

ZILKA SPAHIĆ-ŠILJAK

ISLAM AND FEMINISM: MISSION (IM)POSSIBLE?

By Tamara Zablocki

The easiest way to fight against prejudices is knowledge, with the necessary prerequisites of an open mind and will to meet the Other, the different. Zilka Spahić Šiljak, a gender studies professor, activist, theologian and the first Harvard research associate from Bosnia and Herzegovina, is the right person to turn to for those who are interested in fighting against prejudices, personal biases, and unquestioned life philosophies. One of her recent lectures was on the topic “Islam and feminism: Mission (im)possible?” at the International Multireligious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) Zajedno in Sarajevo.



The number of chairs in IMIC was insufficient to accommodate a large audience interested in learning about Islamic feminism, and the attendees went home with a new wealth of knowledge regarding feminism and history of Islam, which some of them were not familiar with, as well as regarding the names of authors who spoke about equality in the Islamic world, which is the basis for the existence and understanding of Islamic feminism. The term “Islamic feminism” is not properly understood, neither among feminists nor Muslims. It disturbs people, it defies boundaries, it refuses to fit the mold, it intrigues. Therefore, it is all the more important to discuss its significance with both feminists and Muslims.

“ISLAMIC FEMINISM IS CONSIDERED TO BE AN OXYMORON”

Zilka Spahić Šiljak started her lecture with a reminder that people – be they religious or secular – feel uncomfortable or even disdainful when they hear “Islam” and “feminism” being used in the same sentence. “Generally speaking, we think of feminism as a western or American movement in which the Other, the colonized, those outside the world power system due to their race, class and economic circumstances, simply lack representation when it comes to educational and cultural policies. We know very little about it, and what we know is mostly negative and pejorative. We often see feminism in terms of radical feminism, through the mental images of dissatisfied, ‘problematic’ women, ‘frustrated lesbians’. And then you add Islam on top of those images, and the majority of believers as well as non-believers get dizzy at the thought; they are afraid of being blasphemous or they feel uneasy at the prospect of connecting two seemingly opposing things? I would also say that they are not ready to face misogyny and oppression that objectively rule in many societies, Muslim as well as non-Muslim. Most Muslims also react to the idea of Islamic feminism by saying that Islam gave women all rights 14 centuries ago and that Muslim women do not need feminism or human rights to be equal to men. That sounds nice and appealing; however, if we are realistic, if we see the marginalization and oppression

that exist in our society and are especially prevalent in Muslim countries in which Sharia is the basis of their legal system, it is easy to realize that there is something wrong”, said professor Spahić-Šiljak, adding that it is useful to start the conversation on Islamic feminism by defining feminism and by pointing out some facts from the history of Islam which are often forgotten and neglected. “Feminism is an idea, a movement, a social theory, and it has been developed both in the East and West, therefore it is not owned by either side; or as bell hooks would succinctly say: ‘Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression.’ Islamic feminism started developing in the Muslim world at the end of the 19th century, and its framework is a historic legacy of Islam. Margot Badran, an Islamic feminist from Egypt who has been dealing with discourse analysis for the past forty years, stated that Islamic feminism is a call for justice and equality, in the family and in the public sphere.”

EFFECT OF DIFFERENT CULTURES AND TRADITIONS

It is necessary to look back to the time when Islam came into existence in order to understand Islamic feminism. “If we want to avoid simply reiterating how Islam gave women everything, then it is impossible to understand the position of women in Islam without dealing with historical facts first. We need to see what Islam gave women, what was the cultural context in which Islam was interpreted and developed. In the formative years of Islam, from the 7th to 12th century, anthropology developed under the influence of different cultures and traditions, middle eastern, Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Sassanid, Judeo-Christian; from the 8th century, there were the influences of the Aristotelian Greek culture because Arabs were translating Greek philosophy and they brought it back to the West, having internalized Aristotle’s idea on the birth of human beings upon which he defined the core psychological differences between men and women (which you will not be able to find either in Qur’an or the Bible), and which has been used to justify women’s secondary position in the society.” Professor Spahić Šiljak emphasized



