

Debates on feminism in Senegal Visions Vs. Nostalgia

Throughout the world, and particularly in Third World countries, feminists have been sounding the alarm about the rise of religious and political fundamentalism. Historically, fundamentalism has always been a move to strengthen patriarchal authority and maintain the "moral order" of society. Patriarchy, understood as the relations of domination and subordination that pervade human gender relations, takes different forms in different historical periods depending on the prevailing material conditions.

Globally and nationally, political fundamentalism is a reflection of the struggle to maintain and legitimize an inegalitarian socio-political power structure. At the level of the household, political and religious fundamentalists unite in their effort to strengthen gender-based hierarchies through reconstitution of the family as a bastion of conservative values. In these struggles, there emerges a vision of women as special moral beings.

In Senegal, the prevalence and rapid growth of Islamic fundamentalism has become a daily cause for either debate, celebration, or concern among respective social groups in the country. Last April, Yewwu Yewwi (pour la Libération des Femmes), a Senegalese feminist group which we have introduced to AAWORD members in previous issues of our Newsletter, organized a colloque entitled, "Women and Islam in Senegal". The main speaker was a male Islamic scholar who argued that the prevailing view of women in Islam is a misinterpretation of the religious text; that the text itself is more supportive to and cognizant of women's real value in society.

During the colloque and subsequent to it, there emerged a very intense debate in a number of conferences in public halls, as well as Mosques, culminating in a series of lengthy articles in the major official newspaper under the title "Feminism in Senegal - Assault on the Male Empire". Noteworthy, however, is a short piece preceding the week-long coverage by about a month and a half (May 1986) that introduced the debate in the press with the title "Against Feminism". This encapsulated the tone and direction of most of the subsequent press coverage. Space does not permit us to reproduce the debate in full. What follows, therefore, is a synthesis of both sides of the controversy and the final interview which closed the debate in the press, which we feel provides the full texture of the ongoing debat.

The fundamentalists accuse Senegalese feminists of attempting to destroy all the basic institutions of society, particularly the family. Some of the accusations are neither original nor specific to Senegal. In Africa, wherever and whenever women have posed the issue of women's liberation, they have been accused of being urban-based elites capable only of aping Western feminists. Hence, the fundamentalists accuse Senegalese feminists of transplanting wholesale Western ideas into a society, without considering its cultural and social specificity":

"Listening to certain talk, sometimes disrespectful (to religious leaders) and breaking the bounds of social norms subscribed to

by the overwhelming majority of our population, observers cannot fail to wonder whether Senegalese feminists have not stayed in the era of the 100 flowers - the famous period of gaudy exhibitionists, bra-burning, mass hysteria, women's lib".

Thus, one of the major issues in the debate is the struggle to maintain what most patriarchal societies consider as female virtues - silence, obedience and chastity.

Women's demands for equality are viewed as dangerous social and moral inversions which threaten familial disorder and patriarchal role. This can be seen from the accusation which asserts that the main mission of the women's liberation movement in Senegal, as expressed by Yewwu Yewwi, is to instigate a breakdown of the process of dialogue and consensus between the state and civil society which is the hallmark of Senegalese-type democracy":

"It is no longer sufficient to have discussions and peaceful struggle based on persuasion and consensual approaches in the search for a new equilibrium for the woman's place in our society; the era of dialogue is over."

The other overall accusations, again familiar to feminists everywhere, include isolationism and being radically doctrinaire, as if other social movements were all - encompassing and did not have a set of principles which they elaborate and fight for. In this case, Senegalese feminists are accused of unrealistic ostrich-type existence in refusing to recognize that no movement could isolate itself in struggle from the rest of society; in insisting on the historical specificity of the woman's place in society and the necessity to maintain the struggle for women's rights by women themselves. In the view of fundamentalists, the demand for gender equality is synonymous to demanding homogeneity":

"One can't help wondering whether the systematic, undisguised isolationism is not likely to boomerang on the women... The paradox is that the women insisting on the specificity of their struggle are also demanding the homogenization of society, access to all political, economic, cultural and social functions without gender prejudice".

