face (as for instance, discrimination in the job market or housing market). Both authors suggest that debates about Muslim women's rights in the West did not better their situation but in many cases even worsened it. For instance, debates about Muslim women's clothing or forced marriage in some cases resulted in tightening immigration laws but in no direct support for these women. Spielhaus asserted that Muslim women are asking for support and acknowledgement of their perspectives and endeavors: how they see their own problems and what solution they would find fitting.

Even though many Muslims are suspicious about the word feminism, many Muslim women struggle for their rights within the framework of Islamic traditions, proceeded Spielhaus with the topic of Islamic feminism. She pointed out that when the question of women and Islam comes up, many Muslim men and women reply that Islam has brought women more freedom, dignity and rights. While there is truth to the statement that Islamic texts brought an improvement compared to the preceding era, this narrative serves to distract questions about women's actual situation today, she argued. One approach of Islamic feminism is indeed going back to the Qur'an and its message of equality of all human beings, including men and women. This approach bypasses religious scholarship, which it deems to be wrong, patriarchal interpretations of the holy text, influenced by patriarchal culture. Some Muslim women activists like Sadiyyah El-Sheikh and Amina Wadud employ the 'hermeneutics of suspicion': in rereading Qur'anic verses, they look at patriarchal readings with suspicion, arguing that we have to unread, unlearn the patriarchal gaze. Another approach of Islamic

feminism considers religion as an important source of social justice struggles even though it does not center religious texts so much.

Spielhaus closed her lecture with the effects of the events of New Year's Eve in Cologne. The migration and asylum debate in the media before the event was very positive and the majority of the German public was surprisingly welcoming. However, throughout autumn, she said, there have been fake rape reports and several journalists and politicians received death threats and rape threats. In the debates after New Year's Eve, racism and sexism have often converged, Spielhaus said, but at the same time many people opposing immigration used the rhetoric of women's equality, claiming that refugees do not share our values of gender equality. On a positive note, new online initiatives against sexism and racism emerged, and activists involved on both sides built coalitions with each other.

In the **discussion** session following the lecture, Andrea Petó asked Spielhaus to elaborate on Muslim women's activism. According to Spielhaus, Muslim women activists have to fight on two fronts: within their own communities, which often consider them complicit with colonial ideologies, and within the broader context of European and international discourses, which see them as helpless victims of their cultures. Muslim women are stuck in the middle of these different perspectives but they have ways of navigating in this difficult situation. There are several initiatives of Muslim women in Europe on the national and international levels and they suggest that Muslim women can use different reference frames and arguments in different contexts. Spielhaus mentioned, responding to a question about the interaction between Western feminism and Islamic feminism, that there are very different ways of relating to the word feminism and through it to the West/Islam dynamics. Some Muslim women like Amina Wadud do use the word feminism as they do not see any opposition between Islam and feminism: this opposition comes mostly from Western feminists and non-feminists according to this viewpoint. So much so that Amina Wadud does not use the term Islamic feminism because she considers Islam and feminism to be for the same thing. There also has been an exchange between Western and Islamic feminists, for instance, some Muslim women refer to female Christian theologians in their work.

Spielhaus stressed, responding to a question about the heterogeneity within Islam, that there is a huge diversity among Muslim women in how they approach equality as there is a huge diversity in their lives and the social, cultural, political contexts they live in, in whose patriarchal structures she highlighted the role of the economy as well. At the same time she problematized the tendency of some Muslims like herself presenting a nice feminist-leaning Islam to non-Muslims, as Muslim women should not have to struggle for equality to be let

live their lives. She argued that if we look for and aim to find the emancipative power of women's lives, many aspects of many women's lives might escape our gaze.

The second panel's first participant, **Agata Skowron-Nalborczyk** (professor at the Warsaw University's European Islam Studies Department) presented the case study of Poland's Tatars. Contrary to the widespread image of Poland as a completely Roman Catholic country, Islam is one of the country's traditional religions: Tatars have been living among the Polish population since the 14th century. Currently five to six thousand Tatars live in Poland, giving 0.07-0.09% of the population. Poland's Muslim Religious Union was formed in 1925, which makes it the second oldest in Europe after Finland's. The local Tatar communities have had several female leaders since the 1970s: currently two out of the seven communities are led by women. Skowron-Nalborczyk said she had chosen to present the case of Poland's Tatar community because even though we tend to think of Muslims as 'others' coming from outside of Europe, the Tatars provide a good example of European Muslims who have kept their religion for several hundred years while adapting to their surroundings.

