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THE STORY UNDERNEATH

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ROME, Aug 2 (IPS) - Rising fundamentalisms around the world are challenging human rights, and particularly women's rights, feminist groups say. But this is not an Islam-related problem only, and isolating Muslim fundamentalism does not help Muslim women.

Feminist networks have systematically included fundamentalism among the discussion subjects in the 'Feminist Dialogues' (FD) started in Mumbai in 2004 during the fourth World Social Forum. The dialogues are coordinated by a group of 12 feminist networks from Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe.

Invited by the Rome based Society for International Development (SID) and CeSPI, Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (Centre of Studies for International Politics), members of the FD and renowned Italian feminists met in Rome earlier in July to discuss the deepening crisis of democratic nations traversed by forces of fundamentalisms, militarism and globalisation.

"Fundamentalism is one of the key themes identified by the feminist dialogues, which have pointed out how in the World Social Forum itself as well as in popular discourse amongst the media and policy makers, fundamentalisms in all their forms are not spoken about enough," says Aisha Lee Shaheed, in an interview with IPS correspondent Sabina Zaccaro.

Aisha Lee Shaheed is a writer and researcher who grew up in rural Canada, Britain and Pakistan. For the past three years she has been a networker for an international feminist network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), working to create links amongst women and women's groups within Muslim countries and communities. She spoke with IPS correspondent Sabina Zaccaro.

IPS: Is fundamentalism a Muslim concern only?

Aisha Lee Shaheed (ALS): I don't think this necessarily has to be a Muslim issue. I've been speaking with many South Americans, Latin Americans as well as Indian women participating to the FD, and speaking about their own experiences of Catholic fundamentalisms, of Hindu fundamentalisms, Protestant fundamentalisms in North America. For me, these are all linked to our struggles against Islamist and Muslims fundamentalisms.

IPS: What are the potential effect of isolation?

ALS: It is a real step back to isolate Muslim fundamentalism as one discrete problem, because I think that the effect of this, one of the potential effects, is that it roots fundamentalism and politicises religion in coming out of Islam itself, which is totally irrelevant.

I think Islamist actors, their being violent, or politically controlling, comes out of their political agendas, not out of religion itself. I feel that a lot of things are done in the name of religion.

By isolating Islam it seems to say that this is a Muslim problem, that only Muslims try to put their political agenda there. I think that this obscures the other ways that institutions like the Vatican or like the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, the main nationalist Indian political party), in India might also be exercising power in exactly the same way, with the same effects on minority communities, their daily lives and the lives of women specifically.

Our strengths of including fundamentalism in the feminist dialogues means that on a trans-national level we can share our experiences of this and our strategies towards working on this.

IPS: How does your organisation address the issue?

ALS: WLUML is a network, rather than an organisation. We were started very informally in 1984 by a handful of women in different countries -- in Algeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, and Indonesia -- who came together and said something's happening in our contexts, right wing forces are taking over, military forces are taking over, we're struggling with them on a local national level, but there has to be some connection here, how can we work together across our differences, and across the gap of space.

So, in the last 20 plus years it has grown, and it now covers over 90 countries, with many languages and religions. We not only work in places with Muslims laws -- countries like Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia -- but also in Muslim majority areas that have secular laws, such as Turkey, and also places with secular laws with Muslim minority, for example many countries like Western Europe, North America as well.

We also address women who are given the identity of being Muslim. We are in Italy, so I use this as an example: we don't automatically assume that here every woman we're speaking to is Catholic, is religious. We don't identify them as Christian women, because we don't know what someone's personal beliefs are. I find that...we need to give the Muslim women as well the chance to self-identify.

IPS: Don't you think that identifying a woman with her faith is slightly limiting?

ALS: Especially in a context of trans-nationalism, when many of us have mixed heritage, like myself, also migrant women and expatriate women moving across these borders and across these identities, it's incredibly limiting to be reduced to a religion, that has many different manifestations. For example, the Muslimness that a woman might feel being born and raised in Algeria might be very different from Muslimness felt by a woman in Indonesia and all the others in between.

IPS: In this specific struggle, is there room for alliance with men? Can also men be somehow feminist?

ALS: This is my personal opinion, but I think that to a certain extent yes, they can. There is always a space for alliances. I don't think they need to be at the forefront of the movement, but our supporters, our allies as human being.

If we fall under the umbrella of women's rights as human rights, it works the other way as well. Those interested in human rights certainly have an investment in women's rights. I don't believe the women's issues should only be taken up by women, the same way that I don't think the right of any minority should only be taken up by that minority. I feel that I can speak with -- not for -- many other groups that I ally with, that may not be of the same religion, the same background...

IPS: Do Muslim women in different nations face different challenges?

ALS: In many contexts in the world you can find different challenges for women. In the globalised setting, it is difficult to identify what challenges are local, and what are more trans-national.

In general, I think militarisation affects women on many levels and across religion. Although a lot is made about dress code and the veil, and this private-public dichotomy, I worry about placing that too high on the agenda. I fear that that's the symptom of a lot of other things going on.

Women in Iran, who are part of the Iranian women's movement, say that people always ask 'how do you feel, you have to wear chador, you have to cover your head'. And they say you know what, to me this is very irrelevant; my freedom of speech, my freedom of expression, my freedom to politically participate is far more important to me than this. Do I like it? No, I don't like it, but this is not my main source of contestation. So, we have to listen to what women themselves identify as their challenges.

In Afghanistan, my colleagues ask women what is your main issue? Is it rising of Talibanisation, is it conservatism? They say it's security; you know, my children aren't safe, I might want to send my daughters to school but I don't think they're safe walking out there. Take care of security, then we'll talk about our rights, and our constitution, and our body politics. We're not there yet. (END/2007)

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