It is said that politics and religion make strange bed-fellows. In defence of this argument, the author cites not only the position of progressive political parties but, ironically, the Catholic church":

"For the church, the women's struggle is not a specific struggle. The defence and promotion of the dignity of women is a fight for all humanity".

However, all the above are general accusations. As the debate in the daily press noted in its concluding issue,

"Like all organized social groups with alternative visions, the feminists have major causes around which a network of reflection, action and solidarity is born. In our country, their major cause revolves around the Family Code and include diverse points such as marriage, divorce, inheritance but also the control of fertility through birth control methods or abortion, etc.."

Hence, the major bone of contention between the feminist movement in Senegal and the Islamic fundamentalists is the Family Code. The feminists argue that even though it is still patriarchal, the Family Code represents a step in the right direction and should be strengthened in favour of women through further revisions. The fundamentalists assert that the existing Family Code "objectively fights Islam" and is basically a "code of women". It should be abrogated in favour of Islamic-Charia Law. Within the Family Code, the following are major issues in question":

Marriage:

The Family Code in Senegal requires that when Islamic couples marry, they sign a legal document stating the form of marriage they intend to establish, i.e. monogamy, polygamy. Once their choice is legally coded, they have to follow that pattern even if they were to divorce. For example, if a couple who had opted for a monogamous form of marriage were to be divorced, the man would not be able to enter a polygamous marriage. According to

the daily paper article of July 17, 1986, one of the principle grievances of the feminists in the Family Code is the problem of matrimonial choice.

The feminists, says the article, have raised objections to the liberty given to Muslim men to opt for polygamy which permits a man to marry up to four wives. The feminists argue that even the Coran advocates monogamy.

The paper then cites diverse interpretations of the forms of marriage sanctioned by Islam, where a number of religious leaders assert that nowhere does the Coran provide justification for polygamy whereas others categorically point out that it is God himself who has authorized polygamy when he said in vers. 3 "Sourate":

"Marry those women who please you. Two, three or four". The only restriction imposed by Islam is that "if you are apprehensive of not being fair, take only one".

The controversy over polygamy is not limited to Senegal. In some Islamic countries, laws have been passed which forbid polygamous marriages. This is the case in Tunisia, South Yemen, Egypt and Morocco, where polygamous option depends on the wife's consent. Fatoumata Sow, a representative of Yewwu Yewwi, argues:

"In other societies, where polygamy was prohibited, people found fault with quite a number of religious elements which were blocking the advance of women. These societies did not perceive the changes as interfering with their faith, and those are societies which are more totally Islamic than Senegal, and moreover, belong to the Arab-Islamic culture".

Inheritance:

The other controversial issue is that of inheritance. The feminists point out that even though the Code has taken steps to make allowances for "legitimate" children and wives, it is still too protective of male interests as the only recognized household heads. The fundamentalists, on the other hand, consider that the Code in this respect goes against divine wisdom, which gives the males guardianship over females from childhood to widowhood.

Fertility control:

The third and perhaps the most conflictual issue is feminists'demand for the "right to control their fertility". On this, the fundamentalists accuse the feminists of seeking to destroy the basis of society - the family of which the Coran has given women the responsibility for reproduction and socialization. Feminism, conclude the fundamentalist, has three objectives: (1) extension of anti-conception through family-planning in line with neo-Malthusian theories; (2) sexual permissiveness, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's "right to choose one's bed" theory, and (3) a natural consequence, the destruction of the very foundation of Senegalese society - the family.

The series on "Feminism in Senegal: Assault on the Male Empire" appeared daily between July 14 and 18, 1986. The first four issues were said to be "a survey" by a male journalist, throughout which he singled out Yewwu Yewwi as representing the major feminist tendency in Senegal. At the outset the journalist, Mr. Ibrahima Fall, asserts:

"All analysis of feminist movement in Senegal inexorably refers to the Association "Yewwu-Yewwi" (Pour la Liberation des Femmes) (word for word "Awake" or "Be conscious and liberated") which today appears as the stimulus which gives the dynamics to the struggle of women not only among the known associations who recognize the principal of otherness or complementarity but often adopting a radical method of struggle underscored by a doctrinaire methodological analysis and action which claims to be scientific".

As can be imagined this view informed the tone and direction of the subsequent "survey".

