

“Muslim women” and Feminist Strategies in Times of Religious Fundamentalisms

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Women around the world design and adopt different strategies for change, based on their own (individual or collective) interests, and depending on the socio-political circumstances in which they live. Women get involved in initiatives that are informed by their multiple, overlapping, identities, as well as shaped by their differences in terms of class, caste, age, culture, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, health status - or political beliefs.

Over the last few decades, the rise of religious fundamentalisms (1) is one political trend that has affected countless women, albeit in different ways. The response to fundamentalist movements has been diverse - ranging from resistance to active endorsement, with some women involved in organisations or political parties which promote an agenda opposed to gender equality, and at times endorse violence as a political tool. Women supporters of Hamas in Palestine, women elected representatives of the Hindu supremacist BJP in India, anti-abortion activists in the USA provide examples of the appeal fundamentalist forces can exercise over female constituencies. Such appeal is indeed a crucial question for feminist scholars and activists to address (2).

However, this paper aims at documenting women’s progressive initiatives (for lack of a better word), while focusing specifically on Muslim contexts. It explores some of the strategies of resistance women’s movements have designed or adapted in their struggle towards gender equality. It offers concrete examples of how women have responded to the specific challenges posed by two related issues: widespread violence against women and the rise of religious fundamentalisms.

In doing so, this paper wants to pay tribute to the women human rights defenders from Muslim contexts, and to their sisters elsewhere, who continue to hijack the spotlight or to struggle anonymously. Yet, it also shares the dark skepticism expressed by Algerian feminist Louisa Aït Hamou:

“Since 11 September 2001, the world, and particularly the United States, seem to have suddenly realised that Muslim fundamentalism, in its extreme form of terrorism, is a real threat. It is only now

that the US and many European countries recognise that they have to build strategies across the world to 'fight terrorism'. Many of us cannot help feeling bitter about such a new attitude, for we have fought fundamentalism and terrorism in isolation with our bare hands for a good number of years, while those fundamentalists who committed the most atrocious crimes in our countries were getting support from the same governments that are now dictating to the rest of the world how to 'fight terrorism'." (3)

Questioning the label: the social construction of "Muslim women"

Before exploring various instances of women's organizing, it is necessary to discuss some assumptions that surround two of the main themes this paper deals with - namely, how the category of "Muslim woman" and the meaning of "strategies" get constructed.

I myself have been referred to, without my being consulted, as a "Muslim writer" - did I tell you I was Muslim? Maybe I am, maybe I am not: how can you tell? Are my skin colour, the country where I was born, the issues I am raising or the way I dress such infallible indicators? This personal anecdote highlights the fact that, from an average Western perspective, people are assumed to be Muslims if they simply happen to come from contexts where Islam is the state religion; (or, for that matter, if their grandmother happened to have come from such utterly foreign lands.) Hence individuals as well as entire "migrant" communities are defined, and labeled, on the basis of their presumed faith.

Interestingly, no one refers to white women in, e.g., the Netherlands as "Protestant women". Nor do people generally feel entitled to assume that a white female audience in, e.g., the US will necessarily be composed almost entirely of "Christian women" or "Jewish women". For such groups, the difference between identifying culturally or religiously with a specific (faith) tradition is a given. Celebrating Christmas or Passover does not single one out as a believer - yet, being born in a Muslim country or community, makes you a "Muslim woman". The assumption being that you are a *devoted* Muslim woman (no matter whether or not you actually celebrate Eid).

In response to this stereotyping, the Women Living Under Muslims Laws network (WLUML) insists on two, fairly common sense, facts. First that there are (and there were in the past) non-Muslim women who live and struggle in Muslim contexts. Second, and importantly, that there are women from Muslim backgrounds who - *whether they are believers or not* - choose other markers of identity than religion. One might primarily look at herself as a mother, a professor, an athlete, a composer or (God forbid?) a lesbian. Indeed, one can define herself as a devoted lesbian Muslim mother, or as a secular professor: life is full of options.

But this reality is often ignored. What initially constitute relatively innocent assumptions is translated in the political realm and produces yet more stereotyping. This, in turn, can limit the potential for collaboration between women from different cultural backgrounds.

One such barrier to transnational and trans-cultural alliances is that women from Muslim countries and communities are assumed to be fundamentally, if not inherently, more oppressed than any other group of women. This is a claim that would require to be further complexified. First, the status of women in Muslim contexts is extremely diverse, and shaped by a complex web of customary traditions and legal frameworks (4). Second, the concept of intersectionality applies to "Muslim women" as well. In other words it might prove difficult to demonstrate that a prominent figure such as Queen Noor of Jordan is, by virtue of her being a "Muslim woman", more oppressed than a homeless Hindu Dalit woman.

Another barrier is that, in the eyes of many in the West, “Muslim women” are seen as more passive and less able to resist gender oppression. While mainstream portrayal of women from Muslim backgrounds revolves around images of powerless victims, their achievements are rarely publicized. This is no accident: nineteenth-twentieth century history highlights the continuum between colonial stereotypes (especially as they pertained to the Middle East) and Western contemporary constructs of “Muslim women”. The myth of the passive oriental, slave to oppressive traditions and in need of rescuing, is by no means a recent construct. Nor has it become more accurate than at the time of the West glorious “civilizing mission”. Because indeed, women resist - as they have always done (5).

