Debating Sharia: the 1917 Muslim Women’s Congress in Russia

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In 1917, a year of revolutionary change in the Russian Empire, Muslim women organized a congress in order to propose and debate resolutions that they hoped would be reflected in Russia’s new constitution. Transcripts from the April Congress in Kazan provide evidence that participants sharply disagreed over whether polygyny should be permitted, limited, or abrogated, and they used these debates to articulate their own understandings of rights. The core question, which remained unresolved, was one that present-day Muslim theologian Amina Wadud addresses. In 1917, delegates asked whether rights precede Sharia, so that Sharia-approved practices might be rejected if they contradict a woman’s god-given rights.

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