

## The Muslim World, Globalization, and Women's Rights

*Mahmood Monshipouri\**

### Introduction

Muslim women, who have been historically regarded as cultural transmitters and protectors of national values, have become a new subject of debate. This impassioned debate on women's roles in Islam is also seen by many as sources of moral and social disorder. Defying both conventional and patriarchal ideologies, Muslim women today have become a powerful voice for change. Interestingly, certain elements of Islamic feminism and secular feminism are working together to push for legal and educational reforms. By addressing shared problems, such as preventing domestic violence and gender discrimination, Muslim women have come into contact with women's movements and organizations across the globe, developing transnational ties and identities. There clearly are some divisions among women's organizations and groups over issues such as *hijab* (Islamic dress code), which has become a symbol for the defense of the faith, family

---

\* Prof. Dr. Mahmood Monshipouri is Professor and Chair of the Political Science Department at Quinnipiac University in US. He is also a Visiting Fellow at Yale Center for International and Area Studies. He Specializes in Human Rights, Democratization, Comparative Politics, Middle Eastren Politics, and Western European Politics.  
*International Studies Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 2004, pp. 27-49.

integrity, and Islamic identity, as well as some religious beliefs. Nevertheless, the convergence between certain elements of Islamic feminists and Muslim secularists has pointed to the existence of pragmatic grounds for cooperation between the two.

Muslim women encounter three fronts simultaneously. First, they represent an Islamic identity that more often than not is in conflict with modern political regimes and state elites. Secondly, they must fight against Islamic fundamentalists, whose ideas, institutions, and goals they vehemently reject. And finally, and just as importantly, they face a mundane confrontation with a prevailing patriarchal culture within which they live. Questions of women's rights are exacerbated by difficulties Muslim women encounter in a patriarchal culture in which women are often characterized by stereotypes.

The "borderless solidarity" has led to the promotion of women's rights across and within cultures, but it stands in a problematic relationship to broader, more complex social issues. Although this global solidarity is resisted in many parts of the Muslim world, the women's empowerment is seen as the most effective antidote to extremism in the Muslim world. This paper attempts to contextualize gender analysis in the cultural, economic, and political domains, while addressing three questions: (1) why have Muslim women become the agents of change, reform, and democratization in a globalizing world? (2) what impact has globalization on Muslim women and the rise of Islamic feminism? And (3) how could Muslim women maintain the integrity of their culture while at the same time remain receptive to universal values, ideas, and institutions?

## **The Reconstruction of Islam and Gender Analysis**

The gender analysis in the study of culture and cultural politics has taken a new importance given the simultaneous-and often contradictory-emergence of transnational advocacy networks and cross-national alliances that challenge the course of modernity. The gender-based divisions in the world conferences on women's issues attest to this reality. At the same time,

concerns with preventing domestic violence and improving social-legal status of women has opened up a new discursive space for the dialogue between Islamic and secular feminists. This development has made resistance and empowerment central to any processes of change in the women's status and rights in the Muslim world. At issue are the ways in which women redefine religion and negotiate modernity.

Over the past two decades, the tension between political regimes and Islamic identity has intensified. Central to this tension is the debate over the role and status of women, who have come not only to demand but also to represent the vast social changes transpiring in the Muslim world. Increasingly, the women's place in society and in the family has become a primary focus of potential change in Muslim societies. Much of the progress made by women has thus far been in the legal-political arenas. The family personal status law remains resistant to change. This is so because the "family" continues to occupy a central place in Muslim societies, both culturally and historically. How to reconcile the family with the right of women to act against their husbands- particularly in cases of inheritance, marriage, divorce, child support, and women's reproductive choice-remains an unsettling question.

Given the existing male-centered practices and institutions, the prevailing cultural attitudes toward women and their sexuality are premised on the notion that women are "seductresses and potential sources of moral and social disorder."<sup>(1)</sup> In such a context, nationalism is often invoked in gendered politics and women are thus presented in their symbolic role as mothers, the physical reproducers of the nation, and cultural transmitters. Symbolism is manifested in the ways in which women protect their bodies and behavior.<sup>(2)</sup> The role and status of Muslim women, one observer points out, has become a highly politicized and charged symbol in cultural battles between the Muslim world and the West, as well as within the Muslim world itself.<sup>(3)</sup> The cultural and political dominance of the West renders the use of Western rights-based language and the issue of the liberation of women vulnerable to the charges of lacking cultural authenticity.<sup>(4)</sup>

