

Feminists against 'Political Islam' : Report from an international conference in Lahore (Pakistan)

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Feminists stand against 'Political Islam'

LAHORE: Negating 'Political Islam' for being the cause of rising fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism across the world, feminists mostly belong to Muslim countries opposed ISIS, Boko Haram and Taliban's wrong brand of religion, terming them against women's rights.

The globally known women's rights activists after concluding the international conference on Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development for Democratization (WELDD) programme by Shirkat Gah - a women's resource centre - held a special media talk at Lahore Press Club and explicated the current situation of extremism in their countries.

Among the participants were Dr Fatou Sow from Senegal, Sana Salam Kareem of Iraq, Liah Ghazanfar Jawad from Afghanistan, Suha Mohammd Saeed Ba Sherin of Yemen, Dr Vivienne Wee of Indonesia, Ariane Brunet from Canada, Homa Hoodfar from Iran, and Anila Majid from the UK.

Dr Fatou said she was in Paris when the attacks happened. People of all faiths and colours were killed in Paris. She said such attacks were happening in the name of God but these are small groups that are using religion to kill and destroy humanity. She said that such fundamentalism approach of these small groups must be snubbed and stopped by the millions of Muslims who believe in peace as a larger group of believers is suffering because of this small group of extremists. She said that 'Political Islam' was spreading all over and the wave of fundamentalism has impacted common people while some people are profiting politically from it.

Sana said that she was living close to an area of Iraq as well as near the border of Syria where ISIS had penetrated across the border and thousands of people were migrating from there on daily basis and her people are facilitating them on humanitarian grounds.

Liah said that the law and order situation as well as political situation for women was worst in Afghanistan as the Taliban are still strong in different areas of the country.

Suha, who just moved out with her family from Yemen, appreciated Pakistan's role in refusing the Saudi Arabian demand for sending troops in her country. She said there were no camps as Saudi

Arabia says but the media was not presenting the true picture of the Yemen war. She further stated that women and children were suffering as food supply lines are cut. She opposed Islamic extremist governments strongly.

Dr Vivienne expressed that ISIS was not even existing in the country before but was now enhancing its presence in Indonesia as some recognised 700 extremists who did not believe in the political system of electoral democracy had joined Daesh.

Ariane said that though civil society was active in Iraq, Syria and other countries as a watchdog of citizens' rights but unfortunately no one was there to hear their voice. She stressed that civil society must show more activism to protect the rights of females, especially in the disturbed societies across the world.

Homa said that Muslim rulers and governments were either extremist themselves or are too afraid to take a clear stance against the terrorists. She said that Muslim rulers' governments could influence change but they are unwilling to do so. She said that not just civil society but it was also a responsibility of governments to condemn terrorists and terrorism at the national and international level. She said that Egypt and Syria were facing deep political and social upheaval because of fundamentalism.

Addressing the participants, Editor Daily Times Rashed Rahman said after listening to the unfortunate tales of women from war zones and conflict-hit areas working for the betterment of women, we have to address the main problem. He said that the idea of 'Political Islam' had spread like a plague in recent decades as an outcome of the cold war. He said the idea of Political Islam engulfed the whole region and Muslim countries in violence. "If the origin of problems of today we are facing lies in politics, we will have to change the course of politics in order to move ahead," he added. He said that it was perfectly justified for women's rights activists to think that the enhancement in extremism and terrorism was a failure of the political parties dominated by males. However, they must overcome this resentment and consider engaging with politics to change the course of events.

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's Director I A Rehman said Pakistan has the same history of dealing with extremist elements and groups present in our society as were shared by our African and Arab counterpart activists. He said as we are coping with common problems of extremism and terrorism, we should start an 'intra-region discourse' to eliminate the menace of radicalism.

Earlier, the women rights activists conducting the international conference presented hard facts and personal experiences dealing with patriarchy, oppression and resultant subjugation that perpetuates violence affecting women and communities with different identities.

In the international conference, from Pakistan, Farida Shaheed, Executive Director of Shirkat Gah, Gulnar Tabassum, Fauzia Mallah, Veeru Kohli, Humaira Sheikh and other feminist activists participated.

It is pertinent to mention here that WELDD is a transnational programme developed in partnership with the international solidarity network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and the Asia-based Institute for Women's Empowerment (IWE), which has been run in some 18 countries. The WELDD programme was started in Pakistan in 2012 to advance women's participation in public and political arenas.

Kashif Hussain and Faizan Warraich

The Daily Times, 24 November 2015:

Women vs Political Islam

Globally renowned women's activists assembled in Lahore to attend the international conference on Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development for Democratization (WELDD) organised by Shirkat Gah, a women's resource centre. WELDD is a transnational programme developed in partnership with the international solidarity network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and the Asia based Institute for Women's Empowerment (IWE). Addressing a special media talk held at the Lahore Press Club, the symposium expounded on 'Political Islam' being the root cause of rising fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism across the world. The coalition of activists hailing from a number of Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries confront commonalities in facing gender discrimination and oppression enshrined in conflict-ridden regions. Women in Muslim countries are increasingly faced with tyrannical traditional patriarchal social structures that don't just undermine their basic rights of selfhood by subjugating their agency, but with the rise of autonomous self-styled quasi-religious political groups who are victimising and now even using women as a tool of war. Kurdish and Yezidi women are victims of systematic sexual violence and enslavement by the Islamic State in Syria, but warzone rape is not a problem confined to females only. Members of the Nigerian Boko Haram have allegedly kidnapped a number of young boys as well as girls to be used as sex slaves.

In the past decade, extremism has not just become a raging global terror movement but has also facilitated the rise of reactionary policies derived from a reductionist and blemished view of religion. Fundamentalism is not confined to Islam. Many Christian extremists in Senegal and radical Buddhists in places like Myanmar and Sri Lanka have employed religion as a political tool, leading to widespread violence and brutality. Twenty first century religious extremism and political terrorism has to necessarily be understood in its contextual origins and background, i.e. its political manifestation during and after the Cold War. To further their cause, women's rights activists will need to overcome past reservations rooted in male domination and engage with politics through a collective effort in order to change oppressive political structures and chauvinistic power relations that obstruct critical discussions on gender. In today's world, religion has become decisive in flaming conflicts and sustaining a disconnect between social and political elements in society. Now more than ever there is a dire need to infuse an atmosphere of secularism, one that doesn't oppose religion but provides a neutral ground for it to thrive and develop, where everyone is allowed to practice their religion without politicising the dominance of one strand of belief over the other. Moreover, it is vital to re-examine religion in the light of a modern worldview that critically revisits archaic and antiquated interpretations. Women in the past have played a dominant role in the spread of Islam; it is time to re-enter the religious arena too through critical political engagement.

Editorial, *Daily Times* , November 25, 2015:

<http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/editorial/25-Nov-2015/women-vs-political-islam>
