

# The Gülen Movement: Gender and Practice

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## ABSTRACT

One point that always seems to reoccur in the so-called Western debate about Islam is the notion of Islam as a religion, which is not compatible with the fundamental rights of women. At the same time the concept of “women’s rights” sometimes has been understood by Muslims as something imported from the West and thus not compatible with Islam, simply because it has been perceived as a Western idea.

Fethullah Gülen is a Muslim thinker who has turned out to have progressive ideas about women in Islam. Fethullah Gülen emphasizes the equality of men and women in a number of areas. However it should also be noted that he has a traditional view on family values.

Although the Gülen Movement can be looked upon as progressive in many areas, it emphasizes the different roles of men and women<sup>1</sup>. In this paper I wish to explore in what ways Gülen’s *ijtihad*<sup>2</sup> can serve as inspiration for Muslims in Scandinavia who stand at the crossroads between what can be described as “North European values”<sup>3</sup> and Islamic faith.

During the year of 2008 I have monitored the activities of a dialog organization in Sweden which is inspired by the ideas of Fethullah Gülen<sup>4</sup>. In the paper I will focus especially on the important issue of equal opportunities for both men and women. I wish to find out in what ways the Gülen movement can serve as a vehicle to promote alternative ideas that are compatible

both within an Islamic and a “North-European” context. I want to take a look at how women’s rights are perceived by the people within the Gülen movement. I also intend to explore the role of the women in the Gülen Movement. Since this paper will focus on Sweden and to a certain extent on Scandinavia<sup>5</sup>, I would like to investigate if gender ideals in the movement transform in a European context.

I will start off by taking a look at what Gülen writes on women and women’s rights. In this context Jonas Svensson’s dissertation<sup>6</sup> is an interesting study as in to show examples from the current debate on Islam as brought forward by prominent scholars in the field. I would already at this point like to underline that this paper is not a comparative study. The examples given in the paper are there solely to get a slight glance on the current contemporary debate as different scholars on Islam coming from various backgrounds discuss it. Finally I will present Dialogslussen which is a Dialog organization inspired by the ideas of Fethullah Gülen working in Sweden’s two biggest cities Stockholm and Gothenburg. Around the globe from Houston to London and Rotterdam to Paris the Gülen Movement has established similar Dialog groups. My discussion will center on the debate on Muslims in Sweden. My hypothesis in this paper is that although a number of contemporary debaters on Islam as the ones mentioned in the paper, approach the issue of gender and Islam, they might not have the same potential of spreading their message as Fethullah Gülen. Due to the influence of the Gülen movement with its network of dialog organizations, schools and media enterprises, this movement has a potential to reach a much larger audience than mere academic studies<sup>7</sup>.

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## BACKGROUND TO THIS STUDY

From my initial personal observations of the Gülen movement at for example international conferences I can assess that the men in the movement have been more visible than the women (both in

presenting papers and logistically<sup>8</sup>). From these first observations it could be easy to assess this to unequal gender roles preached within the movement. At the conference in London in 2007 that I attended<sup>9</sup>, one female American scholar asked something like “where are all the women in the movement?” (Personal observation). It was and is a very intriguing question indeed. However, my first reflection when starting to investigate the movement was actually; where is the movement in Sweden? After establishing my first contacts with Dialogslussen, I decided that I would proceed with the issue: Where are all the women within the Gülen Movement in Sweden? Having said this I find it appropriate to quote Lester Kurtz in the journal *Muslim World* where he writes: “It will be interesting to see if the Gülen movement reaches out even to its own women as it diffuses into cultures with more gender equality than the Turkey of its native soil (Kurtz 2005: 380). Fethullah Gülen has inspired millions of Muslims worldwide to work actively towards interreligious and intercultural peace and dialog projects. It is not mere rhetoric. As a tool to divert his message are media such as newspapers, radio, TV and the Internet, schools, and dialog groups. Action is important here. The above mentioned activities have in fact led many in the West, especially media to label Fethullah Gülen as a modernist and reformer and a spokesperson for so called moderate Islam. However, all of these descriptions are somewhat unfitting<sup>10</sup>.

Özcan Keles from the Dialogue Society in England expresses that this is a misinterpretation on behalf of western commentators and writes that: “An accurate understanding of Gülen is more important than what he says (...) had Gülen been a modernist as such, he would never have enjoyed the kind of influence he does in Turkey, let alone have any meaningful chance of doing so in the Muslim world” (Keles 2007: 686-687)<sup>11</sup>. The term reformer is not that suitable either, since according to Gülen, there is no need for reform in Islam. Islam is already moderate. A more fitting description of Fethullah Gülen and the movement inspired by his ideas

would instead of the word reformer or reformist instead be the term revivalist.

#### BACKGROUND TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND ISLAM

In the Western media debate a commonly expressed view is that Islam is not compatible with human rights as formulated in the West, and especially the rights of women. On the other hand, in the so called Muslim World, terms such as feminism and women's human rights are often described as foreign ideologies that have no place in true Islam. It is not uncommon that terms such as universal human rights, women's rights and feminism are looked upon as concepts that are imported from the West. Consequently, in many Muslim societies it can be hazardous to emphasize terms like feminism and women's rights when debating since common people feel that these ideas don't have any place in Muslim culture. It is perceived as a Western construction which is incompatible with Islamic norm (Svensson 2000: 48-49). The people in Muslim countries that do support and promote these ideas often belong to a western educated upper class, which has little or no relation with normal people's everyday life. This ruling class in turn often is seen as aligned with the West and encompasses little or no public support. Consequently there is little if any framework to implement these ideas on a grass root level. In the Arab world this upper class has often been identified with the former colonizers<sup>12</sup>. In Turkey so called Western values have in many cases been imposed from above by the political Kemalist elite in whose ideals many people can't identify themselves since they see them as being un-Islamic<sup>13</sup>. Some Muslim debaters want to show that the concept of human rights and women's rights already exists inherently in Islam. The debaters are well aware of that in order to popularize some of these ideas among Muslims it is important to show that they are compatible within the broader Islamic framework. However, in order to so they express that there is a need for an open *ijtihad*. In doing so

they are using exactly the same tool as former Muslim reformers (revivalists).