“Living is Resisting” - Strategies in Context

Women’s initiatives currently under way (either in contexts where Islam is the state religion, or in contexts where Muslim communities represent significant segments of the population) provide examples of a diverse range of struggles. Given Islam’s wide geographical spread and the reality of migration, it is useful to envisage women’s efforts as deployed on different continents, but also to include those fostered by diaspora communities in the West. Keeping these parameters in mind, case studies from Jordan, Nigeria, the UK, Israel/ Palestine, Algeria and Malaysia are explored below.

First, a clarification is needed regarding what ‘resistance strategies’ might entail. Resistance strategies can evoke images of large-scale, organized protests, even mass mobilization. However there is a crucial need to take into account the small ways in which women stand in defense of their rights. Sometimes, “living is resisting”.

This formula was coined by Aït Hamou, who evokes some of the everyday strategies used by women who refused to bow to the diktats of fundamentalists in Algeria in the 1990s:

“During the most terrifying period of the fundamentalist terrorism, women tried to live their lives as they used to. Even [as] they were threatened with death if they went to work or if they refused to wear the hijab, they resisted these violent pressures: most of them carried on going to work and sending their children to school in spite of the bombings in schools and colleges (...) When teachers and students were asked not to resume school in 1994, many of them still went to college and university, but they would carry their books in plastic bags instead of using schoolbags”. Also, despite the ban on such sacrilegious activities, “many women continued going to the Turkish baths, to tailors and hairdressers; they also celebrated weddings.” (6)

While such subtle, individual, acts of rebellion are more difficult to document than collective initiatives, they are not necessarily less significant. In Iran, daily assertions of defiance towards fundamentalist rule include the wearing of lipstick and nail polish. (7) Who would have thought that what is seen as tools of patriarchy in one context can be used to challenge patriarchy in another? Severe enforcement of dress codes by the Iranian “morality police” is also challenged by students whose *chador* open up on legged jeans, or whose *hijab* allow strands of hair to escape. These are forms of resistance that also count, and which require courage.

Taking care of friends and relatives, providing both material and emotional support to those threatened by fundamentalists is another strategy that matters. In Algeria again, feminist spokeswoman Khalida Messaoudi recalls the help extended by her siblings when she was sentenced to death by islamist armed groups. She makes it clear that their backing was crucial in terms of her being able to survive and to continue being politically active. (8)

Rebellious acts can take many forms: however low key they might appear, they nevertheless constitute a form of resistance against the imposition of a fundamentalist ideology. Indeed,

strategies are shaped by the political and social environments from which they arise. The diversity of initiatives therefore reflects the diversity of women's status in Muslim contexts, as well as the strength of local women's movements. How one defines 'success' also depends on the space available for dissent in a given context. To merely raise the visibility of an issue can represent a valuable achievement and constitutes a goal in itself in some places, while it might be seen as only a first step in others.

Activism, contestation and resistance

The modes of enforcement of fundamentalist ideologies (ranging from increased social pressure to enacting legal changes, to mass murders) affect women's ability, and ways, to resist. For example, the recent curtailing of abortion rights by the Christian Religious Right in South Dakota (USA) is inviting women's responses that are necessarily different from those available to Iraqi women, who operate in a context marked by both foreign occupation and armed Islamic factions. The significance of local contexts is key - and activists with thorough knowledge of the (beneficial and obstructive) factors at work in a specific situation are best placed to assess which strategies appear most appropriate.

Strategies also differ depending on whether women chose to engage in time limited interventions or ongoing initiatives; or on whether they rely on local/ national expertise or build on solidarity with allies, within and outside the Muslim world. Finally, in Muslim contexts as elsewhere, social actors operating in the same context might favour different approaches, depending on their means, constituency, political aims, etc. For example, some groups operate from a secular standpoint, while others opt for reform within a religious framework, or others again "negotiate a strategy that is neither wholly secular nor completely circumscribed by religious discourses" (9). Some groups work at a community level, some target higher levels of power; others yet combine a variety of approaches. Such a diversity is by no means counterproductive: varied strategies can play complementary roles.

The organizing efforts envisaged here highlight a number of issues women struggle with:

- violence against women in "peaceful" times (Jordan)
- bodily rights/ reproductive and sexual rights (Nigeria, the UK, Israel/ Palestine)
- wars and conflicts (Algeria), and
- blasphemy (Malaysia).

The rationale behind our selecting these specific issues is linked to their direct relationship with fundamentalisms. Nowadays, violence against women, bodily rights, wars and conflicts and blasphemy are often woven against a background of religious fundamentalisms - when they aren't actual manifestations of the fundamentalist phenomena.

The first case-study explores efforts geared towards confronting Jordanian conservatism. The issue of "honour" crimes in Jordan is one example of violence against women that is considered customary (10). As a worldwide phenomena that predates the rise of the religious right, violence against women is nevertheless further legitimized when fundamentalist leaders are able to spread their message.

