

RECONCILING RELIGION AND FEMINISM: A CASE STUDY OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN INDIA

Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur
Qazi Sarah Rasheed

1.Aim

In the western feminist thought, religion is generally regarded as a tool to legitimize the patriarchal control over women and therefore, it stands in contrast with the basic feminist principle of gender equality (Daly, 1973; Beauvoir, 2011). Islam in particular has a reputation for supporting a segregated social system where women are economically and politically marginalized (Hashim, 1999). However, in the recent times the feminist discourse has suffered a serious backlash for it alienates those Muslim women who want to liberate but not at the expense of their religious identity (Hibri, 1997). Considering this background, the paper seeks to examine how and why the Muslim women activists in India negotiate and mediate this opposition in an Islamic context.

2.Data & Methods

For this purpose, a feminist methodology has been adopted to give voice to women's own accounts of their understandings, experiences and interests. The study is influenced by two feminist research assumptions:

- 1) Feminist research aims to create social change (Reinharz, 1992)
- 2) Meaning comes from women's experiences, their perceptions of experiences, and life stories (Rothe, 1993)

Techniques employed for data collection includes purposeful sampling, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, documentary sources and field notes.

3.Results

It was found that due to the non-intervention policy of the Indian state into the community's internal affairs and the failure of religious authorities to implement the Islamic provisions to protect Muslim women's rights forced the women activists to consider religious based approaches to reform the gender relations within the community. Inspired by the new feminist discourse i.e. Islamic feminism, they have made efforts to re-define Islam by re-interpreting the religious textual sources for engaging with gender suggesting that these can be read as fully supportive of equal human rights for all. While doing so, they not only engage with the state by evoking the Constitutional principle of gender equality but also challenge the authority of conservative religious clerics.

4.Conclusion

From these findings one can conclude that, religion as a social phenomenon may not necessarily promote a series of dogmatic doctrines which are inevitably retrogressive or instinctively status-quoist especially when it comes to the social reforms affecting gender orders. Depending upon the historical, political and cultural contexts, the traditional institution of religion can be used as an alternative strategy to articulate the feminist concerns.

References

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