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Western world had taken the lead over the Muslim world in science, economy and military strength many Muslims started to question the backwardness of Muslim society. Due to increased contacts between the Europe and Muslim countries many Muslims became aware of the need for reform in the Muslim World. The answer to Muslim debaters of that time was to embrace Western development. By doing so the Muslim world would eventually would come to a rebirth *nahda* (Svensson 1996: 14). Svensson writes that “the interest shown by the propagators of *nahda* had its counterpart in Western orientalism” (Svensson 1996: 15, Personal translation from Swedish). Orientalism as an academic field of study included the study of language, religion and culture of the East. However, it also included negative elements of “racist and ethnocentric overtones” (Svensson 1996: 15, personal translation from Swedish).

An illustrative example of this was the dominant European perception of the Muslim world as being intellectually inferior to the Western world and that the main reason for this was to blame on Islam. Islam was looked upon as irrational and incapable of adapting itself to modernity. The prime example of a representative of this view was the French orientalist professor Ernest Renan (Svensson 1996: 15).

However, this orientalist view fueled the resentment of Muslim intellectuals and increased their will to challenge these ideas and prove that Islam was progressive and well adapted to modern times. Intellectuals such as Jamal ad-Din al Afghani, Muhammed Abdu and Rashid Rida emphasized the need of reform in Muslim society. They wanted to combine Islam with modern science “but did not seek secularization but integration” (Svensson 1996: 16). In order to achieve the past grandeur of Islamic civilization it was according to them necessary to return to the true core of Islam. In doing so it was of great importance to rid the religion of un-Islam-

ic elements and to reinterpret the Islamic sources e.g. the Qur'an and *Sunna* by using *ijtihad*<sup>14</sup> (Svensson 1996: 14-18).

### FETHULLAH GÜLEN'S *IJTIHAD* AND VIEWS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Also Fethullah Gülen utilizes the tool of *ijtihad*<sup>15</sup> to find suitable answers to contemporary issues, among these the much-debated question of the women's role and her rights in Islam.

In Fethullah Gülen's view the inequalities that we see today in Muslim societies, should not, and cannot be attributed to the Islamic faith. Like many revivalists of religion before him he states that during the course of history "true Islam" has been contaminated by un-Islamic customs and that the deviations that we see today are a product of misinterpretation of the divine sources.

This standpoint is not a new phenomenon, but as stated above an opinion that has been held by many revivalists before him. Fethullah Gülen has used his extensive knowledge of the divine sources to explain an alternative vision of equality. Subsequently, according to him it is wrong to blame Islam as a religion for the deficiencies in gender equality that is more or less visible in many Muslim countries.

He writes that in "the social atmosphere of Muslim societies where Islam is not "contaminated" with customs or un-Islamic traditions, Muslim women are full participants in daily life" (Gülen 2006: 1). Gülen believes that the inequalities that we see today are subsequently due to pre-Islamic cultural traditions that through the course of history have become incorporated with the religion and misunderstood as being Islamic. Regarding the rights of women Fethullah Gülen writes that: "Woman is equal to man in the rights and freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom to live a decent life, and freedom of finance. Equality before the law, just treatment, marriage and founding a family life, personal life, pri-

vacy and protection are all among the rights of women “(The Muslim World 2005:464)

Is Fethullah Gülen a Muslim feminist then? He certainly does not want to label himself as such himself (Gülen 2008:1). Andrea Bernadette points out that “Gülen’s commitment is to the truth of Islam, based fundamentally in the Qur’an, rather than to “feminism” as such. However, if, as recent writers on women and Islam have claimed, the Prophet Muhammad’s immense respect for women and unwavering commitment to their rights may be seen as “feminist” in the most basic sense” (Bernadette 2006:2) he could indeed be called a Muslim contemporary feminist.

In the essay *women Confined and Mistreated* he harshly criticizes Western feminists for deviating “from the original aim” (Gülen 2008:1) of protecting women. According to Gülen the feminist movement sprung out of a need among other things to correct an unjust equilibrium in society. Instead of striving for protecting women and equality between men and women, the feminist movement has in Fethullah Gülen’s words “only left behind longing, sorrow, and wreckage as a movement of discontentment” (Gülen 2008:1). According to him the feminist movement as it has become in the modern sense, can be considered as one extreme as bad as the other. This opinion expresses his standpoint on what he calls reactionary movements that with time end up becoming extremist movements. Regardless of ideology, may it be feminism, religion or secularism Fethullah Gülen distances himself from extremism which he sees as the result of a reaction that is “doomed to imbalance like all reactionary movements” (Gülen 2008:1).

Whether or not one may call Fethullah Gülen a feminist “in the most basic sense” as to cite Andrea Bernadette, one can truly say that Fethullah Gülen has written extensively about the issue of women and their rights in Islam. However, this paper is not about answering whether Fethullah Gülen’s message can be interpreted as feminist or not since this is only pure terminology and does not tell so much about his message. Having said this I would like to

describe some of the features of Fethullah Gülen's *Ijtihad* on women's rights.

