



# Africa: The Face and Challenge of Muslim women's movements

By Salma Maoulidi, 27 October 2011

*The dominant discourse among Muslim women tends to be about dated cultural rules and practices, writes **Salma Maoulidi**. But activists are now increasingly preoccupied with contemporary questions such as leadership and political participation, as was the case at a recent conference in Istanbul*

There are over 750 million Muslim women in the world and the question that often crops up is who speaks for them? Who leads them? This October about 200 Muslim women leaders from about 40 countries attended the 'Muslim Women Leaders at the Frontline of Change' in Istanbul, Turkey, a conference organized by the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE).

In attendance at the third WISE gathering were women human rights activists, members of parliament, judges and scholars. Also gracing the event were female religious leaders from other faith groups keen on inter-religious dialogue in an increasingly intolerant world. A number of men, mainly Muslim, were also at the gathering including supportive husbands and imams from Afghanistan and USA, one of them being Imam Faisal who is the partner of the main engine behind WISE, Daisy Khan.

In Muslim women's organizing, WISE is relatively youthful as an initiative. In many respects WISE is a post 9-11 initiative germinating from the undue attention the status of women across the Muslim world received prior to the military incursions in Afghanistan and Iraq. This, however, is but one aspect of WISE.

Essentially, WISE is the Muslim women's response to global and political development geared at improving the status of Muslim women through activism and movement building. It is an example of how Muslim women are actively changing their predicament and taking charge of their destinies.

Another emerging transnational movement among Muslim women intellectuals, activists and social justice advocates is Musawah, a campaign for equality in Muslim personal law. Perhaps Musawah is one of the first initiatives to be started and or located outside the Arabian Peninsula or the West. In West Africa, Muslim women organize themselves in national federations as well as through a regional federation. East Africa does not have

an overly centralized form of representation for Muslim women and there are a number of organizations, like Sahiba Sisters Foundation and Womankind Kenya, that work on development. Perhaps because of its history, South Africa has some dynamic forms of Muslim organizations addressing an array of social and advocacy issues.

While not visible to many social movements in Africa, Muslim women have tried to forge solidarity among themselves and with others with varying amounts of success. There are initiatives like the Sisterhood is Global Institute founded by immigrants and refugees from Iran and Afghanistan; Karamah, a rights based initiative mainly by lawyers and human rights advocates in the US; the International Committee for Women and Child which was an attempt by the International Council of Da'wah and Relief to engage women post the Fourth World Conference on Women; and Women Living under Muslim Laws, a solidarity network established in the 1980s which deals with the impact of the implementation of Islamic laws on women.

While there are national Muslim women's organizations or councils in many countries with a sizeable Muslim population, the key difference between these and the organizations being featured is the level of agency women assume in initiating them. At the national level most organizations catering for Muslim women are appendages or wings of mainstream religious bodies. They were not created with the intention to radically address the needs or position of women. Rather, they were structured very much in line with the structure of mainstream political parties with social functions, not advocacy concerns.

New initiatives Muslim women have launched are aimed at recasting the role and status of women in Muslim societies especially after the passage of the Convention on the Elimination of all types of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Fourth World Conference on Women. Thus many Muslim women's groups and organizations, like other organizations in the larger women's movement, assumed a rights based approach to their identity and work. Locally and internationally this saw the emergence of independent women's groups or organizations not affiliated to national councils or transnational Muslim bodies.

At the international level, however, women from the Arab world and South East Asia are overly represented in Muslim women's movements, making them come across as the ultimate representation of Islam and Muslims. Yet there are millions of Muslims in Africa; in some countries they number more than the entire populations in individual Arab countries. At the WISE meeting, Africa was represented by Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Libya, Senegal, The Gambia, Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and South Africa.

East Africa, particularly Tanzania, has one of the oldest Arab and Asian migrant populations in the continent. Yet it is rare for women, let alone Muslim women, from across these communities to meet, socialise and strategise as they would when in international spaces. This poses a challenge to women's movement building, which

ideally should begin from the ground and at a national level before it progresses as a regional or global movement.