Members of Yewwu-Yewwi took strong objection and raised three fundamental issues which they presented to the Editor-in-Chief of

the Soleil, the official Senegalese daily newspaper. First, they rejected the notion of "a survey" as the week-long coverage was biased, highly opinionated, thus hardly a survey as normally understood. It was an attack and misrepresentation of Yewwu-Yewwi. More fundamentally, the nature of the debate questioned the secular nature of the Senegalese state by favoring the voice of religious sects who openly advocate the establishment of an Islamic state.

It is to the credit of Senegalese democracy that the newspaper responded positively by allowing a lengthy interview with a representative of Yewwu-Yewwi, Marie-Angélique Savané, the President of AAWORD.

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Feminism in Senegal

The following interview with Marie-Angélique Savané, a member of the Senegalese feminist group Yewwu-Yewwi, was reprinted from the Senegalese daily newspaper Soleil. The questions asked her were hostile. Off our backs excepted parts of this interview from the British feminist newspaper Outwrite.

Outwrite's introduction to the interview notes that Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise in mostly Muslim Senegal, which still has a secular government. Feminists and fundamentalists are contending over the Family Code.

Fundamentalists want to scrap the Family Code and replace it with Shariat, traditional Islamic law. Feminists want to make the code more beneficial to women.

On the question of marriage, the code requires couples to sign a legal document stating whether they intend to establish a monogamy or polygynous marriage. They have to stick to the original decision. Senegalese women want men no longer to have the choice of polygamy.

The Code recognizes the right of "legitimate" wives and children to inherit property, but recognizes only men as heads of households. Women say women should also be able to be heads of households, while fundamentalists say every woman should have a man who is her guardian. Fundamentalists also oppose birth control as a road to permissiveness, while feminists want more of it.

How do you assess the current status of Senegalese women ?

SAVANÉ: On the whole, in Senegalese society the status of women is still inferior to that of men. Let us put it this way: the perceived notion of women's role in society is still basically that women play a complementary role while men play the main role, that of productive human beings. It's quite clear that existing social laws and rules, whether they deal with the daily realities covered by the Family Code or with the specialized realities of the workplace, are not speeding up the process of change in women's

status. Admittedly however.. the Code has tried to create conditions conducive to the establishment of monogamous families, even if there are formidable obstacles in the way.

Feminism for change

Could you give us a clearer idea of your conception of feminism?

SAVANE: taken as a means for creating awareness, feminism can do a great deal to bring about positive change. It is, in fact, the key social antidote. As long as women remain hooked to the idea that their situation is something personal, or something essentially religious, it's obvious they will not raise a finger to bring about change.. Feminism makes it clear that women's status is a result of social conditioning. That social conditioning takes place in all the educational and socialization processes which together, at one point or another, turn us into women; they indoctrinate us into accepting a feminine ideology, a pervasive system of ideas determining and directing our lives at every stage, so that we end up adjusting to our imposed status as women.

Feminism means an awareness that our prescribed social roles are unequal and inequitable. It means an awareness that women, who are the carriers of humanity (after all, women are the ones who reproduce), and who in addition are producers for humanity, have been and are still treated unjustly.

.. the moment we understand it as a dynamic process, feminism poses a challenge to a set on principles and religious taboos based on the Biblical model of Eve, according to which women originated from men... a reversal of the scientific truth we all know: that it is women who give birth to men.

... feminism.. is assertive because it challenges the social status quo. It proclaims that this social status quo, based on a patriarchal ideology, is fundamentally anti-egalitarian.

... people (feminists) with a reformist vision look at women's problems from a reformist point of view. They give their greatest attention to the establishment of family codes, the provision of greater access to schools, the creation of health centers for women. And all the time they are careful not to shake up the underlying society, built upon pillars of social and sexual inequality. The reformist approach, in other words, goes only half way.

That is why radical or Marxist feminists advocate a different feminist option: a social revolution coupled with a cultural revolution.

... Each woman, when talking about feminism, is bound to talk in terms of her basic ideology. Naturally, when a woman belongs to the ruling party, her vision of feminism implies an effort to find out in what ways the government can improve women's condition. I happen to be in the opposition. Naturally mine is a radical vision, a vision inseparable from a demand for structural change. For if we are to reach a stage where conditions enable women to develop their social role more harmoniously, the present structures simply have to go. There is no other way.