Although he promotes equality between the sexes, Fethullah Gülen's views on gender can indeed be described as complementary<sup>16</sup>. He sees women and men as having equal value but inheriting different roles and characteristics due to physical and psychological differences. He classifies men as "physically stronger and apt to bear hardship" and women as "more compassionate, more delicate, more self sacrificing" (Gülen 2006:1). Although he does state that women can be involved in any field of work he idealizes the mother as the pure educator (Gülen 2006:2) implicitly implying that the man should be the family provider. This may open up for critique on behalf of Western feminists or scholars of religion and gender. According to this relatively new academic discipline gender is a social construction. Human beings are born with different sexes, but social roles and expectations of fulfillment of these are constructed and emphasized by the norms that prevail in society.

King points out that "gender" is not a synonym for "women" (King 2005:3296). The explanation can be found in the fact that gender studies sprung out of the discipline women's studies and that women due to their subordinated status in society have been of more concern to scholars of gender. According to King this has to do with "the deeply entrenched, traditional invisibility and marginalization of women in history, society, and culture" (King 2005:3296).

However, Kinsley writes that: "Categorizing males as oppressors and women as victims can also lead to objectifying women as a category and blinding the historian of religions to women's own voices, keeping him or her from hearing women as subjects" (Kinsley 2002:12).<sup>17</sup>

Also Karlsson Minganti writes about this and refers to the researcher Chandra Mohanty (2003). She writes that "researchers like Chandra Mohanty have emphasized how generalizing descriptions of "the third-world-woman" contribute to "keep them in place" (Karlsson Minganti 2008:3).

## WHAT MAKES GÜLEN STAND OUT IN THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE?

As mentioned earlier Fethullah Gülen's point of departure when it comes finding answers to contemporary questions on the issue of women's rights is to use the classic Islamic tool of *ijtihad* (interpretation) in contrary to *taqlid* (closed door to interpretation). In this sense he does not differ all that much from other contemporary scholars such as for example Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi and Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im<sup>18</sup>. They are all internationally well known contemporary scholars who appeal both to a Western and to a Muslim audience. They also use *ijtihad* as a strategy to show Islam's compatibility with women's rights. Subsequently, in order to bring forward their message, the debaters make use of the different possibilities that inherently exist within the Islamic framework such as interpretation of Qur'an, the *hadith*<sup>19</sup>, and history. Riffat Hassan<sup>20</sup> uses an etymological standpoint when reinterpreting some Qur'an verses that by feminists have been regarded as misogynic. Fatima Mernissi<sup>21</sup>, on the other hand underlines the importance of historiography as a way to understand the situation of women in Muslim societies. From her point of view, men have through history contaminated true Islam. When it comes to the hadiths she is violently critical of unreliable transmitters in the *isnad* chain (Svensson 2000: 136). According to an-Na'im<sup>22</sup> the *Sharia* is based on sources whose nature is inherently misogynic. He argues that the Islamic laws were written for a special time and context in history. According to him these laws have no place in today's modern society (Svensson 2000: 172).

Examined superficially, it might seem that Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi and Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im and Fethullah Gülen are spokeswomen/men for similar causes. That is, to find solutions to contemporary issues by utilizing Islamic methods of interpretation. It is true that there are notable differences in their approach but they all use the tool of *ijtihad* to find answers that can be acceptable

within the Islamic framework. Ihsan Yilmaz writes that “Some elements, if not all, of Gülen’s discourse may not be unique. A number of Muslim thinkers, intellectuals, and *mujtahids* developed new ideas and understandings in the face of the challenges of the modern juggernaut, without making concessions to the Islam of the past, the so called Golden Age” (Yilmaz 2003: 237)<sup>23</sup>.

In this context it is important to point out that albeit the similarities, there are also some noteworthy differences between Fethullah Gülen and the other contemporary debaters on Islam presented here. Whereas Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi and Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na’im are Muslim scholars with an audience in both the West and in the Muslim world they are also to a certain extent synonymously coupled with academic studies. Their ideas may be progressive from a Muslim feminist point of view but do not have the same potential to reach a wider audience as the ideas of Fethullah Gülen. Fethullah Gülen has inspired a huge global civil society movement with Islamic roots/origin while they have not.

In consonance with the above stated Yilmaz expresses that: “what makes Gülen’s case unique is that he successfully has persuaded and mobilized many people (...) to establish institutions and to put into practice his discourse and realize his ideas” (Yilmaz 2003: 237).

Among these institutions that Yilmaz is writing about are the various dialog associations represented around the globe. The Gülen Movement does definitely not only support dialog and exchange of ideas with the West, but also actively encourages it. One of the tools of building deep relations with other religious and ethnic groups in Western countries has been the dialog organizations whose “members” put down an enormous amount of personal time to set an exemplary example as Muslims. Men and women within the Gülen movement have heard his call, and see it part of *bizmet*<sup>24</sup> (service) to realize these ideals. This is an important point since it is one thing to preach a message, and another to really have a true possibility to divert it internationally.

