

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

International Conference on “The Making of the Islamic Diaspora”

On 7-9 May 2004, the SSHRC-funded, York University-based MCRI project on Diaspora, Islam, and Gender project held an international conference on “The Making of the Islamic Diaspora.” Under the directorship of Haideh Moghissi, Saeed Rahnama, and Mark Goodman, the event was held in Toronto and was cosponsored by the Ford Foundation Educational Project for Palestinians, the Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies, the York Centre for Refugee Studies, and the York Centre for Feminist Research. The conference brought together an impressive collection of scholars from around the world to share knowledge and insight into the challenges that face diaspora communities of emigrants, refugees, and exiles who originate from Islamic cultures, with a specific focus on the gender dimension of displacement.

In addition to the invited guests and speakers, the conference was attended by approximately 50 academics, graduate students, and the public at large. The conference’s guest of honor was the Honorable Zahira Kamal, Minister of Women’s Affairs for the Palestinian National Authority, who participated in the conference and presented a keynote address at a dinner reception in her honor.

The conference’s panels discussed themes related to identity formation, gender in diaspora, fundamentalism and human rights, the diaspora experience, and the media and representation. Nergis Canefe, for example, spoke about issues of religious identity and national belonging and noted that diasporas offer a site of new membership that is different than migrants and represent the flourishing of hybrid identities. She described the “common immigrant story,” where such socioeconomic barriers as racism, stereotyping, media representation, and difficulty in recertification make it extremely difficult to have a smooth life transition in a new country.

A presentation by Omar Zakhilwal, who is presently working in Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and comments on the role of Afghan diaspora in peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts, resulted in a passionate response from the audience. Zakhilwal's presentation focused on the positive changes that have occurred in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime, but many in the audience reacted to his overly optimistic and unrealistic representation of the current situation in Afghanistan and future prospects. Mohammed Qadeer (Queen's University) used his presentation to answer two questions: How is Islam influenced by social life, and how are contests in interpretation manufactured in Islam? He noted four important lessons: Islamization (defined as Islamic extremism) is always advanced with military power, not by democracy; the current ideological vacuum in the world is causing a rise of Islamization; liberal interpretations are not in streets because there is no structure behind them; and Islamic narrative is more than academic. For example, research suggests that the most conservative people are not the peasants, but those educated professionals looking for a new ideology that can fulfill their hopes.

A recurring theme across panels was the tendency for members of some diaspora communities to refrain from identifying themselves as Muslims. This seems to be for two reasons: media representations of Muslims and a tendency toward secularism among members of some Muslim communities, such as Iranians. In her presentation, Haleh Afshar (University of York, England) discussed her research on ascribed and adopted identities of Pakistani women in Bradford. She explained that the emergence of Islamophobia has resulted in the beginnings of women self-identifying as "Muslim" rather than "Pakistani" or "British," and noted that nationality and citizenship are poor indicators of where women are (i.e., how they self-identify), because these are generally adopted through their association with men (father or husband). She offered that her research subjects, particularly young women who have adopted Islam as their primary identity, argue that there is something feminist about their identity and their choice to ascribe it.

Shahrazad Mojab (University of Toronto) talked about "Gender, Nation, and Diaspora," sharing her research on Kurdish women in transnational struggle. She suggested that this particular case is especially important in understanding the evolution of transnational political movements and their relevance to social science research. She noted that Kurdish women had a strong sense of identity and did not self identify as Iranian, Iraqi, and so on, but primarily as Kurds.

Ann Elizabeth Meyer (University of Pennsylvania) reflected on “International Human Rights and the Diaspora” and what the Shirin Ebadi case demonstrates to us. She began by reaffirming the universality of women’s human rights and noting that while 165 nominations were cast for the Nobel prize, a woman from Iran received it. She stated that another Iranian woman, Mehrangiz Kar, who did not receive the prize, deserves equal recognition for her many years of devoted and dedicated pursuit of promoting women’s human rights in Iran. Meyer suggested that the universality versus cultural relativism debate is particularly relevant to the hijab controversy, and reminds us that human rights is about freedom of choice. For example, while France criticizes Iran’s human rights record, it deprives Muslim women in France of the right to choose to wear hijab or not. She similarly questioned the Muslim community’s criticism of France’s policy of non-choice and its lack of a similar questioning of Saudi Arabia’s policy of imposition. She concluded that in order to promote and protect women, human rights advocates must allow women to choose how to practice their religion.

Riffat Hassan (University of Louisville) also addressed human rights in Islam, but questioned the belief that human rights can work only in the context of secularism. She described two groups of people: those who are religious extremists and those who claim that Islam is perfect and thus there is no human rights issue to be dealt with by the UN or international human rights regime. She disagrees with both positions for two reasons: true Islam is not being practiced anywhere, and the average Muslim woman lives in countries where she has to endure a life of poverty, illiteracy, and village life. She completed her presentation by discussing relevant Qur’anic scriptures that affirms human rights. She argued that if someone wants to provide a human rights paradigm in the Muslim world, the paradigm found in normative Islam would have the greatest success.

Ezzat Mossalanejad spoke about Islam and consecrated torture criticizing the Shari’ah’s provisions for acts that would constitute torture under international human rights codes. Saeed Rahnema, speaking about Islamic fundamentalism and mass political mobilization, argued that Islamic is not a monolithic entity, for it includes approximately 72 sects as well as those who consider themselves “secular” Muslims. He suggested that Islam has been influenced by, and has influenced, the surrounding environment. He noted that imperialism, authoritarianism, and Islamic extremism are all products of modernization and the failure of secular forces. After reflecting on the long tradition of Islamic revivalism, which has seen attempts to reform Islam so

that it could be contextually progressive (i.e., the possibility of being Muslim in modernity), he concluded that the rise of Christian and Jewish fundamentalism have also promoted Islamic extremism. The final panel provided a conceptual framework and findings of the diaspora project.

In my opinion, the conference was a success and provided an opportunity to discuss an increasingly important research topic with particular relevance in Canada and other multicultural nations. For more information on the project, as well as the panelists and their presentations, see the conference report at [www.atkinson.yorku.ca~diaspora](http://www.atkinson.yorku.ca/~diaspora).

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