The question of bodily rights encompasses numerous issues - yet it is clear that policing women's sexual behaviour is at the heart of all fundamentalist projects. Reproductive rights have been a site of battle between the religious right and women's rights advocates for decades, from the community level (as the Nigerian case shows) to the UN arena (11). Within the bodily rights framework, sexual rights encompass upon many different levels of human experience. But alternative sexuality is

especially important to consider as an emerging arena of struggle in Muslim countries and communities, as recent initiatives by lesbians in the UK and Israel/Palestine demonstrate.

Wars and conflicts have become an almost unavoidable question: not only because ethnic and religious fundamentalisms lead to a globalization of conflicts, but also because civilian populations are increasingly affected, with women being specifically targeted (12). Algeria provides an example of a civil war with over 120.000 casualties and disappearances, as well as one where women were - and still are - at the forefront of the resistance against the fundamentalist project.

Finally, the recent controversy over the publication of the “Danish cartoons” calls for a careful examination of the notion of blasphemy. While these cartoons promoted racist representations of “Muslims” (including a stereotypical post 9/11 depiction of Muslims-as-terrorists), the Muslim religious right instrumentalised the issue to further their political aims (13) - which include introducing the concept of blasphemy into UN language and human rights bodies (14). As the Malaysian example demonstrates, the same issue was used in order to silence dissent and discredit an outspoken women’s rights advocate.

Violence against women in “peaceful” times: Strategies against “honour” crimes in Jordan

By no means a “Muslim woman” issue, crimes committed in the name of honour derive from Mediterranean customs (15) and are prevalent in the Middle East, Latin America and some parts of South East Asia. Linked to notions where “a man’s honour lies in the control of the bodies and sexual practices of women in the same family” (16), “honour” crimes (or “crimes of passion”) can take many forms. Mostly directed against women, they include murder (“honour” killings), forced marriage, assault, acid attack, coerced marriage to an alleged rapist, abduction or unlawful confinement/restriction of movement. (17)

For years, Jordanian activists have sustained a broad campaign against “honour” killings. Aiming to change existing laws (specifically repeal Penal Code articles 340 and 98 which exempt perpetrators from prosecution and allow them to benefit from a reduced sentence), their strategies are multiple. They cultivate the media as well as involve communities and civil society at large. For example, end 1999, 13,000 signatures calling for a new bill had been collected. Public statements by influential clerics denouncing “honour” crimes as un-Islamic were secured (18), and influential people whose involvement could influence public opinion were enlisted (19).

However in September 2003, the Jordanian Parliament rejected an amendment proposing harsher punishment for men who kill their female relatives. Among a total of 85 MPs, 60 argued that this would ultimately “destroy social values, violate religious traditions and generally damage the fabric of Jordan’s society” (20).

Despite the failure to enact legal change in Jordan itself, international networking has proven more successful. Jordanian advocates joined efforts with others from different regions who were lobbying the UN since 1998. As a result, October 2004 saw a major breakthrough, with the UN General Assembly adopting a Resolution entitled “Working towards the elimination of crimes against women and girls committed in the name of honour” (21). This shows how activists can inform the UN system about local realities and how, in turn, local contexts can be positively affected by international human rights instruments. Back in Jordan, national and community-based organizations keep pushing the issue on the agenda.

Bodily Rights: Organising against “zina” crimes in Nigeria

“Zina” crimes refer to adultery/ or extra marital sexual relations - in some Muslim contexts, these carry the death penalty. While there were several such cases, Amina Lawal’s caused much outcry when, in September 2002, she was sentenced to death by stoning by a lower *Shari’a* court on charge of adultery. Her case was fought in appeal by the Women’s Right Advancement and Protection Alternatives (WRAPA) and BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights.

The outcome of the appeal process was successful: on September 26, 2003, the Katsina State *Shari’a* Court of Appeal vindicated Amina Lawal’s appeal. The court held that pregnancy outside of marriage is not proof of adultery, that Ms. Lawal’s alleged confession was no confession in law, and that her rights of defense had not been properly recognised in the lower courts.

The approach chosen (a criminal defense strategy, as opposed to a human rights one) saved Ms. Lawal’s life - a most crucial outcome, and undeniable success. On the other hand, it also risked legitimizing *Shari’a* courts at a time when patriarchal interests in Muslim contexts try to enforce further gender oppression by using the power of religion. It is indeed important, as BAOBAB Director Sindi Medar-Gould stated, to “understand and support our strategy and the nuances of working on rights in the context of Nigeria’s religious and ethnic identity politics”. But critics within the Nigerian women’s movements emphasize that going through the *Shari’a* court did not preclude challenging the very basis of the “crime” by acting at another judicial level, and try lay down foundation for a better law.

Yet the courage of BAOBAB and WRAPA advocates, and the intimidation they faced, ought to be acknowledged. Braving increasing pressure in the Nigerian press and email death threats, they stood in defense of Safiya Hussein Tungar-Tudu, Amina Lawal and others. And they remain keen to also acknowledge community members’ roles in proactively protecting the women accused.

Bodily Rights: Claiming Sexual Autonomy - Lesbian/Bisexual initiatives In the UK - Safra Project

The Safra-Project (*Safra* meaning ‘journey’ or ‘discovery’ in Arabic, Farsi and Urdu) is devoted to lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender women who “identify as Muslim religiously and/or culturally” - particularly those based in the UK. It has grown since its birth in 2001, when the group set itself to challenge the complex and overlapping web of prejudices experienced by Muslim LBT women “based on [their] sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, religion, race, culture and immigration status”. Warning that it “does not seek to provide ultimate answers or solutions, and is not a faith group”, Safra achieves the difficult task of bringing together women from varied cultural, ethnic, educational, class and age backgrounds and creates a welcoming platform for both believers and secular minded.

