

BETWEEN TRADITION, MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY: THE ROLES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN SPORTS ADMINISTRATION AND LEADERSHIP

Ian Henry & Wirdati Razi, Loughborough University, UK

Context

Much of the debate about the roles Muslim women play in contemporary societies has been cast around contrasting 'tradition' and 'modernity,' where religious practices generally and Muslim practices in particular are said to hark back to some pre-modern era or ways of thinking. While modernity is associated with secular lifestyles, 'scientific', 'rationality' and 'universalism' in terms of values and ways of life, 'tradition' by contrast is associated with non-rational forms of knowledge, and networks based on kinship and ethno-religious groupings, rather than nation-state based identities. While leaving to one side the contribution of Islamic thought to a modernity which predates the European Enlightenment (including the contributions to mathematics, philosophy, medicine, historiography and social analysis of thinkers such as Averroes, Avicenna, and Ibn Khaldun), such a characterisation has tended to place Islam in particular on the defensive, with Muslims continuously portrayed as struggling to find their own 'modern' identities in such debate (Al-Attas, 1996; Al-Azmeh, 1993; Arjomand, 2004; Malik, 2004).

The place of Muslim women in this dichotomy of tradition versus modernity is often reduced simplistically to the place of the veil, the symbol 'par excellence' (for some external observers at least) of a traditional separation of women's roles (El Guindi, 1999). This reductionist approach is subject to major challenges not only from Muslim but also post-colonialist writers (e.g., Kaya, 2000; Mernissi, 1985; Mernissi, 1991; Mernissi & Lakeland, 1991; Mir-Hosseini, 2003). This paper therefore takes sport, that is seen as an essentially modernist phenomenon, and reflects on how Muslim women in a particular context negotiate their roles within sports administration. It draws on a global study of the roles of women in leadership in the Olympic Movement (Henry et al., 2004).

Methods & findings

The paper focuses on the accounts of three Muslim women of their approach to modern sport and leadership in the contemporary Olympic movement. We suggest that their approaches reflect Azza Karam's (1998) typology of feminisms in Egyptian society, (Islamist, Muslim, and secular), and that the heterogeneous nature of approaches to women's roles in society among Muslim communities reflects different religiosities (cultural diversity within and between Muslim ways of life) rather than differences in religious dogma. A recognition of diversity within the religiosities of Muslim communities is an essential element of the argument for rejecting the claims of those who, following Huntington (1996), wish to argue that the value sets held by different 'civilisational' groupings are irreconcilable, with the implication that western values may therefore have to be defended by force since they cannot be defended by argument.

Conclusions

Finally, we argue that moving away from oversimplified, homogeneous assumptions about what constitutes *the* Muslim view of the roles of women, provides space for the negotiation of (albeit limited) consensus on the roles which women might, or should, play in sports administration, concluding that a neo-Habermasian approach to discursive ethics (Habermas, 1990; Habermas, 1993) provides the most promising avenue for constructing such a consensus. Such an argument rests on the claim to be able to agree some general (rather than universal) moral claims about rights, roles and responsibilities.

References

- Al-Attas, S. S. (ed, 1996) *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity: Historical and Contemporary Contexts* Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)
- Al-Azmeh, A. (1993) *Islams and Modernities ??*
- Arjomand, S. A. (2004) *Islam, political change and globalization Thesis Eleven 76 9-28*
- El Guindi, F (1999) *Veil: Modesty, privacy and resistance* Oxford: Berg

- Habermas, J. (1990) *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press
- Habermas, J. (1993) *Justification and application remarks on discourse ethics* Cambridge: Polity
- Henry, I., Radzi, W., Rich, E., Shelton, C., Theodoraki, E., & White, A. (2004) *Women, Leadership and the Olympic Movement* Loughborough: Institute of Sport & Leisure Policy, Loughborough University & the International Olympic Committee
- Huntington, S. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations* London: Simon & Schuster
- Karam, A. M. (1998) *Women, Islamisms and the State: contemporary feminisms in Egypt* Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Kaya, I. (2000) Modernity and Veiled Women *European Journal of Social Theory* 3(2) 195-214
- Malik, I. H. (2004) *Islam and Modernity: Muslims in Europe and the United States* London: Pluto Press
- Mernissi, F. (revised ed, 1985) *Beyond the veil: male-female dynamics in a modern Muslim society* London: Al Saqi Books
- Mernissi, F. (1991) *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Mernissi, F., & Lakeland, M. J. (1991) *The veil and the male elite: a feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam* Reading, Mass/Wokingham: Addison-Wesley
- Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2003) The Construction of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought and Strategies for Reform *HAWWA* 1(1) 1-26

Contact: W.Mohd-Radzi@lboro.ac.uk; I.P.Henry@lboro.ac.uk