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Thoughts on Islam, Gender, and the Hizmet Movement

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“What is the position of women in Islam?”

As a Muslim woman educated in the United States, I have been exposed to this question in numerous occasions, especially in the “introduction to Islam” talks I gave at several churches and seminaries. I am aware that this question is being constantly asked in different parts of the world, and Muslims and non-Muslims alike are attempting to answer this question based on their own understanding and knowledge. My answer to this question is, however, that this is a wrong question to ask, because each of the words comprising this question must be specifically handled in order to be able to find a viable answer. What we mean by “position,” “women,” and “Islam” must be clarified, for none of these terms exist in a vacuum, i.e. without a relational context.

The position of women, for example, can be opened up as the ontological, social, economic, and political positions of women in the Islamic societies throughout history. Or, it can be thought as the position of women in relation to men, or in relation to God.

The idea of womanhood, on the other hand, is itself a product of a particular historical moment, when the entire concept of “human” was being redefined in the aftermath of the “death of God” in Europe. The ontological hierarchical status bestowed upon the male and female sexes by God was no longer held valid as they could not be utilized for the idea of citizenship, equal rights, and democracy – which the modern state needed for its legitimacy. When the western colonizers and orientalist criticized Muslim societies for oppressing women starting with the eighteenth century, their conception of womanhood was based on the modern idea of the subject, which was visible, rational, and autonomous.

Finally, the meaning of Islam might seem quite straightforward, as you think of the Qur’an and the Sunnah as synonymous with Islam. These are the sacred sources of the religion of Islam: yet they do not lead to a mass production of Muslims identical to each other. Although the Qur’an and the Sunnah are the reference sources for Islamic doctrines, they do not constitute the Islamic tradition in and of themselves. Islam, as Talal Asad argues,¹ is a living discursive tradition – a living organism, so to speak – that finds life in complex set of relationships in various Muslim societies. In the thirteenth century, the Muslim traveler Ibn Batutah expresses his astonishment at the level of diversity he witnesses in the Muslim societies from Arabia to Indonesia. His accounts are a sign of the diverse ways of engagement with the sacred sources in each of these societies, which are shaped by their physical, social, cultural and economic structures. In that sense, what is written in the sacred texts does not give a full picture of any given reality.

So “what is the position of women in Islam?” is a wrong question; and yet there are numerous answers to this question, given by both the critics and the defenders of Islam. Both attempts to assign a universal, ahistorical, fixed position for women in a similarly

imagined entity called “Islam” have blocked the way for dialogue between these two poles, and caused women to be torn apart in-between, in the struggle of the modernists vs the traditionalists. The questions of veiling and seclusion, in particular, have made women’s bodies the battleground for this struggle.

Muslim Women in Turkey

Unfortunately, in our region of Turkey, Muslim women were burdened with being the litmus test for the modernity of a whole nation. This made their simple demands like getting education, having a job, dressing as they want, and so on, which became a big political matter for the male political elite. In both the Ottoman and the Republican eras, women’s veiling and their participation in the public sphere have created harsh debates among the male political and intellectual elite. Even though women were not totally passive in these debates, their activism and political participation were largely ignored and blocked, even by the seemingly westernist Republican regime headed by Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Deniz Kandiyoti observes that starting from the Ottoman era, the attempts to “liberate” women by the modernizing elite did not result from their concern with gender-equality or women’s rights *per se*, but from the need to create “the new woman” who would accompany “the new man” who was already modernized.² The Kemalist reforms aiming to encourage women to appear in the public sphere with their western outfit were largely internalized by women especially around the network of the military-bureaucratic elite, who accepted the role of being the representatives of Kemalism in the public sphere. Nilufer Gole makes it clear in *The Forbidden Modern*, that for the Republican women, emancipation came with the cost of desexualization or “the repression of her ‘femininity,’ which is perceived as a threat to the existing social order, and even of her ‘individuality,’ in both urban and public realms (education, labor, and politics).”³