Safra has increased the visibility of Muslim LBT women, among their peers and in the community at large, through organising women-only meetings, building an online network, and asserting its presence in the media. In order to highlight issues affecting Muslim LBT women, Safra carried out research, especially with regards to UK based service providers and how they can better address the specific needs of the Safra community. Mapping access to (or lack of) appropriate social and legal services provided the initial impetus to its first research project, followed by another focusing on Sexuality, Gender and Islam. The Safra website, launched in 2003, has been instrumental as an organizing and community building tool, as well as to publicize research findings.

Groups such as Safra-Project (or the more male dominated Al Fatiha in North America) are often set up by “second” or “third generations” from migrant communities settled in the West. These groups play a pioneering role in terms of increasing the visibility of LBT Muslims. This is crucial as it allows others who live in more threatening environments (politically or socially) to connect and experience solidarity. Ultimately, it often inspires them to launch their own initiatives “back home” - as the example of Aswat testify.

Bodily Rights: Claiming Sexual Autonomy - Lesbian/Bisexual initiatives In Israel/ Palestine: ASWAT

Aswat, a support and lobby group (22), was funded in 2003 to address the concerns of “one of the most silenced and oppressed minorities” in the region - i.e. Palestinian lesbian, bisexual and trans (LBT) women (including those who are Israeli citizens). Aswat’s advocates define their dual aim in a context marked by gendered as well as political oppression: “In addition to our feminist struggle for equal rights (...), we are very much part of a national struggle for recognition of our civil minority rights”.

Aswat (meaning Voices) exposes the complex challenges faced by LBT activists, denouncing both Israel’s discrimination against Palestinian communities and patriarchal violence within Palestinian society: “The moment women want to focus their energies in establishing independence from the male occupation and structure, they are transformed instantly into enemies. The competition between different, sometimes clashing needs and struggles, puts us in peculiar situations where we are demanded to prioritize one struggle over the other or to choose our ideological ‘loyalty’ in a multi-layered reality and among potential partners”.

Women’s sexuality and gender identity remain such taboos that most Arab women organizations avoid dealing with these issues “for fear of risking their legitimacy and their possibility to negotiate Arab’s women’s status with the “male stream”.” On the other hand, the more established Jewish LGBTQI (23) organizations are still “ignoring cultural differences, nationality and race and do not related to the Arab culture’s structures and imperatives”. The doubly oppressive environment in which Aswat operates explains the need to maintain anonymity, yet also advocates building alliances at the local, regional and international levels. This approach includes recognizing “the possibilities and power of cooperation with Jewish social change movements, especially gay right groups and organizations, in order to introduce multi-national/cultural layers to this struggle”.

To address the diverse needs of LBT Palestinians, Aswat has launched several programs which mostly aim at either support (help line, crisis assistance and regular members meetings) or educational outreach. The latter include making the presence of LBT Palestinians visible in the media, among service providers and through lectures and participation in conferences. Cutting across these constituencies, an effort is made to translate and produce texts reflecting the experiences of queer women, Palestinian and others. This endeavour goes beyond simply addressing the lack of adequate information: it also contributes to the creation of an “alternative [Arabic] glossary”, a language that offers “positive, un-derogatory and affirmative expressions of women and lesbian sexuality and gender”.

The courage required to carry this pioneering work is further highlighted by the fact that, among the roughly 70 women members of the online forum, only one is publicly “out”. It explains that Aswat was presented with the 2006 International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) annual award. While many advocates struggling against discrimination and violence are “paying the price” for their activism (a price ranging from social ostracism and harassment to sexual violence or

murder), issues such as sexual orientation and tackling religious fundamentalisms are among the ones presenting most danger (24).

Wars and Conflicts: Algerian Women in the Belly of the Beast

The rise of religious fundamentalism and the need to organize in the face of extreme, and large scale, violence against civilians has dominated the Algerian landscape for most of the last two decades. Politico-religious extremism started raising its ugly head in the mid-1980s, culminated with the “bloody decade” of the 1990s, and continues to affect the political agenda to this day.

Women were, and remain, at the forefront of the struggle against fundamentalisms. They engaged in a variety of activities: arranging hiding places and collecting funds for those sentenced to death by Islamist armed groups, providing support and counseling to women and girls survivors of sexual slavery (many of whom had been forcibly impregnated and were rejected by their families) and resisting by, simply, attempting to survive.

In terms of collective mobilization, women held numerous public meetings and demonstrations; as well as cultural activities when these were banned by fundamentalist groups. On March 8 1993, the RAJD (25) organized a mock Tribunal Against Terrorism in the center of Algiers. The largest demonstration took place at the time, with almost one million women taking the streets of the capital. Louisa Aït Hamou testifies: “These were powerful moments of solidarity which gave courage to women to continue their fight against fundamentalism. Because they were public, they showed women’s determination not to yield to fundamentalism”.

