

Jihad: East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia

This entry deals with modern interpretations and expressions of jihad (literally meaning “struggle”) and the role of Muslim women in jihad in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Muslim women have been passionate defenders of religion in multiple ways, but most of them have placed less emphasis on armed struggle against the infidels than on the intellectual and moral struggle against backwardness, poverty, and social injustice. Although Muslim women agree on the universal applicability of jihad and on the high position of women in Islam, they interpret and apply jihad according to social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances.

EAST ASIA

In modern China, jihad has become part of civil society in the form of the women’s movement. A number of women’s organizations, including the Women’s Association for Muslim Widows and Orphans, have been involved in the efforts to better the life of the marginalized, especially poor and uneducated women and children. Women teachers at the Shanghai Women’s Mosque, for example, have also been progressive in their ideas and activities in seeking greater equality and justice. In Hui Muslim villages and townships, there has been a culture of resistance against the stagnation of faith (*weiganji*), youth disenchantment, criminality, economic backwardness, and the neglect of religious education. An example of the latter is the attempt to educate Chinese children and women for the defense of faith by publishing Chinese literature. Yet, for many Chinese women, jihad primarily means self-purification in the context of the three prevailing, often competing traditions: traditional Chinese law, modern law, and Islamic law.

In Japan, Muslim women have to reconcile diverse competing traditions. Most Muslim women in Japan converted to Islam through marrying Muslim immigrants from South Asia, Iran, and Central Europe. For many, the primary concern is the shift from a Japanese tradition to an Islamic identity. Japanese women converts often face ostracism from their family and alienation from friends. Struggle against the predominant Japanese culture takes different forms. If they work, they face the problem of performing daily prayers in a workplace where there is no prayer room and no

break time for prayer. They also have to change their diet. Women encounter difficulties in educating their children about Islam and often face problems in dealing with authorities regarding school regulations.

For those who grow up in a nation focused on material development while religion is often kept in the background, jihad means primarily the search for meaning. The veil (*hijāb*) continues to be stressed not as a symbol of oppression but as a sign of identity. By wearing the veil many Japanese Muslim women become self-confident, serene, and dignified. For these women, *hijāb* and jihad have become closely intertwined: *hijāb* has become not only a sign of modesty and religious faith but also a symbol of the defense of Islam (jihad), the preservation of family, and therefore the identity of Muslim society. Associations like the Islamic Center of Japan, the Islamic Cultural Association, and the Japan Muslim Association aim to ensure self-purification and to preserve a sense of Islamic community. Providing men and women with a wide variety of Islamic information and services, they have become religious, social, and cultural spaces for Muslim families and their children to promote mutual Islamic fraternity.

In Korea, women’s jihad has both internal and external dimensions. Because Christianity and Buddhism dominate the religious scene in modern Korea, Islam has developed as an outsider. While struggling for self-empowerment, Korean Muslim women have to counter stereotypes and misunderstandings about Islam. Recently, the Muslim Association has engaged in an increasing number of activities intended to improve public understanding of Islam. Some efforts are bearing fruit. For example, Islam is now accorded a status almost equivalent to that of Christianity and Buddhism in revised textbooks for middle and high school students. As in Japan, Muslim women in Korea interpret jihad in terms of proper observance of Islam.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the country with the largest Muslim population, Indonesia, contemporary Muslim women have become increasingly diverse in their understanding and implementation of jihad. In Aceh, with its history of seventeenth-century queens and nationalist female leaders, jihad symbolizes armed

struggle against the infidel (*kāfir*), first in the form of Dutch colonialism and then the Indonesian nation-state. However, in most of the other regions, the term jihad connotes fighting against poverty, ignorance, and social injustice. In the colonial era, Aisyiah, the women's wing of the Muhammadiyah (founded in 1912) established the Laskar Sabilillah (Defenders of God's path) and Laskar Hizbulwatan (Defenders of the nation), but in the post-colonial period such paramilitary organizations were deemed irrelevant. The meaning of jihad has therefore shifted from armed struggle to enjoining good and forbidding evil (*amar maruf nahi munkar*) in a wide variety of areas previously dominated by men, including politics, education, and religious propagation. Aisyiah now runs orphanages, maternity clinics, hospitals, day-care and family planning centers, and girls' dormitories. Women are taught how to set up cooperatives and how to market their products in order to increase the family income. Similar organizations were established, including Muslimat, the women's wing of the Nahdlatul Ulama (founded in 1926).

Muslimat has focused on educating and empowering women mostly in rural areas, aiming to eradicate illiteracy and encouraging women to be more independent. Together with Aisyiah and other smaller organizations, Muslimat has stressed economic progress, efficiency, and productivity. More recent feminist organizations, such as Rahima (Center for Training and Information on Islam and Women's Rights Issues), based in Jakarta, are particularly concerned to apply an Islamic perspective to women's empowerment and liberation. These women activists have avoided associating jihad with holy war. Resistance against state oppression, male supremacy, gender inequality, and injustice are for them much more relevant and urgent.