The iconic role of women in the official modernization project was mirrored in the Islamist project starting in the 1980s, which made the women’s headscarf the most explicit symbol of the Kemalist vs. Islamist rivalry. The headscarf of Merve Kavakçı in 1998 brought the end of the Islamist Virtue Party, and its modernist successor JDP (Justice and Development Party) came to the brink of closure ten years later after passing legislation in the parliament that removed the headscarf ban for university students. For the secularists, this is loaded with a symbolic meaning that undermines the very founding idea of Turkish secularism: the invisibility of religion in the public realm. Furthermore, it stands out as the greatest puzzle for secular feminists in Turkey, who decided to align themselves with secularism, since many of them saw the Islamist movement as a threat to women’s emancipation – and their efforts of constructing an independent women’s movement – as they considered Islam inherently misogynist.

Pious Muslim women’s taking public roles in the last thirty years has taken place in such a difficult context as they had to negotiate with the state, the secularists, the traditionalists as well as their own connection with God. A rise in the education level of conservative Muslims took place simultaneously with this process, and this led to the creation of a new kind of relationship with their conception of religious authority, making them more open to promote women’s education.

A significant actor in the promotion of women's education as a pious act has been the Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen and the pietist Hizmet movement he leads. The movement has evolved a lot in its more than three decades of history; and yet its material and spiritual support for the education of a Muslim youth – regardless of gender – has always been there, allowing a secure (i.e. pious) network of friends, gender-segregated accomodation, and reliable financial help throughout their education.

The Hizmet movement also stands out as the best available religion-friendly network for Muslim women who want to be actively taking public roles and yet maintaining their sense of piety and their adherence to the prescribed religious practices. This, however, does not mean that the Hizmet movement has a single code of behavior for women that can be traced in its reference sources. In fact, making a claim about the position of women in the Hizmet movement is even harder than making a claim on the basis of Islam.

The position of women within the Hizmet movement

First, it is almost impossible to frame this movement due to its dynamic and non-centralized characteristics with ambiguous (almost non-existing) borders. Hence, there is no point in looking for a universally valid position of women or men in such a non-framable and non-definable phenomenon. Only the position of women in a particular level and a particular location of the movement can be asked, and this can be easily answered with direct observation. The volunteers within the Hizmet movement adopt different understandings of gender relationships as a result of their diverse experiences in diverse locations. Jill Carroll observes these differences as such:

The movement can manifest different attitudes in different cities. I think the local administrations decide it. And the movement is very flexible in that matter. The volunteers in Ireland adapt to the Irish context, for example. There were women on the podium at the Niagara Foundation's event in Chicago. They were leading the sessions. Some were covered, and some were not. But in the foundation in Houston, you see men more than women. In most of the session I attended there, I used to be the only woman, and mostly, this would force me to forget that I was a woman. That means, it changes according to the place.⁴

From a different perspective, it can be observed that women's visibility within the movement is parallel to the standards of the society in which the movement acts. It can be even claimed that the approach of the Hizmet movement volunteers has surpassed the standards of conservative circles within Turkey in terms of regulating gender relations and women's roles in the public sphere. The female supporters of the movement have gone public by founding charity associations and non-governmental organizations in order to conduct pious acts rather than becoming visible. Their pious activism opened the door of the public sphere for many other Muslim women who were hesitant to step into the public sphere for fear of losing their religious sensitivities.

The lack of a central philosophy that goes into the details of gender relations and tells what behavior to take in what situation results from the fact that the ultimate goal the movement advises to its followers is to please God without developing any gender-based

approach in its formulation. What I will say about the Hizmet movement now can also be claimed for Islam in a general sense: Hizmet leaves the path open for its followers to evaluate each local moment and situation by their free will and to develop actions towards God's consent by creating a synthesis of the society they live in, the traditions of that society, the spirit of their time and the global perspective. In other words, the ultimate goal for Muslims is to get closer to God, to get the consent of God, and both men and women are required to use their freewill and judgment to develop and create ways of achieving that goal.