These efforts were supported by Algerian women from the diaspora: large numbers of (mostly middle class) women had to go into exile, but remained active from abroad. For example, they:

- publicized the crimes perpetrated by fundamentalist forces (through press conferences, demonstrations, film screenings)
- lobbied mainstream human rights organizations (whose reports tended to focus unilaterally on violations by the military state)
- fundraised to support initiatives back home
- networked with feminist organizations and women’s groups in Algeria, in the Maghreb and in Europe.

Once the worse of the violence abated, another strategy was to documenting human rights violations and domestic abuse. In 2002, the Wassila network produced a “White book” focusing on violence against women and children (26). Other groups celebrated the multi-cultural character of Algerian society, in defiance of a pervasive ideology that emphasizes Arab and Muslim identity over all others. In 2004, the “20 ans Barakat” Collective (27) produced a video clip, as well as a CD (aiming at mobilizing for a less restrictive legal status), with songs in 3 languages: Berber, Arabic and French.

The legacy of a decade long civil war and the fact the government broke a deal with some former perpetrators have kept women activists busy in recent years. They now focus on two main fronts: countering the authorities’ project of “concorde civile” (national reconciliation), and improving women’s legal status.

In 1999, various associations of families’ victims of terrorism and women’s groups formed the “National Committee against Forgetting and against Betrayal” (28). This coalition came about to denounce the agreement between the Algerian government and the AIS (Armée Islamique du Salut/ Islamic Salvation Army), which provides impunity to perpetrators. Along with other fundamentalist groups, the AIS carried out a terror campaign against civilians, specifically targeting independent

journalists, progressive intellectuals, and women activists (29). The “concorde civile”, which offers amnesty to numerous fundamentalist fighters, is therefore seen by Algerian progressive forces as a betrayal.

In memory of the countless people - and especially the women - who resisted, RAJD created the “Award of women’s resistance against fundamentalism and against forgetting” (30). In 2001, it was awarded posthumously to 11 women teachers assassinated in 1997 - at a time when the AIS and its allies denied a girl’s right to education and a woman’s right to exercise her profession.

In terms of women’s legal rights, the Family Code enacted in February 2005 offers limited gains (such as amendment to polygamy or provisions for divorced women’s housing). The new Code is, again, denounced by women activists, as a concession to the Muslim religious Right: the principle of gender equality is not stated, the husband’s unilateral right to initiate divorce (*talak*) remain unchallenged. Furthermore, as feminists called for abolition of the provision that subjects women to the authority of a tutor (*wali*), fundamentalist parties launched a signature campaign to oppose this amendment (31). Indeed, fundamentalist forces continue to affect the Algerian political agenda.

Blasphemy: Sisters In Islam Fighting Back in Malaysia

Around 2003, Sisters In Islam (SIS) founder and director Zainah Anwar, as well as five other Malaysian writers, were accused of insulting Islam - a most serious charge that can lead to accusation of apostasy. In the case of Ms. Anwar, the attack focused on specific public statements she had made, declaring for example that the Ulama (32) do not have monopoly on religion, or that polygamy is not a right in Islam.

The condemnation was launched by the Ulama Association of Malaysia (representing in fact those Ulama aligned with the Islamist party), who first submitted a police report. When the police failed to react, they approached the Religious Department and, finally, submitted a memorandum to the Conference of Rulers (33). Media coverage meant that the Ulama’s intimidation strategy provoked broad public discussion and raised significant concern.

Ms. Anwar looks back on the means adopted to defend herself: “To me, the important lesson in dealing with this was the need to go public, to mobilise wide-based support and to put our opponents on the defensive. The support we got [succeeded in that] they were portrayed as intolerant, dangerous people who want to criminalize freedom of expression and thus a threat to our democratic space.”

The strategy was geared at several levels:

- Involving NGOs to strategise collectively,
- Issuing a press statement signed by key NGOs and prominent public figures (including almost all members of the Human Rights Commission, some Islamic scholars, ex-judges and constitutional lawyers),
- Holding a press conference,
- Submitting counter argumentation and documents to the Prime Minister and selected rulers.

This course of action proved successful: “The Conference of Rulers called on the government to deal with the issue as it deemed this was a political matter and not a religious matter. We were called in for a discussion by the Head of the Religious Department who actually became enlightened by the arguments we presented and even became an ally to our work”. When SIS was later attacked for its campaign in favour of monogamy, the same cleric “came out in our support - after we provided him with research on differing interpretations, juristic opinions and practices in Muslim countries - and

went on TV to say that polygamy is not a right in Islam.” It is worth remembering that “the notion that all men in Muslim societies are misogynistic is as much a myth as the notion that women are only silent victims.” (34)

While Ms. Anwar’s supporters managed to secure a successful outcome, accusation of blasphemy is increasingly used by fundamentalist leaders to assert their political power. This is a trend that women’s rights and progressive advocates must monitor. More recently, in January 2006, a prominent Malaysian who was a practicing Hindu (and whose relatives claimed he had never converted to Islam in the first place) was denied burial according to his beliefs: the state intervened and enforced a funeral according to Muslim rites. In March of this same year, an Afghan man accused of converting to Christianity was threatened with execution for blasphemy, although the magistrates dismissed the case on technical grounds. These two instances illustrate what happens when values such as “freedom of thought” are hijacked by fundamentalist ideologues.