Despite conservative resistance, the views regarding women's role in

Muslim societies have undergone a profound change during the twentieth century. Due to educational reforms and increased female literacy rates, Muslim women have become a significant new force with more visibility in public life. Many obstacles, however, stand in the way of the Muslim women's struggle for equality, some of which are linked to the political economy and others to sociocultural contexts and religion. John L. Esposito points to the multitude of barriers: "Muslim women's battle is about gender, class, and political and economic power as often it is about religious faith and identity."<sup>(5)</sup>

Neither feminism nor women's rights movements are solely of Western origin. In several Asian and Middle Eastern colonies, "the women question" arose in the early twentieth century alongside or in connection with anti-colonial nationalism. Some feminists even traveled to participate in international conferences.<sup>(6)</sup> Feminists in the Muslim world, as elsewhere, are diverse and represent varying viewpoints. Aware of their identity and rights, as well as their place in history, many Muslim women have become avid enthusiasts of globalization. In a globalizing context defined by common problems and shared standards, as well as by transnational identities and ties, women's central role will be to shape the terms and establish the conditions under which discrimination is countered and social and legal reforms are advocated.

Some scholars call on human rights advocates in Muslim societies to seek, articulate, and engage Islamic justifications for the rights of women. They maintain that adopting such a method of discourse is indeed integral to-and not just a substitute for-the political struggle for the protection and promotion of women's human rights.<sup>(7)</sup> Others warn about using Islamic rationales as part of an appeal to the laws of the Nature, laws which have discriminated against women by making them different from men.<sup>(8)</sup> Such a pattern of hypocrisy on women's rights issues, they note, is not unique to Islamic societies; it is an example of the worldwide rhetorical strategy to bypass the principle of women's equality as established in international law and such UN human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>(9)</sup>

Still others note that Muslim women must transcend the colonial experience and traditional patriarchal politics if they are to achieve their task of self-authentication. “They should refuse,” Mahnaz Afkhami, an Iranian secular feminist, insists, “to identify themselves as against the world outside.”<sup>(10)</sup> The new vehicles of international communication, such as the Internet, have spread further interest in *ijtihad*, leading women to challenge male-centered values, institutions, and legal systems. Heba Raouf Ezzat, Islamist writer and political scientist in Cairo, has led a fight against outmoded thinking on women by other Islamists. “God in the Qur’an never put restrictions on a woman in a ruling position,” she wrote. “Contrary to what the traditional Muslim scholars teach, a woman in a leading political position is not against God’s system or against the Qur’an. It might be against the chauvinistic views of some men.”<sup>(11)</sup>

Women’s access to resources of participation in the larger society has been increasingly aided by several factors, including the growing necessity for more women to earn a cash income, the market expansion in women-oriented and women-run social and political movements, the rise in demand for female literacy levels, and the concern with population planning and its effects on national economic goals.<sup>(12)</sup> In brief, many Muslim women have come to see globalization as a liberalizing and empowering process with far-reaching implications for gender relations.<sup>(13)</sup>

## **Dissenting Voices and Actions**

The explosion of new possibilities and feminist thoughts points to dramatic changes in the Muslim world. Two forms of change can be discerned: structural and ideational. The material or structural change is associated with the socioeconomic transformation and growth that Muslim societies have undergone. The rising educational and employment opportunities for women in the Muslim world have helped shaping new ideas and attitudes with profound implications for such societies. The availability of educational resources in such countries as Qatar, Morocco, and Jordan has led to the women’s rising political participation.

Women studies' scholars have begun to pay attention to the messages and instruments of communication that the state, Islamic groups, and NGOs in civil society have used to enhance women's status vis-à-vis the family and reproductive rights.<sup>(14)</sup> Exposure to ideational forces, via extended schooling and education, has spurred the debate over customs, habits, and conformism, influencing the way in which women confront traditional and legal restraints on their rights. The upsurge of interest in the Arab-regional and UN conferences on Women in Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995) represents the growing impact of ideational factors.