## DIALOGSLUSSEN: GOALS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

As a tool to promote dialog between people belonging to different religious backgrounds the Gülen movement has established a number of so called dialog organizations around the globe. One of these is Dialogslussen. Dialogslussen was started in the year of 2006 in Sweden's second biggest city Gothenburg. At the beginning the name of the group was Rumi Dialogslussen but now it is simply Dialogslussen. At the beginning of 2008 a branch of the same group working in Gothenburg set up an office in the Stockholm suburb Kista<sup>25</sup>. However, the two dialog branches are not separate groups but work closely together with different interreligious and intercultural projects. However due to the geographical distance between the two cities some of the projects are only performed in one of the two cities. In the groups' activities there has been a strong emphasis on projects aiming at intercultural understanding. Sweden of today is a multicultural society<sup>26</sup> and Dialogslussen aims at building bridges between Swedish culture and immigrants. The following text is a quote from one of (Rumi) Dialogslussen's flyers where the group's goals are summarized. RDS stands for Rumi Dialogslussen. As mentioned above the name has now been changed to now being simply Dialogslussen:

1. To promote a mutual understanding between the different cultures in Sweden.
2. To create a framework of mutual tolerance in Swedish society by working actively on an intellectual level.
3. Through the establishment of dialogue and close cooperation with media, voluntary organizations (non-governmental organizations), public institutions and the business world, RDS wishes to provide for the spreading of knowledge concerning various cultures and religions. RDS also wants to confront prejudice in Swedish society.
4. RDS wants to play an active part in the integration process of non-ethnic Swedes in Sweden. The RDS Association will work

for the introduction of non-ethnic Swedes to the Swedish education system, and stress the importance of education for the integration process.

5. The Association will work actively to promote mutual understanding between Swedish people and non-ethnic Swedes.

#### SWEDISH MEDIA

In Swedish media there is a seemingly never-ending discussion on how to integrate immigrants in Swedish society. Especially Muslims are often described as being hard to integrate with Swedish social norms. In this context Islam is often looked upon as an obstacle. In the media especially the status of women in Islam is questioned in a quite stereotyped way (Karlsson Minganti 2008:7).

One issue that always seems to surface in this discussion is the headscarf. The headscarf or *hijab* is looked upon as a dangerous symbol signaling unwillingness to comply with modernity and Western values. In this context Modernity and Western values often are looked upon as one single unit. It is also looked upon as a symbol of gender inequality. On the other hand, by many Muslims it is regarded as un-Islamic not to cover one's self.

When asked about the status of the veil in Islam, one male informant belonging to the Stockholm branch of Dialogslussen was of the opinion that the veil does not say anything about how good a Muslim someone is. He quoted Fethullah Gülen saying that the headscarf belongs to the categories in Islam which can be classified as *füruat*<sup>27</sup>.

He argued that: "some veiled women might not pray while other women who do not wear the headscarf might be described as very pious indeed".

According to this informant real faith was more important than external attributes. This reflects how the message of tolerance preached by Fethullah Gülen has found its way to individuals in the

movement. However, it should not be misunderstood as if Fethullah Gülen discourages women from wearing the headscarf.

In the Swedish debate the media often shows a distorted version of Islam. Islam is portrayed as a religion, which promotes terror and discrimination of women. This media picture undoubtedly plays part in nurturing “negative perceptions which are reflected in society in the encounter between Muslims and non Muslims” (Zaman Sverige 2007:15; Karlsson Minganti 2008:7; Personal observation).

One female informant expressed that in the media Muslim women are portrayed as “weak people, for example if they (the women) wear a headscarf they do so because they are forced to (...) That is how media portrays all the Muslim women in the world” (25 year old female informant, 2008).<sup>28</sup>

Another woman answered:

“I believe that there is a need of a Muslim source that one feels that both Muslims and non-Muslims can trust when it comes to finding information on Islam. The *ijtihad* of Fethullah Gülen can serve as a good alternative” (Female informant 30 years, 2008).

For example honorary killings (*töre*<sup>29</sup> in Turkish) which are found in the Middle East and the custom of clitoridectomy which is widely spread on the African continent are in media more than often ascribed to Islam (although it exists in Christian culture too), and not to culture<sup>30</sup>.

Unfortunately negative arguments such as the above mentioned which frequently is put forward in the media also are used by Islamophobic and racist groups. These groups use common misinterpretations of religion to reinforce common prejudices in society by polarizing Islam versus for example Christianity.

Andrea Bernadette writes about Samuel Huntington’s very much debated “clash of civilizations theory” where the issue of women’s rights has “taken center stage” (Bernadette 2006: 1) in the debate.

In this discourse Bernadette lays forward two convincing arguments as to find a historical explanation to the contemporary Western notion of the Muslim woman as a suppressed creature under man. Firstly she blames “the orientalist misrepresentations (Bernadette 2006: 1)” about Muslim women which were established and cemented in Western imagination from the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial period (Bernadette 2006: 1)”. From then up to this day the notion of Western supremacy in regard to Islam has been fueled. Especially the issue of women’s rights, or more correctly spoken, the popular manifestation that there is an inherent lack of women’s rights in Islam has been used over and over again to prove this notion. Similarly, the global resurgence in “Islamic fundamentalism” which the world has witnessed has done nothing more than to enforce prevalent negative notions about Islam. Terror acts and discriminatory policies of women have for many people become synonymous with Islam. In this context the work of Fethullah Gülen can and has worked in building bridges of understanding and dialog between cultures and religions.

As an influential Islamic leader Fethullah Gülen has taken a strong stand against radicalism and violence of any kind. On the issue of terrorism he expresses that:

“A terrorist cannot be a Muslim and a Muslim cannot be a terrorist. A Muslim can only be the representative and symbol of peace, well-being and prosperity”

“The unjust killing of one person is like the killing of all human-kind”<sup>31</sup>

When it comes to women’s rights, Fethullah Gülen states that the inequalities that are visible in Muslim societies stem from culture or un-Islamic traditions. He states that:

“In the social atmospheres of Muslim societies where Islam is not “contaminated” with customs or un-Islamic traditions, Muslim women are full participants in daily life” (Gülen 2006: 1). This was also a view shared unanimously by my informants who expressed

that some discriminatory practices against women in for example Turkey stemmed from culture and not religion. However, one informant had a complementary view on the opinion distribution of work between men and women and stated that whereas women are allowed to work some jobs are for women and others for men:

“Women cannot do all the jobs that men do. This is due to natural disposition. I mean, some jobs are for women while other jobs are solely for men” (Male informant 32 years old, 2008).

