

In Quest for Equal Rights, Muslim Women's Meeting Turns to Islam's Tenets

16 February 2009

by Sabrina Tavernese

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — The religious order banning women from dressing like tomboys was bad enough. But the fatwa by this country's leading clerics against yoga was the last straw.

"They have never even done yoga," said Zainah Anwar, a founder of a Malaysian women's rights group called Sisters in Islam.

Ms. Anwar argues that the edict, issued late last year by the National Fatwa Council of Malaysia, is pure patriarchy. Islam, she says, is only a cover.

It was frustrations like those that drew several hundred Muslim women to a conference in this Muslim-majority country over the weekend. Their mission was to come up with ways to demand equal rights for women. And their tools, however unlikely, were the tenets of Islam itself.

"Secular feminism has fulfilled its historical role, but it has nothing more to give us," said Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an Iranian anthropologist who has been helping to formulate some of the arguments. "The challenge we face now is theological."

The advocates came from 47 countries to participate in the project, called Musawah, the Arabic word for equality. They spent the weekend brainstorming and learning the best Islamic arguments to take back to their own societies as defenses against clerics who insist that women's lives are dictated by men's strict interpretations of Islam.

"We are trying to develop a new language, offer it to the world and use it," said Marwa Sharafeldin, an activist from Egypt.

Ms. Anwar, the main organizer, said her group was almost alone when she started it 20 years ago, but now it is one of many. "It's a movement whose time has come."

The repression comes not from the Koran, the women argue, but from the human interpretation of it, in the form of Islamic law, which has ossified over the centuries while their globalized lives have galloped ahead. So they are going back to the original text, arguing that its emphasis on justice makes the case for equality.

"Feminist Islamic scholarship is trying to unearth the facts that were there," Ms. Mir-Hosseini told a room of eager activists Sunday. "We can't be afraid to look at legal tradition critically."

She referred to the work of Muslim intellectuals, like Nasr Abu Zayd of Egypt and Abdolkarim Soroush of Iran, reformers who argue that the Koran must be read in a historical context, and that laws derived from it can change with the times. Their ideas are controversial, and both are in exile in the West.

Ms. Mir-Hosseini argues that Muslim societies are trapped in a battle between two visions of Islam: one legalistic and absolutist that emphasizes the past; the other pluralistic and more inclined toward democracy. She said that in Iran reformers were gaining ground, but that President Bush's antagonism toward the country ended up strengthening hard-liners there.

"It's really a struggle between two world views," she said, adding that time was on

the side of the women.

It was the rise of political Islam that brought the women together. As Malaysia's progressive family laws began to be rolled back in the late 1980s, Ms. Anwar and several other women formed a Koran reading group.

"There is an understanding that mullahs know best, that you cannot speak," Ms. Anwar said. "Muslim women's groups are coming out to challenge that authority."

Some scholars argued that the effort sounded unrealistic and would have no impact, mainly because it appeared to ignore more than a thousand years of Islamic legal scholarship and practice. Religious authorities are the only ones with the power to interpret laws, and circumventing that well-entrenched system would require replacing it altogether.

"This kind of argument is being made at the margins of the Islamic world," said Bernard Haykel, an expert on Islamic law at Princeton University. "It has shape and form, but no substantive content. There's no real way of actually bringing about these changes."

But others made the case that change, though incremental, was happening at the grass-roots level in a number of Muslim societies. Isobel Coleman, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, who attended the conference, argues that women's movements are making progress, as girls' education levels increase and the Western world is a click away on satellite television. Women are even taking positions in religious institutions, she said: a woman has headed the Shariah College at Qatar University.

"It's a slow shift," said Ms. Coleman, whose book on the topic, "Paradise Beneath Her Feet: Women and Reform in the Middle East," is to be published by Random House in 2010. "It's just beginning to come together as a movement."

There have been some successes. In Morocco, sweeping changes of family law in favor of women went into effect in 2004. Critics argued that it was possible only because the country's king approved it, but Moroccan activists said it never would have happened if they had not spent years lobbying and formulating legal arguments, some of them based on Islamic tenets.

That has had ripple effects. Elaheh Koolaee, a professor from the University of Tehran who formerly served in Iran's Parliament, said that Iranian women had been watching the Moroccan example and that a Muslim success was an invaluable tool. "It's important for us to show positive experiences from within Muslim societies that are not from the U.S. or Europe," she said.

Ms. Mir-Hosseini said she believed that change was coming, and that it was just a matter of when.

"There's so much tension and energy there now," she said. "It will be a flood."

From The New York Times, February 16, 2009