Muslim women in Africa often have to contend with the perception that they are new converts to Islam and thus not authentic enough when compared to non-Africans. Such perceptions are prevalent among Muslims and non-Muslims alike even though Islam spread to other parts of Africa around the same time it spread to North Africa or the Indian subcontinent. Such a perception has probably prejudiced donors as well as Islamic foundations from giving to independent Muslim women's groups in African countries the way they do in the west or in South East Asia.

Even though the dominant discourse with regards to Muslim women tends to be around dated cultural rules and practices, Muslim women activists are also preoccupied with contemporary questions affecting Muslim women. Thus the question of Muslim women's leadership and political participation was a key topic for discussion at the conference in Istanbul. Specifically, participants addressed themselves to the recent announcement by the King of Saudi Arabia allowing women the right to partake in municipal elections where they could contest and be eligible for nomination to the Shura Council.

Women's rights activists from Saudi Arabia at the meeting cautioned on how to read this decision. As Nimah Nawwab, a women's rights activist and renowned poet, noted that when the decision is considered in a context where men in Saudi Arab do not have extra privileges in this matter it is hardly exceptional. Women's rights activists from Saudi Arabia noted that coming at the eve of the Arab Spring the announcement seeks to diminish the struggles waged by Saudi women for greater political representation long before the Arab Spring. Moreover, the king's proclamation was announced a few days from the actual voting, which meant that women could not partake in any manner in present elections.

Saudi women tirelessly organised to pressure the government to address their demands for greater participation in the affairs of the country. The campaign to allow women to drive is one of the many campaigns through which Saudi women and men are staging acts of civil disobedience to protest against undue restrictions on their citizenship. The campaign for women's political participation, the Baladi Campaign, is larger and grassroots based relying on a network of volunteers.

Fauwziah Al Hani, a social and human rights activist leading the Baladi Campaign that is working towards women's full participation in municipal elections, explained how in a bid to pressure the government to respond to their demands women mobilized around the country presenting themselves at polling stations and demanding to be registered.

They also pursued other legal challenges to claim their rights. Two women, including Fauwziah, filed cases in their respective supreme courts against the minister responsible for municipal affairs for violating the Saudi constitution and international law in denying women the right to participate in the governance of their countries. The minister did not deny that women had a right to vote but claimed that the state was trying to put in place

the necessary infrastructure and procedures to accommodate women in public life, at which the campaign offered the ministry their extensive network across the country to help put the machinery in place to facilitate women assuming the vote.

Nimah Nawwab observed that, faced with such pronouncements, the tendency is to be immersed in celebration when such proclamations are made even though they may not reflect the reality on the ground or translate into real change in the prevailing practice. Saudi Arabia is a context where women are faced with restrictions emanating from tribal laws and customs as well as a conservative interpretation of Islamic law. Laila Al Zwaini, a shariah scholar who has studied the application of shariah laws and rules in a number of Arab countries and Afghanistan, notes that in many instances tribal laws dominate and are justified as Islamic law making the understanding of shariah problematic. She notes that 80 percent of what informs shariah and the interpretations thereof are tribal values not sourced in the Quran.

The relevance of shariah in new political and social realities was also deliberated. Times have moved on, as noted by shariah court judge from Palestine Kholoud Al Faleh who gave vivid accounts of how she interprets Fiqh rules to respond to the reality in contemporary Palestine, especially with regards to the changing notions of the family where the effects of the occupation demands for flexibility to achieve justice. In this respect, it is not just the rules that facilitate this but also the process of adjudication itself. The judge gave an example of how having a female judge in shariah courts helps lactating mothers, for instance, to give evidence uninterrupted thereby maintaining the flow of proceedings, something that would have been hard if a male judge was hearing the case. The lactating mother would have had to excuse herself several times to attend to her child thereby compromising her evidence.