One informant expressed that the problems that Muslim women face often are twofold. On one hand they are perceived as being oppressed by Swedish society and on the other they are often subject to misinterpretations of Islam by Muslims, which is something that affects their daily lives. When asked what Dialogslussen can do and is doing in relation to the above stated questions she answered:

“I think they should try to inform about the Islamic faith and about women in Islam. Hopefully this might change the picture that society has about Muslim women, and that would ease our situation most significantly. It is tough to always be perceived in society as being oppressed, incapable of standing up for one self, lacking in independence and incapable of doing most things when that is not the fact (...) Because the ignorance about women in Islam is also incredibly big among Muslims and is often illustrated badly and in a wrong way. The knowledge needs to be implemented more in practice, but unfortunately it seem as if it takes a long time to change cultural tradition” (Female informant 30 years old, 2008)

#### WOMEN’S RIGHTS: A MATTER OF DIALOG

Dialogslussen which is a group inspired by the ideas of Fethullah Gülen is trying to change some of the negative attitudes towards Islam that prevail in Swedish society through dialog projects.

It should be noted that they are promoting a dialog between different ethnic groups in society and not only discussions between religions. Some of the projects, which are taking place, have been

initiated by Dialogslussen and others by different Christian church groups as well as by the Jewish community. One example of peace building on a real grass root level is the football match that was played in the year of 2007 between imams and priests in the Gothenburg area. As a way to heal the deep wounds caused by the al Qaida terror attacks on 9/11 the match symbolically was played on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September. It is hoped that the match from now on will turn into an annual event. This activity was organized by Kristna fredsrörelsen (The Christian Peace Movement), Kristna studenter (Christian Students), and Muslimska fredsagenter (Muslim Peace Agents and Dialogslussen<sup>32</sup> (Zaman Sverige 2007: 15; Personal communication 2008).

Dialogslussen on the other hand has initiated other projects. Projects initiated between Muslim, Christian and Jewish groups include Abrahamstältet. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2007 the project "tent of Abraham" was launched in Gothenburg. In the tent the different religious affiliations displayed their holy scriptures- the Quran, The Bible and the Torah. The visitors to the event were also invited to listen to music, enjoy Turkish folk dancing, and to try food from various cultural and religious backgrounds (Zaman Sverige 2007: 15; personal communication). Other projects that have been initiated by Dialogslussen and also by another organization within the Gülen movement called Plattform för Dialog<sup>33</sup> (Platform for Dialog) have been *iftar* dinners (the breaking of the fast of Ramadan) in Stockholm and Gothenburg. It has been a welcome event, which also for some people has served as their first encounter with Muslim culture and Islam (Zaman Sverige 2007: 16; personal communication).

Although these activities do not specifically deal with gender issues or women's rights they are indeed important as to show the importance of dialog in order to work against prejudice in society. Prejudice and isolationist ideas in society often stem from a lack of personal contact with people from different backgrounds. This includes immigrants as well as Swedes. In creating a platform of

dialog between different religious and ethnic groups it is the personal encounters that value most. Elaine Andersson who works for the organization Abrahams Barn (Children of Abraham) pointed out in her speech at an *iftar* dinner which was organized by İsveçzaman and Plattform för Dialog that “Dialog is between two humans and not between religions. Religions cannot do this without people and this is what we are doing at this *Iftar* dinner” (Zaman Sverige 2007: 19). Thus, a reciprocal continuous discussion regarding a wide range of issues, albeit not always centralized round the question of women in Islam is necessary in the long-term exchange of ideas between different groups.

My first personal encounter with Swedish representatives within the movement was in the winter of 2008. As a sort of launch for the Stockholm branch of Dialogslussen I was invited with my wife to attend an *Ashure*<sup>34</sup> dinner on the 21 of February 2008. The people invited were a mix of Turks within the movement and Swedish representative from the Swedish Church, another from an organization which works against Islamophobia in Swedish society and a politician with Turkish roots working within the Green Party (Miljöpartiet). A woman who works within the movement initiated the dinner, which took place on a boat, with a short presentation. Some of the guests spoke Swedish and some did not. The majority of the women wore a headscarf while the woman who was presenting the program did not.

Later when analyzing my encounter with the people present at the *Ashure* dinner, the first thing to come to mind were some of the observations that Maria F. Curtis brings forward in her paper about the women in the Gülen community in the United States. Here she points out that the Gülen Movement consists of women coming from different backgrounds. These women all have their specific role within the organization. Some do not speak English and belong to a more closed group which serves as to conserve Turkish culture and ethics in the group while others who speak English are involved professionally in both the movement through various dia-

log projects, and as independent ambassadors of Gülen's ideas. These professionals help the group which does not speak English well in how to cope with life in the United States while the other more integrated group serves as a sort of moral support in the shape of a sort of "adoptive mother and sister figures" (Curtis 2005: 2). Some academic works on the Gülen Movement describe it as a conservative movement where women's main role is to prepare the food for the various dialog projects such as this *ashure* dinner. I do not have direct knowledge of who did the cooking at the Ashure dinner. However, I would like to suggest that these roles probably belong to the newcomers, who due to their personal lack of knowledge of the Swedish language cannot be expected to be active participants in the various dialog projects. Whatever may be the case I see a similarity between America and Sweden in how the organization works.

To analyze gender roles on a domestic level it is even more difficult. What can be ascribed to the norms of the Gülen Movement, and what is an expression of personal ethic, influence of Swedish gender norms or even Turkish culture?

I received very different answers when I raised the question in my questionnaire "Is it your opinion that women within the movement who have a professional career are expected to take care of the home to the same extent as a housewife?"