Ongoing Threats

The examples developed in the various contexts envisaged above show some of the initiatives women in Muslim contexts are engaged in to confront the rise of fundamentalisms and to secure their rights. Their strategies challenge the dual stereotype of “Muslims” as barbarian terrorists, and of “Muslim women” as passive and powerless. Yet, women’s struggles against the Muslim religious right are made tougher due to a number of external factors - some of which public opinion in the West might be able to influence.

One such factor, although hard to challenge, nevertheless needs to be further publicized. Muslim fundamentalism is sometimes constructed by scholars as “no more than a spontaneous indigenous response to profound social, political and economic crises.” (35) Far from “spontaneous” and far from “indigenous”, the global rise of fundamentalisms is actually the result of sustained organizing, from the neighborhood level up to the international arena - from the streets to the state to the United Nations. Furthermore, fundamentalist leaders of various creeds engage in transnational collaboration, especially with regards to enacting a common agenda against reproductive rights. If nothing else, one ought to be aware that Vatican representatives, Mormon or Muslim fundamentalist leaders do strategize collectively, and regularly, to limit women’s rights (36).

Other trends offer opportunities for resistance outside the Muslim world: people in the West can express solidarity by lobbying mainstream media. Progressive women’s voices are often silenced because “rigid, unforgiving and sexist voices are considered valid voices by Western media.” (37) I had noted elsewhere this unfortunate tendency: “Conservative voices, it seems, are seen as the most authentic. Liberal ones, somehow, lack the sweet perfume of exoticism. Hence, dangerously rigid standpoints are offered as the “true” expression of all Muslims. Space for dissent becomes monopolized by fundamentalists, at the expense of secular, feminist, and pro-democracy advocates.” (38) By denouncing Western media biases, our allies in the West could assist in both promoting the voices of progressive women, and in restricting fundamentalists’ discourses being further spread (sometimes indeed with “convincing”, toned-down arguments).

Another crucial area of intervention would be to pay attention to the rise of fundamentalisms within the West as well. And to also expose the linkages being weaved among constituencies in the West and forces associated with fundamentalist projects elsewhere. Increased alliances between Western democracies, institutions and social actors and Muslim fundamentalists pose a risk. Different factions within the Muslim religious right target potential supporters in the legislative, political and economic arenas in the West - these are briefly examined below.

Lobbying to enact legal changes which are ultimately detrimental to women is often justified, in Western contexts, by reference to “respect for cultural diversity” or “respect for freedom of thought”. When successful, such strategies provide the advantage to impact large segments of the Muslim diaspora/ migrant communities settled in the West. One recent example is the attempt to introduce faith-based arbitration councils - or “*Shari’a* tribunals” - in different Canadian states in 2004-2005 (39).

Tentative diplomatic “dialogue” - as currently envisioned by the Labour government in the UK - makes the threat of Western democracies building political alliances with the Muslim religious right somewhat more tangible. A January 2006 leaked document reveals that the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office had decided to develop “working level contacts” with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (40). This is a political organization whose gender ideology is worrisome to say the least, and whose members at times advocate resorting to terrorist tactics. Such a step by British authorities represents without a doubt a victory for what is diplomatically referred to as “political Islam”.

The appeal of fundamentalist groups is not only heard by the British government, but also by conservative activists in the US. Three decades ago, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) started annual gatherings of right-wing activists. It is now the largest such event in the United States and boasts up to 3,500 participants every year. A few Muslim groups whose leaders allegedly hold extreme right beliefs are now exploring this venue by acting as CPAC co-sponsors. The Islamic Free Market Institute first appeared in 2005, and has been joined in 2006 by the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

Last but not least, some segments of the left in Europe and the Americas also seek to engage in collective endeavours with extremely conservative Muslim organizations, some of which pursue, discretely or overtly, a fundamentalist agenda. This is especially noticeable in the organizing against the Iraq war in North America, the UK or France, for example, where anti-imperialist stand leads to flirting with dangerous branches of the Muslim religious right.

Under similar pretenses of countering US hegemony, economic considerations also pave the way for rather dubious alliances: a May 2006 summit held in Brasilia brought together representatives of the Arab Lique and of 12 South American countries - and provided an opportunity for Venezuelan leader Chávez to hold talks with the very conservative emir of Qatar. In preparation for the Brasilia Summit, Brazilian Foreign Minister Amorin visited a dozen Arab countries, including jewels of “democracy” such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria or Jordan. Indeed not all of those countries are headed by fundamentalist leaders: theocracy, dictatorship, ultra conservative or military regimes are also represented.

These developments suggest a worrying trend for advocates of gender equality, both those resisting the religious right within Muslim countries and communities and those struggling elsewhere. It is a worrying trend as well for secular voices from Muslim contexts, which are increasingly dismissed and stifled as non-representative bystanders. And it is, finally, a worrying trend for Western democracies themselves - as they appear to construct male religious conservatives and so-called “moderate” islamists as more legitimate spoke-persons than a feminist, progressive opposition. Yet, despite ongoing efforts to silence us - here and there - yet, we exist (41).

