Feminism, Gender Democracy and Religions in Local Practice

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Despite tremendous resistance on the part of the patriarchy, the debate about feminism and gender mainstreaming within the religious communities is <u>officially</u> under way.

How does the Muslim community feel about these definitions?

Feminism has very different connotations in the Islamic world: for a start, large numbers of Turkish Muslim women and men define feminism from experiences in their home country, which means that feminism is associated with terms such as "non-religious" „family-destructive" and "hostile towards men".

Therefore functionaries officially attempt to distance themselves from an Islamic gender-equitable theology by, on the one hand, for example classifying the booklet[1] published by the *Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung und Frauenförderung* not as gender equitable but rather as feminist. However, they adopt the arguments therein compiled because they have understood their socio-political relevance in the non-Muslim society.

The permanent assertions that God has already given women all rights and that Muslim women always attempt to legitimate this attitude from the Qur'an does not bring them any further on a practical level. It only results in these arguments being accepted, whereas women are only seldom taken seriously on a theological level. The question of sovereignty of interpretation is usually decided in favour of the traditional version. Especially because they benefit from the balance of power and the implementation of possible public statements at the grass root level is minimal.

Therefore, carrying out this theological discussion is and remains an inner Islamic affair. Nonetheless transparent and sometimes in public. Non-Muslim sides often emphasize that this is also desired. However, it might appear suspicious to a woman when the powers oriented towards gender equity in the Islamic society are not even allowed to take part in most of the meetings and public debates. It becomes clear that it is obviously not about gender democracy and its realisation within the religious communities, but rather about the consolidation of a predefined image of Islam that is confirmed by certain representatives of individual religious communities as representatives of other religions also do for their community.

Therefore, this aim, the enforcement of gender democracy, also in religiously oriented communities, is more likely to benefit from the objectification of the issue. Let us assume that:

Social norms in patriarchal-oriented cultures must be revealed as the cause of discrimination and non-implementation of gender mainstreaming.

It is often recklessly argued that: "The Islam is to blame". Which implies that only this religion would need to be repelled or even abolished and peace would be restored.

Realistically, the **facts** must be put forward: we are talking about Islam, on the one hand, and Muslim women, on the other. The Prophet Muhammad already advised human beings: "Do not measure Islam on the Muslims! "

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[1] "*Ein einziges Wort und seine große Wirkung* " - a hermeneutic approach to Qur'an Sura 4 verse 34 with regard to gender relations in Islam. Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung und Frauenförderung, Cologne/Zurich 2005

Gender mainstreaming initially means taking the interests of women and men into account in various life situation projects from the very start at regular intervals.

However, what happens if this consideration emanates from an imbalanced gender image? Then gender specific interests are invoked that often do not correspond to the real needs of the persons concerned but rather solely serve the consolidation of a traditional understanding of one's role.

The gender image in Islam takes a completely ontological equality as a starting point. Derived from this, nothing would obstruct the implementation of gender democracy. The interpretation of the verses concerned is presented in the annex, but should not be the main matter of debate at this point.

Access to blissful happiness in male theology via the definition of man is not only present in the patriarchal way of thinking. This means that the following applies to women, but not only in many Muslim groups: their silent attendance of the worldly patriarchy leads to the otherworldly, also patriarchal heavenly reward.

Societies of all shades are consequently accustomed to unequal gender relations.
But how do we define the term gender?
In contrast to the term "sex" that describes the biological identity, the term **gender** refers to the socially and culturally shaped identity that can also be changed.
Many Muslim societies are oblivious to the changes or misinterpret them because a "change" of the biological identity is often implied /connoted, and as such the whole is regarded as contradictory to the "natural facts".

Women's' rights are often either not at all or insufficiently represented in the teachings and media in Muslim reality.

Even women in so-called senior positions have usually reached them because they must represent and defend patriarchic structures. In principle, women in society frequently let themselves be "flaunted" as token women by the patriarchy; this undermines the position of members of the same sex who genuinely want to shape society and participate in mainstreaming.
Mainstreaming is not just a verbal affirmation, it is a precise contentual guideline that has not determined behaviour so far and is now becoming consistent. In general, it needs to be focused on the living situations of **both** sexes; this will increase the effectiveness of the measures and projects, because they become more accurate and precise.