"If there is a child in this family I believe it can be difficult to combine a career and the housework. One side will suffer from it". (Male informant 32 years old, 2008)

"Unfortunately it most probably is that way, but I think it feels good that one can find support in Islam that shows that it does not have to be the case. This needs to be enlightened, especially by the Muslim men". (Female informant 30 years old, 2008)

A male informant in the movement expressed rhetorically when I asked about household chores that "even if I help out at home just as much as my wife I might have done this also before

becoming involved in the movement” (Male informant 34 years old, 2008).

## DISCUSSION

In the beginning of this paper I described how three prominent thinkers on Islam were highlighted in Jonas Svensson’s dissertation. There are a number of commonalities in how these writers and Fethullah Gülen approach the question of women and their role in Islam. However, it has to be pointed out that the issue of women and Islam is only one out of a multitude of other topics that Fethullah Gülen has written about. The common point of departure between Gülen and various contemporary debaters is to find the solutions to contemporary questions in the Qur’an and the Sunnah. These intellectuals can actually be classified as representatives of what Yilmaz labels “the modern juggernaut” (Yilmaz 2003: 237).

When looking for possible clues to explain the subordinated situation of women in the world today there are a number of factors that have to be taken into account. Religion used as a power tool to control women can be one, but the same can also be said for cultural gender roles that are synonymously ascribed to religion. Sometimes it is a combination of many factors. Thus, from the aspect of gender inequality there are a number of aspects that need to be considered when approaching the issue of women’s rights. Among these are education, social background, economic situation, culture and so forth (Karlsson Minganti 2008: 3).

I believe that the Gülen movement is no exception to this. The Gülen movement cannot be seen as more homogenous than in the basic sense. The people who are inspired by Fethullah Gülen’s message also interpret it different ways. As such, gender inequality in the movement can ultimately most likely stem from personal religious perceptions on what roles should be attributed to men and to women. The group of people that stick to traditional Turkish (cultural) gender ideals will in some cases be more likely to preserve

these on Swedish soil as a sort of cultural defense. On the other hand there is also a new generation who do not necessarily share Swedish gender ideals but try to find an acceptable Islamic answer to Swedish society's expectations regarding issues such as equality between the sexes.

Referring to Gülen's call on education the well-known scholar Hakan Yavuz writes in the book *Turkish Islam and the Secular State* that Fethullah Gülen

“is more practical and progressive than his community” (...) “a decade ago this religious community was not willing to allow daughters to go to high schools, preferring instead to send them to Qur'anic courses or to the strictly female Imam Hatip Schools”(Yavuz 2003: 30).

The movement as it was 15-20 years ago can indeed be described as more conservative in thought and practice than it is today. The movement of today has also moved out from being a national Turkish movement to becoming more and more internationally active. The Gülen movement attracts people from a number of social, religious and economic spheres and encompasses a generation who have found it as natural to discuss Islam, Judaism and Christianity as discussing different hadith. The movement even has non-Muslim followers and there are even atheists who are sympathetic towards Fethullah Gülen's ideas.

From my first insights into the Gülen movement in Sweden I draw the conclusion that the women cannot be described as one homogenous group. The same can of course way be said about men. It is also hard to speak of homogenous gender roles within the movement.

The spokesperson of Dialogslussen in Gothenburg for example is a very outspoken and active member of the community. She has also chosen to wear the headscarf. The woman who presented the Ashure dinner did not. Consequently, the issue of wearing a headscarf or not says very little about *empowerment* of women in the movement. What they have in common is that they both have

grown up not in but with Swedish culture since childhood, and that they are inspired by Fethullah Gülen's ideals. In this context it is necessary to go beyond the common Western perception of all women in Islam being mere objects deprived of their free will. Karlsson Minganti speaks of *women empowerment* and women in terms as active subjects where she refers to the scholar of development, Naila Kabeer. In Kabeer's model of analysis empowerment means to make "strategically important life choices (...) have the ability to define and realize objectives" (Karlsson Minganti 2007: 29). This model is contested when including people who superficially might seem to be subordinated (Karlsson Minganti 2007: 29). Why do they want to be a part of something that from an external western perspective might be seen as a hierarchal system that does not give them any immediate freedom? In her discourse Karlsson Minganti lays forward an alternative scenario which I find fitting in this context. An active subject is not solely a person who fights against a prevailing social order but can also be understood in other terms. She refers to the Egyptian anthropologist Saba Mahmood who in her fieldwork among women in Egypt discovered that the main determining factor for being active subjects was the will to become pious women "in thought and action" (Karlsson Minganti 2007: 29), and not to eradicate male dominant structures (Karlsson Minganti 2007: 29). Thus, as I see it, this active commitment on behalf of the women within Islam cannot be looked upon merely as a sign of subordination in a patriarchal social order.

When it comes to education and its possible prospects of changing misogynic gender ideals one could say that Gülen's call for secular and religious education has brought with it a second consequence. Thanks to the emphasis that the Gülen movement puts on education Muslim women have achieved a greater access to territories such as higher education which once was reserved solely for men. As a result these people now have the possibility to interpret religion in a more independent way and question inherent misogynic structures as stemming from culture and not from reli-

gion. Fethullah Gülen's *ijtihad* can serve as an inspiration for Muslims who wish to define their faith as being compatible with both Islam and the western world where they are living. Actually as a consequence of the movement engaging itself more and more internationally, it also is due to become less Turkish in culture in the future. This can also serve as a vehicle to change inherent misogynic gender ideals that can be ascribed more to culture than to Islam. It might also be easier for Muslims in the west to challenge ideas stemming from culture since they do not have to cope with that pressure as much. One informant explained that

“People who have grown up in Sweden often have a deeper knowledge about the Qur’an than people that have grown up in Turkey, where it is hard for people to distinguish culture from religion (Personal communication with male informant 2008).