Notes

1. While there are different understandings of the term, the Women Living Under Muslim Laws network (WLUML) defines fundamentalisms as a global phenomenon that affects all major religions and involves the “use of religion (and, often, ethnicity and culture as well) to gain or maintain

political power". WLUML, Plan of Action - Dhaka 1997 , 24p., p.9 ; see also www.wluml.org

2. Paola Bachetta and Margaret Power, Right-Wing Women - from conservatives to extremists around the world, Routledge, NY/London, 2002.

3. Louisa Aït Hamou, "Women's Struggles against Muslim fundamentalism in Algeria; Strategies or a Lesson For Survival?", Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms, Imam, Morgan and Yuval-Davis (eds), WLUML, 2004, pp.117-124, (p.117).

4. A decade long field research undertaken by Women Living Under Muslim Laws makes this point by comparing women's legal status as well as customary practices in over 20 Muslim countries/communities across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. WLUML, Knowing Our Rights - Women, family, laws and customs in the Muslim World, 2003, 360p.

5. A recent WLUML publication documents the words and deeds of women's rights advocates from the early days of Islam till the mid-Twentieth: Farida Shaheed, with Aisha Lee-Shaheed, Great Ancestors - Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts, 2 volume Kit (Training Manual: 133p; Narratives: 193p.) Shirkat Gah/ WLUML, 2005.

See also Book review and interview with Prof. Vivienne Wee (Hong Kong): Anissa Hélie, "Our Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts", WomenHRNet: Challenging Fundamentalisms - A Web Resource for Women's Human Rights, AWID, March 2006.
<http://www.whrnet.org/fundamentalisms/docs/issue-ancestors-0603.html>

6. Louisa Aït Hamou, "Women's Struggles against Muslim fundamentalism in Algeria; Strategies or a Lesson For Survival?", Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms, Imam, Morgan and Yuval-Davis (eds), WLUML, 2004, pp.117-124, (p.121).

7. Teams of female staff check on women coming to courts, and enforce the rule stipulating that women should not wear make up. Visitors are therefore asked to remove any trace of make up before entering the court - and are sometimes complimented afterwards: "Good: you look like a real lady now". (Longinotto & Mir-Hosseini, Divorce Iranian style, 1998, Women Make Movies)

8. Khalida Messaoudi and Elisabeth Schemla, Unbowed - An Algerian woman confronts Islamic fundamentalism, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

9. Ayesha Imam, "Fighting the Political (Ab)Use of Religion in Nigeria: BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, Allies and Others", Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms, WLUML, Dec. 2004, 200p, p.133.

10. The "honour" crimes in Jordan could indeed "fit" into several of the above mentioned categories: "honour" crimes as an expression of violence against women, as well as a sanction to exercising sexual rights (or freedom of movement, etc). All other examples (but the Malaysian one) can also be considered as instances of violence against women by either state or non state actors.

11. Freedman, Lynn, "The Challenge of Fundamentalisms", Reproductive Health Matters, N.8, November 1996, pp.55-69.

12. The UN High Commission for Refugees states that, in the last decades, "the proportion of war victims who are civilians leaped from five per cent to over 90 per cent of casualties". Attacks on civilians have become a strategy of war and are no longer a "collateral damage". In this context, women are primary targets, and also form the majority of people displaced by conflicts.

13. The Muslim religious right's role in bullying secular voices and Western leaders is further exposed in an Egyptian blog - which shows that the same cartoons were published on 17th October in

Cairo (Al Fager), in the midst of Ramadan, without provoking reactions. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was instrumental in manipulating demonstrators and so was the Organization of Islamic Countries, after its meeting in Mecca in December 2005. See Amir Taheri, "Culture clash - Bonfire of the pieties", Feb 8 2006, http://www.iran-press-service.com/ips/articles-2006/february-2006/cartoons_10206.shtml See also Hassan M. Fattah, "At Mecca Meeting, Cartoon Outrage Crystallized", NYT, Feb 9 2006.

14. The Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) uses the Danish cartoons controversy to try insert "anti-blasphemy" language in the draft resolution defining the role of the new Human Rights Council (currently taken shape in the UN). The draft preamble includes a clause (PP7) demanded by 56 Islamic states that would impose demands on the media to respect religion, but which omits any mention of freedom of speech or freedom of the press. See Mark Turner, "Cartoons dispute hits creation of UN body", Financial Times, London, Feb. 10, 2006; and "Muslims want anti-blasphemy clause in rights body", Feb. 9, 2006, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/0,2106,3567029a12,00.html>

15. Prominent Jordanian lawyer Asma Khader challenges myths around 'honour' killings being a religious practice, or in accordance with the Shari'a [the standard interpretation of Muslim jurisprudence]. She points that the "honour defense" actually derives from European criminal codes prevalent 200 years ago. In "Report of the panel held in December 1999", Crimes Against Women Are Crimes Against Humanity, Women's Caucus for Gender Justice, New York, 2000.

16. Ayesha Imam, "The Muslim Religious Right ('Fundamentalism') and Sexuality", WLUML, Dossier No. 17, September 1997, pp.7-23, (p.10).

17. CIMEL/Interights, Roundtable on Strategies to Address 'Crimes of Honour' - Summary Report, WLUML Occasional Paper No. 12, November 2001, 33p, p.4.