In modern Malaysia, Islamization has become the concern of both the state and civil society. For many women, jihad has meant a struggle for a greater conformity toward Islamic orthodoxy, but for liberal women activists, such as Sisters in Islam (SIS), jihad should signify women's liberation in all aspects of public and private life. These women, mostly middle-class, have taken the lead in opposing the Islamic establishment in the country as well as Islamic literalism. For example, they criticized the 1993 Shari'a Criminal Code (II) of the State of Kelantan and the 1994 Domestic Violence Act. SIS has also been vocal in advocating women's rights. The SIS leader Zainah Anwar argues that cultural traditions affirm women's public contribution and participation in often positive, non-hierarchical

ways. Another kind of jihad has been promoted by missionary (*da'wa*) movements, which flourish in schools, campuses, and businesses. The latter have been seeking economic autonomy and ritual segregation and have been promoting their own concept of gender equity, based on their interpretation of the Qur'an and the *hadith*, rather than on Western feminism. There are also moderate Muslim women who insist that there is no discrimination by God between men and women in any of their work. These moderate women believe that Muslim women should be able to reconcile authenticity and modernity. For these women, jihad should open up a wide variety of opportunities for female advancement, but pursuit of these should be peaceful.

In the Philippines, the meaning of jihad similarly varies according to different individuals and groups. Bangsamoro Muslim women, for example, are not monolithic in their beliefs. To them, jihad has meant armed resistance to the aggressive actions of martial law, personified by Ferdinand Marcos (president 1965–86) as well as actions by subsequent governments. Jihad has implied the continuous effort to defend their cultural tradition, property, land, livelihood, and life. Their rebel songs provide a unique indication of how they interpret jihad in relation to the defense of the indigenous community of the believers and their homeland. As the result, homeland (*inged*) and jihad have become closely interwoven in Bangsamoro thinking. However, in contemporary times, even for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), jihad has come to convey more complex meanings. While it retains the old connotations (namely, fighting against colonialism and the enemy from within), it has also come to signify a moral struggle that aims to bring about a positive transformation of the inner self and the socioeconomic and political order.

Although many women are actively involved in the armed struggle and are trained in military camps, many others engage in medical services and educational or economic activities. Among the educated women are activists who have established foundations, such as the Salama Women Foundation and the Bangsamoro Women's Foundation for Peace and Development. Among Bangsamoro women who have excelled in the educational field are Bai Matabay Plang, Bai Tanto Sinsuat, and Bai Yasmin Sinsuat. The first Bangsamoro Women's Assembly was held in April 2003, where some 100,000 women tackled various concerns of Bangsamoro women in the context of the raging war in Mindanao, where the victims were mostly women and children. Unlike the MILF and other Moro

fronts, important initiatives in Bangsamoro civil society have been promoting peaceful alternatives to solve the conflict – to bridge the gap of misunderstanding between the Manila government and the Bangsamoro people.

AUSTRALIA

The notion of jihad as armed struggle has never entered the minds of Muslim women in Australia. However, since the Australian constitution recognizes freedom of religion in the sense that the Commonwealth cannot make any law imposing religious observances or prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, Muslim women are increasingly realizing that Muslims continue to encounter problems in obtaining and practicing their rights, whether personal, human, or religious. Jihad for Muslim women in such contexts is thus not physical but intellectual and spiritual. They feel the need to demonstrate their overlapping Australian and Islamic identities, and have attempted to be the defenders of Islamic heritage in Australia's multicultural environment. They have to demonstrate their loyalty to Islam while avoiding placing themselves on the periphery of the wider Australian community. Amatullah Armstrong, a follower of Sufism, for example, emphasizes that jihad is essentially the conquering of selfhood. She insists that the struggle along the spiritual path in Australia is great, for not only must a Muslim woman struggle against the enemies within herself but she must wage determined war against the irreligious tide in an era of decadence. For her, jihad is the battle to bring peace to the earth – not the physical earth out there – but the earth of the self.

Muslim women in Australia have been active in advocating Muslim rights. The Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria (IWWCV) is the most famous in providing Islamic information and services. Their struggles have included an effort to correct misconceptions about Islam, including the meaning of jihad as holy war. According to IWWCV, the concept of jihad is generally misconstrued and limited to holy war. More broadly, jihad means to struggle and make an effort in any activity carried out for the sake of God. The greatest jihad is the struggle of the inner self. Since Islam is stereotypically associated with Arabs, especially after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in the United States, Muslim women in Australia often suffer discrimination, harassment, and assault. Under these circumstances, they attempt to challenge the often biased media and politicians in order to improve the representation and public understand-

ing of Islamic symbols. Jihad in Australia is therefore largely interpreted and implemented in the context of a multicultural society through mass media and education.

Referring to both an internal and external struggle, the passion attached to the Islamic concept of jihad has never been lost. Jihad provides the language of struggle in contexts where religious ideas and symbols are central. Women's jihad has accommodated a broad, diverse, and complex meaning according to different agencies and environments. However, although Muslim groups in certain parts of Southeast Asia still emphasize the military aspect of jihad, the vast majority of Muslim women in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia have stressed its non-military aspects, especially in the context of the struggle against illiteracy, poverty, and social injustice.

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