It is difficult to estimate what part of Fethullah Gülen's *ijtihad* regarding women has *empowered* women within the movement most. I would like to imply that although Fethullah does indeed speak a lot about rights of women in Islam, the biggest contribution in this context has been his call on education. With education women in the movement have been assigned a tool which they always will carry with them and which will help them define and negotiate their role in society. If we turn to Sweden, these women who live at the crossroads between what can be described as “Western values” and Islamic faith, can utilize their skills to negotiate their position both within an acceptable Islamic context and in accordance with Swedish society's expectations. With millions of men and women listening to Fethullah Gülen's message of peace, tolerance and dialog, I believe that the potential of the movement to build bridges is huge.

## NOTES

- 1 I am not implying that the concepts “traditional” and “different roles” necessarily contradict gender equality.
- 2 *Ijtihad* is the principle of independent reasoning (interpretation) on Islam. However, within some Muslim orthodox circles the tool of *ijtihad* has been rejected since this camp share the opinion that the door of interpretation *taqlid* is closed.
- 3 I write North European since this paper focuses on Sweden. I do so since within the so-called “Western World” there is also great cultural variation between different regions. I will later in the paper use the words West and Western, but I do so in a North European context.
- 4 My interviews have been carried out both on the personal level and by sending a questionnaire in English and Swedish by e-mail to people involved in the Gülen movement with whom I have never met personally. The answers to my questions were given in Swedish, Danish and Turkish. I want to point out that the answers received and used in the paper should only be understood in terms of presenting personal examples from active people in the movement. Although I received more material than what has been presented in this paper I have due to the limited space chosen to only present the most descriptive and relevant accounts here.
- 5 One of my informants was raised in Denmark.
- 6 In the dissertation Women’s Human Rights and Islam- *A Study of Three attempts at Accommodation* Jonas Svensson explores how three contemporary Islamic debaters have approached the question of women’s rights in Islam. The three are the Pakistan born debater Riffat Hassan, Moroccan Muslim feminist debater Fatima Mernissi and Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na’im from Sudan.
- 7 In the year of 2008 Fethullah Gülen was voted by the readers of the international magazine Foreign Policy as the most influential intellectual person in the world superseding well known Nobel Prize winners as Mohamed Yunus, Orhan Pamuk, Shirin Ebadi and Al Gore. In this context it is important to point out that shortly after the internet voting list was announced in the newspaper Zaman which is owned by people who support Fethullah Gülen’s ideas “votes in his favor began to pour in” (Foreign Policy 2008: 1; also see Today’s Zaman 2008).
- 8 With logistic I mean all the small tasks carried out at e.g. conferences such as serving coffee and tea, helping out with registration procedures, transport to and from hotels, airports and so on.
- 9 The name of the conference was *Muslim World in Transition: contributions of the Gülen Movement*.
- 10 Another misinterpretation of the Gülen movement is that it is a sort of modern *Sufi tariqa* (Sufi order) (Expressed in the Spanish daily newspaper El Pais (El Pais July 12, 2008). For more information about this subjects see Zeki Sarıtoprak. A Sufi In His Own Way, Thomas, S.J. Sufism and Modernity in the Thought of Fethullah Gülen and Elisabeth Özdalga, Redeemer or Outsider? See full list in the bibliography.
- 11 Keles writes that “The influential Rand think tank in the United States for example, wrongly identifies Gülen as a “modernist” and states that although modernists are the most suitable allies of the West in terms of their discourse and beliefs, they lack

the authenticity of the traditionalists and the service-outlets through which to influence the public. The overall observations concerning modernists are correct, categorizing Gülen as one is not "(Kecles 2007: 686-687).

- 12 For example France in Algeria and Great Britain in Egypt (Svensson 1996: 14)
- 13 In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the big cities in Turkey Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir experienced a massive influx of immigrants from Anatolia. In the big Turkish cities the main polarization has been between traditional values versus Kemalist style modernism - Countryside versus city- Religion versus laicism (Zarcone 2005: 171).
- 14 Quite ironically it was the Islamic reformer Muhammad ibn 'Abd al Wahhab (1703-87) who initiated the call for a return to a clean, "unpolluted Islam". According to 'Abd al Wahhab, Islam needed to be cleansed from un-Islamic elements such as the popular veneration of saints, and also the "extreme veneration of Prophet Muhammad himself" (Baldick, 1989: 133) performed by many Muslims (Baldick, 1989: 133; Svensson 1996: 16). The Taliban movement in Afghanistan was inspired by this way of interpreting Islam.
- 15 Fethullah Gülen does not label his interpretation *ijtihad* himself. Yilmaz writes "many people may adapt themselves to his discourse and follow his *ijtihad*, even though he does not label his precepts as *ijtihad*" (Yilmaz 2003:237)
- 16 It should be noted that the majority of the so called world religions have a complementary view on men and women. Complimentary means that there are different roles ascribed to women and to men. However, it should be pointed out that the word complementary bears different connotations in different cultural settings. In the West it is often understood as inequality whereas among many Muslims, including "feminist Muslims" this is not always the case.
- 17 Kinsley writes that Western researchers often have been tempted to condemn "religious-cultural practices, such as clitoridectomy or Muslim women wearing the *hijab*" (Kinsley 2002:12).  
Western feminists and western scholars have thus generally seen this as a clear indication of the women being oppressed and subordinated victims in a patriarchal social order (Kinsley 2002:12-13).
- 18 Although Jonas Svensson does not write about Fethullah Gülen in his thesis it serves as a useful tool of comparison when analyzing and collecting data on the contemporary Islamic scholarly debate on women's rights in Islam.
- 19 Within *ijtihad* the process of reinterpretation also included the questioning the truthness of *hadith*. Some of the criteria used in separating the "true *hadith* from the untrue were the *isnad*- chain of informers. When using the *isnad*-chain it is investigated if the *hadith* informers were morally reliable, lived at the same time or if they knew each other (Lapidus 1985:104; 1985:922; Svensson 2000: 136).
- 20 According to her, these verses have been misinterpreted due to the fact that the Arabic language contains so many words that may have many possible interpretations. She stresses that the Qur'an might be interpreted in many ways due to the richness in Arabic vocabulary. By using this method of analysis she has been able to find new less misogynic meanings in the Qur'an without questioning its status as timeless and the word of God (Svensson 2000: 94-96; 2000: 206).