Emire Khidayer (expert in Middle Eastern studies, former diplomat of Slovakia) raised questions about the role of religion in our lives. She brought examples to show that changes in Muslim women's lives have been uneven in different regions. In Slovak discourses, the question of women in Islam was more of an exotic topic before the refugee crisis, yet by now it is more than sensitive. Discussions about the topic brought up questions about violence in the Qur'an and in the Bible as well and many people asked the question why we still have to use these old texts as guidelines to our lives, why we need to refer to them as arguments in any debate. These texts, partly because there was no punctuation at the time they were written, can be interpreted in countless ways, and while it is important that women also interpret the Qur'an, they are in minority compared to men. Khidayer argued that by turning our minds to the past we are suppressing our present moment and the fear of trespassing the borderline of blasphemy prevents us from discussing important questions. If we take discussions about Islam and women seriously, we have to consider religion as a form of power in the struggles and we should also reconsider which questions and claims we take seriously, as they will reflect our lives and our relations with other cultures, she suggested.

Erzsébet Nagyné Rózsa (expert in Arabian Studies and Iranian Studies, National University of Public Service, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade) talked about the images of women and women's rights in Islam and Muslim communities. She first talked about the common misconception about fertility rate: contrary to popular belief, fertility rate is declining in Muslim-majority countries. There are various other stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, positive (exoticity, first ladies) and negative (oppression, covering of women, female genital

mutilation) as well. Some of these like clothing and female genital mutilation originate from pre-Islamic times even though they are associated with Islam in popular belief, she contended. When we talk about women in Islam, the first question that arises is what criteria of women's situation we should look for: there are various criteria we might consider from the constitution to the the right to vote, family law and the right to education and healthcare. Another question is whether a 'woman in Islam' is a meaningful category, as Muslim women's lives are very different according to region, country, Shia/Sunni religion, majority/minority group, urban/countryside, social strata, education level, personal relationship in the family, and so forth. It is also important whose perspective we are looking at: that of the women themselves or of Western or other eyes. A further topic to address is the relationship of Islam and human laws and social arrangements: while the latter are very diverse in the Islamic world, nothing can overwrite the divine law according to Islam. Societies in Muslim-majority countries are patriarchal and the radical Islamist interpretations are also deeply patriarchal, to which the lecturer contrasted the presence of the respected ladies and female soldiers, police and brigade of the IS.

Anna Németh (Hungarian Islamic Community) talked about the everyday lives of Muslims women and men in Hungary. It is not well-known that Muslim women enjoy several financial rights in marriage compared to non-Muslim women, Németh said. She focused more on Muslim women's relationship with the majority non-Muslim society: she mentioned the discrimination in the labor market and the necessity to deliberate from a practical point of view whether to wear the hijab in the working place. The refugee crisis did not better the situation of Muslims in Hungary: more Muslims experience threats and there are examples of atrocities in public spaces, even against women with children. As a result, more Muslim women have decided not to wear the hijab. She pointed out some misconceptions that make Muslims' lives more difficult and asserted that contrary to popular belief, jihad does not mean the endeavor to forcefully convert other people to Islam but choosing the righteous path in one's heart.

In the **discussion** session, Andrea Pető asked the panel members what changes the refugee crisis brought in East-Central Europe, how discourses changed and how this affected women's situation. Skowron-Nalborczyk said that Tatars are treated differently by Polish society, they are considered 'ours' as opposed to the newcomers, a line of thinking that some Tatars also share. This also confirms that religion is not the most important aspect in these questions. Khidayer alleged that Islam became a widely debated topic that leaves many people perplexed in Slovakia. Many are tired of the topic because they consider these obsolete things and do not want to turn to the past. Erzsébet Nagyné Rózsa said that she senses the changing of the discourse about migration but not about Islam, even though

Islam is also touched upon in these discourses. Anna Németh said that prior to the refugee crisis, Muslims were allowed to leave in peace, but since then Islam has become politicized and this made Muslims' lives more difficult. As a community, they have used their communication platforms to distance themselves from terrorist attacks and condemn the war that forced people to flee from their homes.

As a summary and conclusion, Andrea Pető returned to the four points that she mentioned in the opening remarks. First, different political forces attempt to define the 'real Islam' and some of the lectures also touched upon the possibilities women have to claim their own definition. Second, as for women's possibilities in the political struggle within Islam, the forum made it clear that Islamic feminism is a very adaptable approach that is able to give new answers to new challenges, and as we have seen, word use and considering the context are vital in this struggle. Third, the lectures provided various examples (for instance, Spielhaus' discussion of the aftermath of the Cologne events) of how conservative and colonialist forces use women's rights for their own political agenda. Fourth, as for Europe's role in this question, colonizing and self-colonizing tendencies are still present in the way we talk about 'we' and 'them', and we have to work on how we enter into dialogue with 'others'.