the importance of the cultural context in which women's position in the Islamic society was regulated because all religions, including Islam, are deeply embedded in the cultural context of their time and place. "During the time of middle eastern, Mesopotamian, cultural practices and customs, people turned from animal husbandry to agriculture and a sedentary lifestyle, and the female body and female sexuality became a trade stock, controlled by men. That perception of female body and sexuality was later integrated into Halakha, the Jewish law, and Sharia, the Islamic law. You can find great similarities between the Code of Hammurabi and postulates in the Islamic and Jewish law. Judeo-Christian influences and the Aristotelian philosophy, which saw women as unfinished men, were incorporated into the Islamic jurisprudence, and that makes it difficult to differentiate between cultural construct and pure religion, faith."

THE ORIGIN OF THE VEIL AND THE ISSUE OF WOMEN'S RIGHT IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC AGE

As we listen to the story about the influence of Mesopotamian cultures on Islam

as we know it today, it is impossible not to talk about the veil, which is now a very current issue in the West, where they are trying to legally ban it. "In her book *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed explains how Mesopotamian cultures influenced the wearing of the veil. 1200 years B.C., Assyrian women in courts, especially women of higher class, were required to wear a veil. The only women who did not wear a veil in public were prostitutes. The veil was intended to classify women based on their sexual activity, and that influence continued to live on. Leila Ahmed also gives an example of a Bedouin who threatened to attack Prophet Muhammad's wives in public if they did not wear a veil, because that was part of the tradition. That was the cause for the line in Qur'an about the veil for the Prophet's wives. Therefore, you need to take into account the context in which a certain regulation was made. Mesopotamian cultures were deeply patriarchal and androcentric; although, they would give more or less rights to women during different periods, even though some women could get education, jobs, and inherit property, they were still unequal to men, and their social status was regulated on the basis of their sexual activity. There was always a father, a guardian or a husband who was responsible for them." There have always been theologians who claim that the veil is a Muslim woman's choice, not an obligation. "Hijab should be a matter of choice, and there are different kinds of obligations (fards). There are the foundations of Islam and then there are fards, which could be interpreted differently, but which are taken as a strict obligation by the mainstream. Qur'an is not decidedly clear about those issues. As a woman who has been wearing her hijab for thirty years, I think the hijab should be a matter of choice: a woman can wear it, or take it off, without being pressured to do so by any institution. I would never consider it a duty", said Professor Spahić Šiljak. She believes hijab should not be the first and last thing to discuss as a woman's issue in Islam. "A Muslim woman can be a believer with or without a hijab. Besides, wearing a hijab is no precursor to being a morally upright person. One could be the best or the worst person

with or without hijab. Hijab should be a matter of choice, so a man has no saying in that. When it comes to lowering one's gaze, it is clear that Qur'an first speaks to men about that and then to women to draw their veils over their bosom. Sexual assault cannot be justified by the way a woman dresses."

WOMEN WERE SYSTEMATICALLY ERASED FROM THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

Professor Zilka Spahić Šiljak's lecture was also an opportunity to remind ourselves that not all women had the same rights in any society throughout history. Islamic feminism deconstructs the idea that women had no rights in the pre-Islamic age and that Islam came as a salvation to them. "That is incorrect. Not all women had rights, but some women had certain rights, like the Prophet's first wife Khadijah. She was a successful businesswoman, a self-sufficient and emancipated woman who could propose marriage to a man. The right to education, economic independence and rule over one's life depended on a woman's social class." Professor Spahić Šiljak also spoke about the fact that women had participated in politics and the public life in the first Islamic community, that they were exceptionally educated and in charge of transmitting the Prophet's tradition, they were teachers to great teachers, they were even leaders, but that was systematically erased from the history of Islam. "Fatema Mernissi wrote about this in detail. Women were systematically erased, but thanks to honest historians we can reconstruct the data on Muslim women in the world who had made a difference. The problem is that they were cast aside and marginalized, which is why students do not learn about them in school." The patriarchal image of god and the entire Islamic tradition is a result of a kind of "kidnapping" of the Islamic revelation, emphasized Professor Spahić Šiljak. "How is it possible that the universal message to learn, read and seek knowledge – which was meant for both men and women – became dominantly male? How is it still wrapped in patriarchy and androcentric language and occasionally misogyny for a good measure? If we take into account Mesopotamian culture, and that the 7th century was the height of patriarchy on the Arabian peninsula, we cannot underemphasize the fact that the Islamic revelation in that context is inevitably embedded in that linguistic, traditional, patriarchal and androcentric cultural context." The message that was supposed to bring justice and equality in a society was adopted by a small – dominantly male – elite that monopolized the transmission of messages of Islam. Because of that, women in Islamic societies do not have equal rights as men, they are expected to be obedient to men beside god, and there is no justice and equality. "Islamic feminists insist on unpacking god's message in every age and context so that it would be effective and communicable. God's universal message should speak to men and women in the 21st century differently, it should be a solution their issues, not the ones the society had in the 7th century."

ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Islamic feminism started with men and women who wrote in the 19th century when they discussed through literature the first conceptually feminist calls for emancipation. "That is the era of 'silent' feminism, as we did not even have the word 'feminism' in the Islamic world at the time, and it lasted until the anticolonial revolutions in the Muslim world. During the 1920s and 1930s, there were national anticolonial movements and women started to get organized under the control of the state and to create their own unions and organizations", said Professor Spahić Šiljak, adding that the first terms for feminism appeared in the Arabic language at that time. In the decades that followed, the women's movement in Muslim countries was no longer under the control of the state, and the position of women reflected broader changes in society. Two important events in the 20th century were crucial for the feminist movement in the Muslim world. First, the "new woman" was created in parallel with national liberation, and the "new women" gave up the head covering but kept her sexuality covered. Europeanized, the new woman becomes politically active. At the end of the 1960s, and especially 1970s, during the Islamic revolution in Iran, other Islamic movements became stronger, and the events took a new turn: re-Islamization, returning to the roots. A new Islamic society was created in which

women wore head-coverings as a sign of emancipation. “The state image was built over a woman’s body and her sexuality. The new republic with a new uncovered woman and the Islamized republic with a covered woman. The woman’s body has always been a battlefield between modernization and Islamization of that part of the world. Battles are still being fought over the female body and female sexuality; ethnonational, religious and other goals are being met using women because every ideology (if you turn religion into ideology, it also becomes dangerous) intends to have control over a nation’s reproduction, and through that it controls the processes in a country”, emphasized Professor Spahić Šiljak.

THE NORM NEEDS TO BE DECONSTRUCTED

The important question at the end is whether it is possible to change the society within the existing patriarchal system or whether we can only make superficial changes because the system is unjust. “What we have been doing throughout the 20th century are minor superficial changes, patching-up the existing patriarchal institution. The male norm is the one still in place today, and everything you try to fix is only patchwork. We see that by simply adding the female principle to the existing system hardly yields the necessary results, because the existing norm needs to be deconstructed and a new egalitarian one needs to be installed”, concluded the lecturer and reminded the audience that all the legal documents and conventions signed to this day have failed to deconstruct the existing norm. In that context, it is not enough to have women in political life, or in jamaat, stated Professor Spahić Šiljak. “It is not an issue of whether we have women in jamaat, but whether we have gender-sensible women in jamaat. It is the same with parliament representation. That is why it is important to talk about these issues, to update school textbooks, to have open discussions in universities. You must question the status quo despite receiving negative backlash, despite people casting doubts on your ‘legitimacy’ by asking you if you are married and whether you have children, despite people’s attempts ‘pacify’ you by saying you have achieved success already through being a mother. There are many things that we need to work, but the most important one is to question the norms taken as god-given truths.” Islamic feminism is primarily significant to Muslim women because it makes it possible for them to ask questions such as the one about female imams, to question terminology, traditional norms and values, and to fight for a better status in their communities. However, it is extremely important to have solidarity among all feminists irrespective of their religious or secular background. Zilka Spahić-Šiljak believes that a fight without solidarity is a waste of resources. “There is not enough mutual action, and it is highly important to involve both the religious and secular perspective, to make use of all the available resources.”

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Originally published in the Urban Magazine, November issue, 2018.