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UNH Welcomes Scholar's Discussion On Women's Movement In Islamic State

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DURHAM, N.H. -- When thinking about women's rights movements, many Americans likely don't connect them with Islamic countries but according to a preeminent scholar, that would be a mistake.

The University of New Hampshire welcomes internationally known linguistic scholar Fatima Sadiqi Monday, Feb. 26, 2007, to discuss "Gender, Language, and Islam in Morocco." The event is free and open to the public, and begins at 6:15 p.m. in Murkland 115.

"Generally speaking, Americans hold the view that women in Islamic countries like Morocco are 'passive' and 'too submissive' to fight oppression. Such a view may be simplistic at best. The truth of the matter is that all societies, Muslim or non-Muslim, are patriarchal and oppress women," Sadiqi says.

But unlike other Islamic countries, Morocco has a long-lived women's movement that began in the 1940s as a societal movement involving both sexes.

"The women's movement in Morocco, which now bridges secular and religious communities, is setting an example of the power of social thought in a traditional society," Sadiqi says. "It is no exaggeration to say that the Moroccan women's movement has become the cutting edge of reform, engaging Islamization, modernization, democratization and feminism."

Not only has the women's movement resulted in a revisiting of traditional interpretations of scripture, it has been instrumental in changing laws regarding family, nationality, media ownership and political organizations. Women's advocacy has shaped a new approach to poverty, which integrates efforts to improve education with better sanitation and housing. Men and women now are heads of the family, divorce is no longer unilateral, and children are protected after divorce even when the wife remarries.

"Women are increasingly making the argument that they have been deliberately excluded from a full role in society not because Islam prescribes their exclusion, but because Islam was revealed in a deeply patriarchal social world," she says.

Even regarding language, Morocco is experiencing change, according to Sadiqi. Most Moroccans speak four languages, including Arabic and Berber. Arabic, language of the Qur'an, is considered male-biased and is used more by men than women. Berber, on the other hand, is a secular language in the sense that it is not backed by a holy book and is more associated with the private sphere and women. Recently Berber has gained official recognition and is being taught in schools. In addition, women are speaking Arabic.

"Many feminists use Arabic to rally the large female illiterate population and hence cut the grass under the radical Islamists' feet," Sadiqi says.

Sadiqi is a senior professor of linguistics and gender studies at the University of Fes, Morocco. She has published extensively on Moroccan languages and women/gender issues in Morocco, including "Images of Women in Abdullah Bashrahil's Poetry" (2004), and "Women, Gender and Language in Morocco" (Brill, 2003).

Sadiqi lectures and writes in three languages (Arabic, French and English). She has set up the first Centre for Studies and Research on Women in Fes and the first Graduate Unit Gender Studies in Morocco. She is currently a research associate and visiting professor of women's studies in religion and Islamic studies at Harvard Divinity School. She recently was appointed by the UN Secretary General as a member of the UN Economic and Social Council.

"One of the points that struck me when I first read Dr. Sadiqi's work was how Moroccans viewed language as an identity builder, a resource that opens doors. Her work challenges the subtractive nature of our current English only climate, which tends to define language as a barrier. Dr. Sadiqi's work, on the contrary, highlights multilingualism as a powerful resource that can lead to positive social change," says Judy Sharkey, assistant professor of education, who met Sadiqi in 2004 at a Fulbright-Hays Seminar in Morocco.

Sadiqi's visit is sponsored by the Center for Humanities, President's Commission on the Status of People of Color, Education and History Departments, Women's Studies Program, and the Linguistics Program.