A scene from the conference.

The ISIM workshop on 'Islam, Women's Rights, and Islamic Feminism: Making Connections between Different Perspectives' (9-11 November 2001) took place under the auspices of the International Conference between the West and the Muslim world, at a time when public interest was focused on the American offensive in Afghanistan and anti-American responses in countries as diverse as Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia. Most of the participants felt that precisely at this time one should not allow the agenda of political issues to be completely determined by political issues and that the workshop should take place as planned.

A few of those invited to the conference were not able to attend because of the international situation: some faced travel restrictions or feared for their security. Retrospective consular regulations made it impossible for our participant from Pakistan, Profesor Afsaneh Tehrani, to acquire a visa and another prospective participant, Dr LoLo Ghazi from Malaysia, went to lead a medical team among the new wave of Afghan refugees.

Fifteen scholars and activists, representing a broad range of women's engagement with Islamic issues, and coming from eight different Muslim countries, from Indonesia to Nigeria, actually did take part in the workshop. Participants had been invited because of their contributions to public discourse or concrete experience in defending women's rights and women's points of view. It was hoped that a heterogeneous composition in terms of background, experience and concerns might lead to a stimulating exchange of viewpoints that proved to be the case. The participants presented papers on what they considered as a major issue in their respective situations and in which they had been intensively engaged. The discussions that followed offered up comparative perspectives, contrasting views, and food for reflection.

The contributions

The experience of Iran since the Islamic revolution has been one of the most fascinating developments in the Muslim world, producing some of the most important contributions to contemporary Muslim discourse. Many secular feminists left the country after the revolution, but in due course a strong women's movement emerged precisely because of the contradictions that had supported the revolution. Four of the participants were from Iran; two of them are based in the West but are deeply involved in developments inside Iran. Mahboobeh Abbashojolizadeh, the editor of the women's studies journal Faranoneh, exemplifies perhaps most clearly the development of Muslim women's discourse in Iran. She has been actively involved in the revolution, gradually adopted a feminist perspective and was among the first women in Iran to plead for an Islamic feminism. She spoke about the impact of the political reform movement and the 'new religious thought' (of such authors as Soroush and Shahbazi) on the women's movement. In her view the movement is entering a new phase in which there is the possibility of a convergence between secular and Islamic feminism and, more importantly, a post-modern acceptance of plurality.

Nahid Moetie, a feminist and sociologist affiliated with the Azad University, surveyed the debates around the very term 'Islamic feminism' and gave overview of the various, often conflicting ideological positions adopted by women thinkers and activists in Iran and elsewhere, known for her book on Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran and her film Divorce Iranian Style, gave a similar overview, focusing on the individual trajectories of leading women's intellectual development. Ziba also showed the participants her new film, Runaway, shot in a shelter for runaway girls in Tehran the film was to win a nomination at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, see page 23). Sussan Tahmasi, a US-trained political scientist and NGO activist, spoke of the various types of women's NGOs existing in Iran. Some of these are modern organizations, established in response to global trends and President Khatami's call for strengthening civil society. Sussan emphasised the potential of the less publicized, traditional community-based organizations, which are much closer to the grassroots. The participants from Turkey, Cihan Aktaş and Hidayet Tukal, described conditions that were almost the mirror image of those in Iran. The Ahab is a major political issue; political change in Turkey is a struggle against men's control of women's bodies and very similar to women's resistance against its imposition by the state in Iran. Cihan Aktaş, a popular Islamist essayist and author of short stories, told how for Islamist women it was the veil that has made their participation in public life possible but that its official ban in schools and government offices prevented these women from getting an education and a job. Hidayet Tukal, a doctor in Islamic theology and the author of a critical study of the gender bias in Hadith, sketched the history of the Islamist women's movements in Turkey and the dual struggle of women in the movement for their rights as committed Muslims and as women. In efforts to develop an Islamic discourse that is liberating, they are up against the state as well as Muslim men, conservative or Islamist. There is no convergence between secular and Islamic feminism in Turkey as Abbashojolizadeh claimed this was the case in Iran. Secular feminists are rarely interested in their Islamist sisters' struggles for rights, and when they do support a cause it is usually presented as proving the essentially oppressive nature of Islam. Actually working within an Islamist movement, the woman's wing of Malaysia's IMF (Jemaah Islah Malaysia), Suriya Omae gave an account of work at the grassroots level: she is a medical practitioner as well as a women's organizer. Faced with the difficult tasks of raising women's gender awareness, she found support in the search for more enlightened and woman-friendly interpretations of Islam in a nationwide network of women's activists.