From such a perspective, feminism implies an ideological choice. Even if all women could come together around such relevant issues as free access to contraception, different women would project different points of view, because individual approaches are based on ideological visions, and these vary from one woman to the next. That is why, for me, feminism is a political struggle.

... a change of regime is not a necessary and sufficient condition for solving the problem of women's status. It is only a step forward.

... Institutional changes linked to social or socialist options are more likely to offer objective conditions for achieving women's liberation than changes brought about by reactionary or bourgeois movements..

Now even socialism, if it is simply conceived of as a process of economic change, cannot deal satisfactorily with the issue of

women's status. Women's liberation requires changes in hierarchical power relationships non only within governments but also between individual women and men.

Is it advisable for feminists to regard men as the enemy?

Especially since there are men who claim to be feminists?

SAVANE: There is no way the women's struggle can be anything but a specific struggle. Whoever fights at all fights for specific objectives.

Every woman fights on two fronts. The first front is political. The second involves changes in relationships with men.

The accusation that feminists here are merely imitating foreign lifestyles is simply groundless. The development and propagation of social theories has always and everywhere been the business of intellectuals. Look at history. You will observe that the prophets were marginal figures in their own societies. The feminist is no exception to that rule. It is only logical that those women best placed to compare their situation with that of their mothers' generation happen to be intellectuals.

Intellectuals are equipped to think up theoretical models and to fight for change on the basis of a more or less thorough critical analysis of ideas.

The public discussion of feminist issues is very recent in Senegal. As a matter of fact, the word feminism itself has invariably been given very negative connotations.

Feminism goes to villages

...Now here in Senegal the feminist movement has come so far that it has reach the remotest villages. Of course no one in those villages talks of feminism in the commonly accepted sense. What they do is to stress the need for women to get together and to carry on their own activities.

As time goes on, the feminist debate is bound to acquire direction. Right now it finds its focus in the urban movements, among city-dwellers. These are people who make it a habit to air their problems because they have access to possible solutions. They have access to the Family Code. They can make use of all the existing services; they can also criticize what exists.

...as more women go to school for longer periods, people are going to wait longer before getting married, which means that for a very long period of their lives, Senegalese woman are going to be unmarried, in a culturally approved situation, offering opportunities for challenging their social status.

It is up to the feminist movement to begin right now to think about such situations, to start people thinking.

Of course it is a fact, for the time being, that women do not as yet constitute a social and political force powerful enough to challenge the prevailing political ground rules. But the time is coming when women will become an increasingly educated and conscious group. At that point the odds are bound to change.

Meanwhile, right now in Senegal, the government would be well advised to solve a number of problems facing women, because the question at issue is no longer social justice but economic development.

Islam conditions the behavior and reactions of society as a whole.

Are you not running the risk of having your struggle seen as an attack on Islam?

SAVANE: All social theories in their beginnings carry the germ of fundamentalist intolerance, religious theories most of all. The reason is not hard to see: such theorising usually involves a search for purity so intense that those engaged in it come to believe they have in fact found the answer to all possible problems. They therefore lapse into approaches that are not consistently rational. They forget that change is an integral aspect of life, of the world.

...the kinds of Muslims who see the feminist movement as a threat are not the only type of Muslims around. There is the

fundamentalist type of Islam, which does not see the issue in terms of individual human beings... but in terms of political power. Now such people suppose that this country is 80 percent Muslim, and so we have to have an Islamic state governed according to the prescripts of the Sharia (Islamic Code).

Yet the truth is that those Islamic precepts were tailored to the needs of a specific society. It is plain as daylight that the Sharia is no longer adequate for managing the world.

.. those who aspire to promote an Islamic political alternative have to get down to the serious business of conducting accurate, empirical studies. I think that our women's approach deals with a fact of life visible in every family, and I think the Senegalese people are mature enough not only to understand it, but also to accept it.

As for fundamentalist ideas, their time came and went a long time ago.. We, on the other hand, have real alternative propositions to offer.

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