If this is also supposed to take place in Muslim society, we first have to bring the actual situation to mind.
All the problems of the majority society can also be found in the domestic Muslim society. Gender equity is often discussed, however in connection with non-Muslim society. E.g. violence against women is officially condemned, but is not sufficiently outlawed in the communities.

Society, i.e. majority and domestic societies, must be aware of Muslim women and their identity and must take them seriously. They must not be denied their maturity, no matter from which side.
While doing so, it is important that this kind of acceptance does not simply remain a lip service which means that given a suitable opportunity the majority society will demand gender-equitable measures resulting in showcase projects that are just as

half-hearted as short-lived. Incidentally a phenomenon that is also taking place on a European level in a number of member states with regard to the EU Gender Equality Law.

We will not be able to start thinking about the sustainability of mainstreaming until women are not only asked and accounted for but also involved. It must be wanted, earnestly and by everyone, also by the women themselves.

The gender mainstreaming principle belongs in women's hands, but also in the hands of men committed to gender equity. Otherwise, it will hardly be possible to obtain more concessions than the appointment of token women from the powers that be.

Women represent a great creative potential within Muslim communities. These resources are often only used when they serve the consolidation of traditional and as such patriarchal structures.

Gender democracy describes the intention to create democratic conditions between women and men in society in general, as well as specifically in communities and organisations.

This would mean that women are equally involved in the collective policies and theological debates.

To disband non-democratic structures women will first have to learn to verbalise these grievances.

Due to the power structures, the non-Muslim society will have to provide Muslim or religious women with a platform that enables a sustainable type of participation in shaping society and demands and secures positive repercussions on their own religious group.

Whoever is serious about common core values cannot impose their own ideas on religious women; they must encourage the development of gender equitable visions in the communities instead.

However, strategic partnerships with for example so-called critics of Islam are not at all helpful. People who genuinely identify themselves with the respective region (if not always with all parts of the religious community) should be sought out instead.

This means that also the irreligious part of our society will have to face up to the criticism of discriminating religious people. Gender democracy can only be claimed from the other side when pressure is reduced from this side.

Gender democracy cannot be realised simply by encouraging Muslim women to conform. It would be more important to get them to act.

On the one hand, to prevent men from yet again taking claim of the term "gender democracy" which would create an authorisation to appropriate areas that women claim for themselves. On the other hand, also because women must learn how to challenge male-dominated areas.

This is frightening – in particular in a society that already feels marginalised.

Therefore, an incentive to encourage religious groups to start an internal dialogue between the genders ought to be created. It would then make sense to give it sincere encouragement from the outside.

The fronts are often precisely not between the religions, but rather between the genders. This would make it possible to benefit from each other in an interfaith

gender dialogue. Young women in particular could be encouraged to follow this path and men with democratic standards could be held fully accountable.

This is where a yardstick for integration lies - namely integration from both sides. Integration in which the non-religion oriented share of the population allows the religious share to participate, for example by analysing and becoming aware of discrimination mechanisms, continuously, from all sides and preferably together.

In religious groups the perspective on the respective role perception also in the respective social context must lead to self-reflection and inevitably also to changes. Meaning it must be clear that the demand for gender democracy is directed at both genders and both are also responsible for revealing which structures and standards prevent gender democracy in their own community. Furthermore, one must reflect on how, in principle, in their own institutions and in all projects, the diverse approaches and interests of both women and men could already be taken into account during the planning phase.

The effort and support of women in developing the courage to state their claim must go hand in hand with men's awareness of the gender question.

ANNEX I:
Explanation of the Islamic theology on gender equity:

...... First of all, the Creator is said to have created mankind from a single substance; this term „nafsun wahidatun", a feminine grammatical construction, describes "that primary substance".