Two of the participants are presently affiliated with Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), an international organization defending women's rights. Cassandra Balchin, the programme co-ordinator for Asia, who has extensive experience as a journalist and women's rights activist in Pakistan, explained the work of her organization, which addresses secular feminists as well as those working within an Islamic perspective. She called for a renewed debate on secularism and religious pluralism, referring to women's protest movements against the Islamization campaign in Pakistan (under Zia-ul Haq) and in Bangladesh. Amina Joda, who founded a centre for women's empowerment in northeastern Nigeria and is presently at the WLUML office in London, discussed the impact of sharia movements in West Africa on women's lives, focusing especially on the impact of the sharia legislation in Nigeria in 1999.

The other activists included Radhah Hasan, who was the director of the Women's Studies Centre in Sanaa until this was closed under pressure from Islamic circles. She spoke on the dynamics of Islam, democracy and women's rights in Yemen, where the North and the South, only recently reunited, are very different with respect to the acceptance of women's public roles. Official endorsement of women's participation, a remnant from the South's socialist past, has regularly been overruled due to pressure from conservatives and Islamists alike. Debates on women's political participation were also central to the two Indonesian contributions. Lies Mustafiah Marcos analysed the positions adopted by major Indonesian Muslim women's organizations in their struggle for female political leadership (which became relevant when Suharto appeared to be grooming his eldest daughter Tutut for successional, and again when Megawati became a presidential candidate). Not surprisingly, the religious and secular women who join the debate is often against female leadership at different points in time appear to vary in accordance with the political situation and with mundane interests.

Chunnil Marylah discussed the situation in Aceh, which has recently been granted a considerable degree of autonomy (in the hope of appeasing the separatist Free Aceh Movement) and where the sharia has been proclaimed. Women are making efforts to take part in drafting the concrete regulations in which the sharia will be operationalized. Several of these other participants, such as Yasmin Hamid, argued that for women to be actively involved in legal drafting (and therefore the necessity of developing the relevant expertise.

Zainah Anwar of the Malaysian NGO, Sis- ters in Islam, brought up a number of other themes. One of the objectives of her organization is to give women a more active role in developing Muslim discourse, so that this will not remain a monopoly of men unsympathetic to women's concerns. This raises important questions of authority and legitimation. The standard response of conservatives when women join the debate is to delegitimize them for not having the 'right expertise' - something that is not demanded from men who support conservative interpretations. The Sisters have, on the other hand, made efforts to strengthen the traditional legitimacy of their arguments in favour of liberal and pluralist understandings through study and consultation with sympathetic theologians and jurists. On the other hand, they have developed an effective lobbying pressure on the government with memoranda and keeping a steady presence in the media through letters to the editor.

Special guests

Two special guests added further dimensions to the discussions. Nazir Ali Zardari, father of a Qu'anic hermeneutics and women's rights, giving a sophisticated analysis of key verses in their context and in the light of the non-chronological organization of the entire text of the Qur'an. His work on hermeneutics was felt to be of great importance to the participants.

Mona Abuza also made some critical comments on the search for an Islamic feminism by Western scholars and its emergence as a particular form of middle-class discourse in Egypt. She also made a comparison with the emergence of a feminine theology in Ger- man Protestantism in the 1960s, which, unlike later liberation theology, never drew much attention in the Muslim world.