While it is not convenient to talk about a universal perspective of Islam, or more specifically of the Hizmet movement, on women, it is possible to reach some conclusions regarding the views of the spiritual leader of the movement, i.e. Fethullah Gulen. In many talks and writings, Gulen has clearly revealed his views on the relationship between men and women by approaching the topic from ontological, religious, and sociological perspectives.

Ontologically speaking, it has been unanimously acknowledged by traditionalist and modernist scholars alike that no difference exists between men and women in terms of one's position, rights and responsibilities in relation to God. Moving from the verse that lays down piety or righteousness (*taqwa*) as the only criteria for superiority between human beings in the eyes of God, Gülen has decisively repeated the view that being a woman or a man does not constitute any supremacy over the other. For Gülen, man and woman are two halves of a whole being, and one cannot complete itself without the other half. However, Gülen says "one is never identical to the other," as each of them "has different innate character, physical quality, spirituality and psychological characteristics." And yet he instantly adds that "neither man is the more biologically improved form of woman, nor woman is a less developed form of man. Each of them are distinct human beings and they are in need of each other." According to Islam, he says, "even though there are certain differences between man and woman, these are the results of a special design planned for many skills; but there is certainly no difference between them in the ontological sense."⁵

Sociologically, Fethullah Gülen's approach to the relation between men and women is based on the difference of roles, determined largely by their physical differences. In other words, there is no problem in Muslim women being visible in the public sphere, whereas it is not approved to charge women with duties surpassing their physiological capabilities – but it is not banned, either.

The religious framework Gülen draws for a woman's activities in the public sphere is her ability to fulfill her prescribed religious practices. She can do any work or profession as long as she is not deprived of her piety. Gulen says that the understanding which imprisoned women at home has originated from culture rather than religion, and gives examples from the time of the Prophet Muhammad to show how women's visibility was seen normal in that period:

The contribution of women in certain fields of life is not banned in Islam, provided that physical conditions have been taken into consideration and their working conditions are suitable. Women have indeed contributed in every field of life (throughout history). For instance, they were allowed to participate in battles; their education was not only desired, but also actively sought and encouraged In Islam

there is no such thing as limiting the life of women or narrowing their fields of activity. Things that appear negative to us today must be analyzed with respect to the conditions of the time in which they were experienced and to the policy of the respective states in which they happened. It should also be noted that pre-Islamic traditions in some societies and regions have been preserved, and Islam should not be held responsible for any faults inherent in them.⁶

Conclusion

Gülen is one among many examples who have formulated a path leading to piety and God's consent for men and women by deriving his ideas from the sacred sources of Islam, thereby adding to the creation of a discursive tradition. As said in the beginning of this article, I do not find it viable to make a universal and ahistorical claim about the status of women in Islam in general, and the Hizmet movement in particular. However, I can speak from my own experience as a highly educated Muslim woman from Turkey. And from where I stand, I have tried to give the particular context of being a Muslim woman in Turkey with its evolution, ruptures, and opportunities.

Endnotes

¹ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986).

² Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam, and the State* (Houndmills, England: Macmillan, 1991) 38.

³ Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996) 79.

⁴ Jill Carroll, "Gülen Hareketi Rönesans Neslini Yetiştiriyor" (the Gulen Movement is Raising a Generation of Renaissance). Interview with Balci and Yilmaz, *Aksiyon Weekly*, <http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/aksiyon/haber-27129-176-%E2%80%9Cgulen-hareketi-ronesans-neslini-yetistiriyor%E2%80%9D.html> (accessed June 23, 2011) 2010.

⁵ Fethullah Gulen, "Alan Mahkumu ve Hak Mahrumu Kadınlar" (Women as Confined to Certain Spaces and Deprived of Their Rights). *Kırık Testi*, 02/07/2007, <http://www.herkul.org/kirik-testi/alan-mahkumu-ve-hak-mahrumu-kadinlar/> (accessed September 30, 2011) 2007.

⁶ Fethullah Gulen, "Women in Islam." Interview with Mehmet Gündem, <http://en.fgulen.com/press-room/mehmet-gundem-interview/1929-womens-rights-in-islam> (accessed September 30, 2011) 2005.