However, the patriarchal interpretation proclaims:
"O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women." Qur'an, Sura 4,2 pp

Nevertheless, a gender-neutral version (that does justice to the etymological/linguistic aspect) also permits the following interpretation:
"O people! be careful of (your duty to) your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two, many men and women."

It is clear that the first translation implicates the subordinate creation of Woman, which is supported by the theological notion that Woman was created from "Man's rib", a story that cannot be found in the Qur'an.

However, even the patriarchal theological speculation was never able to deny Muslim women the creation by God and as such the meeting with her Creator. The Qur'an's words are too explicit.

This means that both genders are considered ,Hanif', i.e. people who can follow the right path and participate in social activities with equal rights and responsibilities. By the same token, they have identical rights to education.

"And the believing men and women, they are allies to one another: They order good and deter from evil"...Qur'an 9:71]

Ontological equality embodies the basis for both the coexistence of gender and mankind per se because a clear equality on the level of creatureliness arises from it.
Every now and again there are attempts to lever out this equality by means of translation variants that are grammatically possible, however do not correspond to the „ruh-at-tašri" (Spirit of the Scripture) in their entirety. The idea that the creation of Man was prior and as such had priority (a concept that is also held by persons of different religious faiths) has become "integrated" in many Muslim circles.
In many cases the so-called "Expulsion from Paradise" is used as proof for the "dangerousness" of Woman. However, according to the Qur'an, Woman is not given the blame for the need to leave Paradise:

"So they **both** ate from it, and their wickedness became apparent for them, and they began to place leaves on themselves from the garden. Man had disobeyed his Lord, and had gone astray." [20:121]

The conditions on Earth were pretty much equal for both genders, Woman's ability to conceive children constituted an exception. This means that both are present on Earth and both carry the responsibility for the Creation and for the formation of society:

"For Muslim men and women— for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves) for men and women who guard their chastity and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise— for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward." [33:35].

Women and men have their own soul and each is ultimately responsible for her/himself. The consequences for earthly life also apply for both genders.

"But those who believe and work righteousness no burden do We place on any soul, but that which it can bear— they will be companions of the Garden therein to dwell (forever)." [7:42]
"*And their Lord hath accepted of them, and answered them: "Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: ye are members one of another. .... [3:195] "*
"(It will be) the Day when no soul shall have power (to do) aught for another: for the Command, that Day, will be (wholly) with Allah.[82:19]"

However, in the Qur'an interpretation women are requested to shoulder this responsibility. The idea that they have to bow to male directives that are contrary to their own question of conscience seems to be questionable at the least.
The Qur'an assumes that Woman and Man, as a couple, ought to protect and support one another. Whereas the exact definition of the details as to how it is carried out in reality, ought to be determined in mutual consultation and consent.

In this connection it is often forgotten or suppressed that Islam recommends making a marriage contract. In particular, because marriage is not a sacrament, but a civil contract per se.

A marriage is a long-term contract, but as with all contracts it can be dissolved. Especially for this case, it is necessary to define the terms at a time when the contractual partners are amicable.

ANNEX II:

Taken from: The dialogue is alive - long live the dialogue?

"The Islam is just as European as are Judaism and Christianity; they all originate in the Orient."

It is apparent that in Germany a cultural **coexistence** has already become reality; however, philosophical, sociological approval and the implementation of **cooperation** lag behind. Muslim and non-Muslim citizens in the Federal Republic of Germany have to contend with a large number of communication barriers.

An only marginally religious but mainly ethnically defined 'sense of belonging together' often hinders the equal exchange between the cultures and minimises the contacts of the minority to the majority society. For all intents and purposes, it promotes the sealing-off and ghettoisation of the minority which results in a further hardening of the ethnocentric standpoints. Currently, the feeling as though they haven't yet "made the grade" and being regarded as inferior has led to arrogance and lack of self-criticism in Muslim migrants. These kinds of migration problems can then focus themselves in religious feelings and lead to a particular development of Islam "specific to Germany" that culminates in an unfavourable interaction of claim to exclusivity, feelings of superiority and even nationalistic views, which are adamantly rejected by Islam.