18. For example, Shaykh al-Tamimi's statement in July 1999 "took the view that 'honour' killings were not supported by Islamic law because of the warnings in the Qu'ran against acting on the basis of unproven doubt and suspicions". CIMEL/Interights, Roundtable on Strategies to Address 'Crimes of Honour' - Summary Report, WLUML Occasional Paper No. 12, November 2001, 33p, (p.8).

19. Queen Noor and princess Rania pledged their support while Prince Ali and Prince Ghazi - respectively brother of Jordan's King Abdullah II, and the king's cousin - participated in a public march in Amman in 2000.

20. BBC World News, September 8, 2003, quoted in "Jordan rejects laws on honour killings and Khuloe", Shirkat Gah/ Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Newsheet, Vol XV, No. 3/4, December 2003, p. 25-26.

21. UN General Assembly, Advancement of Women, A/C.3/59/L.25.

22. <http://www.aswatgroup.org/english/>

23. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Transgender, Intersex people.

24. Urgent Action Fund/ Jane Barry, Rising Up in Response - Women's Rights Activism in Conflicts, 2005, 183p.

25. Rassemblement Algérien des Femmes Démocrates/ Algerian Gathering of Democratic Women.

26. This combined focus did not derive from a naive approach (that would associate women-and-children as if they belong to some "infantile" section of the population) but was motivated by the fact

that, in Algeria as elsewhere, armed conflict leads to brutalization of civil society - with increase incidences of violence specifically directed at women and children or teenagers being tortured by relatives. The Réseau Wassila (Réseau de Réflexion et d'Action en Faveur des Femmes et Enfants Victimes de Violence) is a women's group that focuses on denouncing domestic violence, see Livre Blanc - Violences Contre les Femmes et les Enfants, 2002, 97p (in French and Arabic).

27. The collectif "20ans barakat" (literally "20 years is enough") was created in 2003 as a coalition of several women's organisations and solidarity networks in both France and Algeria. Its main aim is to coordinate a campaign denouncing the impact of the Algerian Family Code enacted in 1984 (or Code of Personal Status Law, that regulates women's status and issues such as inheritance, children custody, marriage, divorce etc).

28. The "Comité National contre l'Oubli et la Trahison" (CNOT) includes associations such as Somoud, Djazaïrouna and the Tahar Djaout foundation - groups in which women are in leadership position - as well as women's organizations such as Tharwa and RAFD.

29. For violence against women, see for example Zazi Sadou, 'Algeria: the Martyrdom of Girls raped by Islamic Armed groups', in Niamh Reilly (ed), Without Reservation: the Beijing Tribunal on Accountability on Women's Human rights, Center for Women's Global Leadership, New Jersey, 1996, 190p. pp.28-33.

30. "Prix de la resistance des femmes contre l'intégrisme et contre l'oubli"

31. The one innovation in the new Code is that women can choose their own tutor when they reach 18

32. Literally, Ulama means "scholar" in Arabic. The term has come to also refer to a body composed of Muslim scholars or religious leaders; or to member(s) of such a body.

33. The Sultans are the heads of religion in the different states in Malaysia.

34. See note 5, "Narratives", p. xvii.

35. Gerrie ter Haar, "Religious Fundamentalism and Social Change - A Comparative Enquiry", The Freedom to Do God's Will - Religious Fundamentalism and Social Change, Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busuttil (Eds.), Routledge: London/New York, 2003.

36. Whitaker, Brian. "Fundamental union - When it comes to defining family values, conservative Christians and Muslims are united against liberal secularists," The Guardian (UK), January 25, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,,1398055,00.html>

37. Raheel Raza, "Muslim Women Raise Voices Worldwide", Toronto Star, March 25, 2006.

38. Anissa Hélie, "The U.S. Occupation and Rising Religious Extremism: The Double Threat to Women in Iraq", Different Takes, No. 35, Summer 2005, Hampshire College, MA.

39. Behind Closed Doors - How Faith-based Arbitration Shuts Out Women's Rights in Canada and Abroad, Montreal: Rights & Democracy, 8p. See also the Canadian Council of Muslim Women's website www.ccmw.com

40. Ewen MacAskill, "UK to build ties with banned Islamist group", The Guardian (UK), February 17, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/egypt/story/0,,1711892,00.html> See also Martin Bright, "Talking to terrorists", New Statesman, January 2006, www.newstatesman.com/brotherhood

41. See for example, "A Secular Muslim Manifesto: We are of Muslim culture; we oppose misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism and the political use of Islam. We reassert a living secularism", 2004 <http://www.iheu.org/glossary#term252> . See also [in French] "France : Des musulmans français contre la censure au nom de l'islam", March 10, 2006. http://www.redacnomade.com/article.php3?id_article=581&id_auteur=4

P.S.

* Anissa Hélié studied Women & Development (MA) as well as contemporary history (MA, PhD), and specialized in feminist history. She grew up in Algiers, Algeria, and has been involved with various womens organizations and transnational networks including as Coordinator for the Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) International Coordination Office (2000-2004).

She currently teaches in the Gender Studies department at Mount Holyoke, MA, USA. Anissa is a frequent speaker on issues of sexuality, wars and conflicts, religious fundamentalisms and violence against women. She has also widely published on these topics.