Muslim women are not only restricted by outdated rules and codes. The influence of political forces and big capital limits their ability to manoeuvre in respect to women's human rights. Fatma Ahmed from Sudan cautioned that while the phenomenon of female shariah judges is a positive step, it could also be used to further political interests. In Sudan, there have been many women in shariah courts but many are political appointees and thus cannot be linked directly to emancipatory agendas.

Financing is another area where women's interests can be compromised. A number of rehabilitated mosques in Tanzania, for instance, are funded by sources from the Arab world or by prosperous Arab and Asian businessmen. Some funding sources put conditions in the operation of the mosques that are counter-productive for women as worshippers or as citizens of a community. They may, for example, stipulate that mosques they fund should not allow women on the premises, conditions that local Muslims leaders agree to since in their mind prohibiting women from places of worship is insignificant compared to replacing a local imam with a foreign one.

There are therefore many examples in Islamic institutions where the fear of missing funds or compromising patriarchy takes precedence over the fear of God. According to Nevin Rada, an Islamic scholar based in Canada, Muslim leaders have unashamedly strived to

violate basic Quranic injunctions and teachings in defense of patriarchy. Thus, while the Quran has exalted the leadership style of the Queen of Sheba, Muslim preachers regularly disparage her and instead praise Solomon whose leadership style was but authoritarian.

Sophia Abdi Noor, one of the only 22 female parliamentarians in Kenya representing a majority Muslim region, has suffered from such attacks. Speaking during a session dedicated to women in political office she revealed how her party dumped her during the 1997 elections even though she came first in her party nominations only because male leaders from her conservative region used religious arguments to influence the party's leadership to drop her name. Even though she merited the nomination she was denied the opportunity to assume office solely because some men in her ethnic group and political party felt threatened and they used outdated arguments of cultural and religious sanctity to run her out of contention.

Likewise, in Tanzania during the 2010 general elections Muslim women in particular were dissuaded from running for office by religious figures who claimed that in Islam men are the natural and desired leaders because God willed it to be so. Such arguments were built on the concept of qawamah (protection) and taa (obedience) and served to silence any opposition to male usurpation of a right that belongs to both male and female citizens of a free nation and democratic community.

Such practices are not only in legal codes and practice but increasingly find themselves in cooperate practice. In an effort to conform to dominant Muslim practice it was revealed by Samiah El Moslimany, a participant from Seattle, Washington, that in the IT capital of the world, a mosque built by Microsoft staff put a number of restrictions on women from assuming various leadership portfolios there. This was done with the complicity of some women professionals who were worshippers in the facility because they have subscribed to the idea of male supremacy as something divine.

The relegation of women's public role can also be subversively sabotaged. Participants, for example, noted how three of the 2011 Nobel Laureates are women, two being from Africa and one representing a Muslim majority country. In the so-called Arab Spring, be it in Libya, Egypt, Saudi, Tunisia and a year previously in Iran, women were at the forefront of demonstrations, mass mobilization and movements but sadly as these movements begin taking shape women's visibility and inclusion is compromised.

Participants at the WISE conference noted how military actions in most Muslim majority countries were justified in the name of liberating oppressed Muslim women, but more often than not invading forces and countries have actively compromised the rights of women and relegated women to subsidiary status even in nations that previously pursued progressive agendas for women such as Iraq. It was once recognized as having one of the most progressive family code which was compromised under the West sponsored and supported new constitutional framework which privileges sectarian interests and not national interests. In such a political equation women become the bartering chip with which communities bargain their cultural autonomy.

How then do Muslim women rise above these limitations towards emancipation within a framework that is rooted in their religious legal tradition? Mufuliat Fijabi, a consultant on women's rights in Nigeria, calls for a framework that will enable women to have claim and enforce their rights as it is possible under a rights based approach. Towards this end Laila Al Zwaini, a Muslim scholar who works on the intersection between customary law, Islamic law and human rights, recommends the need for a new methodology to guide the unpacking of dated Fiqh rules to address the situation at present, an approach currently being pursued by the WISE Shura Council.

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