On the one hand, Muslims cannot claim any special rights because that would be evidence of a lack of understanding with regard to integration. The majority society, on the other hand, ought to accept the participation of Muslim women in every type of social process as a matter of course, because neither sealing off nor preferential incorporation encourage the feeling of integration. But this also means that each individual first has to clarify at which point in their opinion the process of integration is completed.

The extensive media coverage regarding the cultural and religious life of Muslims has not led to a change of attitude towards them.

Consumers of these media seem to pick out only those information (or parts thereof) that enable them to uphold their preconceived opinions.

The Muslim culture can then be an enrichment for the respective resident society if it succeeds in using a special, genuine feature of Islam anew: there is historical proof that whenever Muslim culture has encountered a different culture, it has been able to use the customs and ways of this other culture without difficulty for the benefit of society as a whole provided they do not violate the essential principles of justice.

It is essential that similarly easy-going and poised dealings of the cultures with one another are strived for. However, one must keep in mind that naturally **different demands** will be placed on majority and minority. Certain integration behaviour (not assimilation) can be expected from the minority, in particular with regard to language competency; legal and social equality, however, can only be provided by the majority.

Shifting and flexible social structures demand integration behaviour from **all** its citizens. For the ethnic German majority, this means a reintegration in the newly created culture. If all the members of both cultures were willing, the joint making of our society could become reality. Muslim citizens could finally view this society also as their own and finally be challenged in the attempt to solve our current issues, and make positive contributions.

With regard to this potential for development, every culture with which an agreement regarding common significant values is reached then becomes a welcome enhancement for our society. Perhaps the visual diversity of the citizens also gives us an opportunity to reflect our own fears and shortcomings continuously and optimise our social structures together.

The work of the ZIF is aimed at helping Muslim women in European society find a conscious Islamic identity because this is a prerequisite for healthy self-esteem. In our opinion, only then will these persons be able to tackle the society in which they live. Only a person who is not straying in search of their own identity can deal with the interaction of the different identities.

We try to help the women find their own individual path. It is not about giving instructions, it's about developing Islamic alternatives from the Qur'an, the legitimacy of which is not only theologically comprehensible, but also through the living situation of women.

To do so, we rely on the fact that the non-Muslim society is aware of these developments within the Islamic society, and disavows the stereotyped image of Islam, that is "the Islam" per se. Because if the autonomous progress is ignored, its further development is uncertain.

A female Muslim speaker once said that European societies create "their own Muslims"; otherwise how can it be explained that for example Muslims living in the Netherlands often boast different characteristics than their counterparts in France or Germany? Because as is generally known "we reap what we sow", however this also applies to Muslims, too. They need to develop empathy for the majority society because the willingness to compromise is demanded from all sides.

The most important element needed to put this discussion on a sound basis is our hermeneutic research group. Muslims develop these methods according to the hermeneutic based in the Qur'an.

Women are finally plucking up the courage to explore the texts t h e m s e l v e s, develop a methodology, ask about the historical context of theological interpretations, and occupy themselves with the possibility of linguistic philological transformations of texts in this day and age.

Many attempt to break away from the traditional brace as well as the social constraints, and search for their own path. They face the effort and pain it costs to develop an individual position.

It is a demand that is in line with our social principles; the aspect that arises from the religious perspective is not contrary to the collective need, and therefore needn't be perceived as a threat but rather as an enrichment - if our intentions with plurality are honest.

The numerous options are reflected in the plurality of Islam in Europe and together we must learn how to carry out inter-religious action – on all sides.

It seems clear that Islam in Europe will be affected by the image that Muslims have of women in Europe.

Self-situatedness and transnational identity are ways of infiltrating dominant attributions. This also applies to emancipatory achievements of the majority society which we already believed to be secure.

Christianity and Judaism have found their place in Europe, Islam is in the process. Together the worshippers of all religious communities could become aware of their common roots and possibilities, work together for a tolerant multireligious society and the joint endeavour would be the respectful management of an inter-religious awareness in Europe - whether European or cosmopolitan or both.