- 21 According to Mernissi, Islam initially was very progressive when it comes to women's rights. However, due to economical factors, attitudes and traditions preserved from the period before Islam commonly referred to as Al-Jahiliya were preserved. Mernissi writes that this was a consequence of men wanting to control women (Svensson 2000: 148-159).
- 22 In the opinion of an-Na'im an "alternative Islamization" (Svensson 2000: 174) is necessary (Svensson 2000: 174). He bases his argument on the fact that the Qur'an is written in two time periods that sometimes overlap. The Meccan message is described by an-Na'im as a period of equality and tolerance (Svensson 2000: 177). The Medinan message which does not share this inherent quality can according to an-Na'im be looked upon as "time bound" (Svensson 2000: 177-178). Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im utilizes the methodology presented by his teacher, M. M. Tāhā. Svensson writes that according to an-Na'im and Tāhā "Islam consists of two different messages, one put forward by Muhammad in Mecca and the other in Medina, related to differences in audience. There is also an intermediate period in which these two messages overlapped. The former message, revealed in Mecca, is the original and eternal message, characterized by equality (including gender equality), tolerance, respect and freedom of choice. The latter message, lacking these features, is time-bound. It was relevant and applicable only to pre-modern phases in history" (Svensson 2000: 177-178). Jonas Svensson explains that an-Na'im believes that "it is the original, *postponed* Meccan verses that- as a result of changed circumstances-abrogate the time-bound Medinan verses as a source of Islamic law" (Svensson 2000:189).
- 23 Yilmaz expresses that the question today is not if the door to *ijtihad* is open or closed. The important issue is which *ijtihad* are necessary and which are not. With the flood of religious material found in media, books and on the Internet, today anyone can be their own *mujtahid* (expert) and perform *ijtihad*.
- 24 *Hizmet*, means service. One could say that the notion of *hizmet* functions as a core element in the Gülen Movement. The idea is to serve other people before one self. It is an ideal that bears its legacy from *Sufi* ideals. In this context strongly influenced by *Sufi* ideals it means to serve the people without putting one's self first. Thus, it is looked upon as an Islamic ideal to give service to mankind. This service may include human as well as economic resources. The element of *hizmet* is actually so important in the Gülen Movement that there exists a common way in which to describe a person who has joined- "he joined the service" "*Hizmete katıldı*" (Şen 2005: 256).
- 25 In the fall of 2008 this group also started a small school in the Stockholm suburb, Vällingby. It is school of approximately 60 pupils, which has seven teachers who are employed on a fulltime basis. The majority of the teachers are women. The children are between 7 and 12 years old. (Personal communication 2008).
- 26 In Sweden there are approximately 300 000 people who would describe themselves as Muslims. However, due to Swedish legislation it is difficult to give an absolutely accurate figure (Karlsson Minganti 2008: 1).  
The population of Sweden is roughly 9 million people.
- 27 *Füruat* refers to certain prescriptions in the Islamic faith that can be considered of less importance (when comparing), than the core elements of religion, such as e.g. believing in God and observing the daily ritual prayers.

- 28 See Karlsson Minganti 2008:8 for additional information on attitudes on the headscarf in Sweden.
- 29 The killing of Fadime Şahindal by her own father in the year 2002 for dating a Swedish boy caused an outrage which seldom had been witnessed before in Sweden. How could this happen in Sweden? Why had no one protected her? After this incident Swedish politicians started to react and some political measures were taken to protect threatened women. There is a full report about Fadime Şahindal in the Turkish version of the magazine *Prizma* (Prizma, 2002).
- 30 For more info on the debate in Sweden see Karlsson Minganti 2007 and 2008.
- 31 Video at Gülen conferences in London and Rotterdam in the year of 2007
- 32 The role of Dialogslussen in this project consisted in providing some of the players for the match, advertising about the event on regional TV and radio (personal communication 2008).
- 33 The full name is Plattform för Dialog och Tolerans (Platform for Dialog and Tolerance). It is Dialog organization that until recently has been working very closely with RDS, Rumi Dialogslussen (Gothenburg). Plattform för Dialog och Tolerans has been active with different cultural projects in the Stockholm area for approximately seven years. With the establishment of Dialogslussen in the Stockholm area in the year of 2008 the two groups have now more or less merged into one unit which is Dialogslussen. However Plattform för Dialog och Tolerans still exists on the formal level (personal information 2008).
- 34 In Anatolia Muslims and Christians commemorate the Prophet Noah by eating a delicatessen called *ashure*. In Muslim tradition it is believed that when the waters from the great flood started to retrieve Noah and his family collected all the remaining food found on the ark and made a dish out of the various ingredients *Ashure* is celebrated on the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram (Rumi Dialogslussen 2008; Rumi Forum).

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