### ◆ Cultural and Sexual Politics

One important, if not dominant, aspect of life in the Muslim world is that *cultural politics*-a process of conflict over cultural norms and symbols-is inseparable from *sexual politics*-women's struggle for power and authority at domestic, community, national and international levels. One of the most drastically visible ideational challenges facing women's rights in the Muslim world is the issue of gender identity. During much of the twentieth century, the issue of Islamic identity of Muslim countries has shaped the debate regarding the role and status of Muslim women. As a symbol of national identity, Muslim women have faced a daunting challenge to promote "modernity" and the notion of "becoming modern" without losing the integrity of their culture. They have for a long time struggled to maintain their identity in a modern way. Foremost among the symbols of identity are the "dress code" and an alternative "Islamic moral/social order."

Six decades after the death of Atatürk, Turkey is pushed to redefine its Muslim identity on both social and political levels.<sup>(15)</sup> The top-down modernization by secular elites over a period of almost 70 years has brought Turkish women positive consequences. The imposition of eight years of compulsory schooling and the enactment of the law that tries to prevent intra-family violence are two examples of such achievements. In 1981, Turkey became the only Muslim country where abortion was legal on request.<sup>(16)</sup> In reaction to a secularization process in the country, the "New

Muslim” women’s movement emerged, which attacked not just the Western world and Turkey, brought into being by the Kemalist reforms, but also attempted to dissociate itself from orthodox Islam.<sup>(17)</sup> Ironically, the secular feminist movement, whether Kemalist or radical, by siding with the state and the army to counterbalance the influences of this “New Muslim” movement, has “lost the search for new solutions and new alliances.”<sup>(18)</sup>

The Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) and its modernizing programs led to Islamic resistance in the form of the chador (*hijab*) becoming a symbol of resistance against the shah’s regime. In the post-Islamic revolution era, the Family Protection Law of 1967, which promoted secular laws and placed some limitations on the men’s ability to divorce their wives willfully, was cancelled and the legal age for marriage, which had been raised to 18 by this law, was reduced to 14.<sup>(19)</sup> The reformist women in the second decade after the revolution pushed successfully for the restoration of the Family Protection Law of 1967. Yet many cultural and traditional constraints affecting gender relations, such as individual rights, *hijab*, or sexual freedom and preferences, continued to characterize gender relations. The reformist women’s movement proved to be a crisis-oriented one that failed to fundamentally challenge patriarchy.<sup>(20)</sup>

In recent years, however, a noticeable split has appeared among traditional religious women and non-conformist Islamic feminists in favor of reform on the one hand, and the convergence of some elements of the religious and secular women on matters relating to divorce law, child custody rights, alimony on the other. Of particular relevance to this paper is the continuing struggle of reformist women, both religious and secular, to build consensus on at least some issues, including the prevention of domestic violence and the promotion of gender equality.

Since the late 1990s, as Mehranghis Kar reminds us, these groups have participated in elections, have been active as legal staff in the Islamic courts, and have significantly contributed to the literature on women’s rights in Iran. The result has been a vibrant intellectual setting imbued with flourishing ideas about universal human rights and women rights.<sup>(21)</sup> Increasingly, new configuration of Islam, revolution, and feminisms are emerging in Iran.<sup>(22)</sup> In

fact, women's press in Iran has become a primary vehicle to demonstrate how secular and Islamically oriented women have redefined the status and role of women. A coalition of secular and Islamic feminists, some of whom became members of parliament in 2000, has begun to work with "reformist parliamentarians to contest the codified and institutionalized privileges of men over women."<sup>(23)</sup>

Their divergent views on some issues notwithstanding, an unprecedented degree of gender solidarity has emerged between secular and modernist-Islamist women, thus forging their alliance ahead. Mahboobeh Abbasgholizadeh, the editor of *Farzaneh: Journal of Women's Studies and Research*, in Tehran, has noted that Islamist women are no longer the sole heirs of the revolution: "We have realized that our sectarian views of the first post-revolutionary years led to the isolation of many competent seculars, which was to the detriment of all women."<sup>(24)</sup>

Iranian women, however, continue to lack the organizational infrastructure to build a sustainable civil society in the post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>(25)</sup> Women have lost any enthusiasm for political power, revolution, and ideology. Rather, they seem to be more concerned with the "control of their own lives within political, social, and economic institutions, whatever the ideological configurations of those institutions."<sup>(26)</sup>

Just as revealing is the phenomenon of Islamic feminism in Egypt. Heba Raouf Ezzat, herself a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and a practicing Muslim, defends the Beijing "Platform for Action," but resents attempts by the state to impose a Western secular view of the world on Egyptian society and women. Islamist women have a public presence that has enabled them to win many votes in the elections and thus become a force in the parliament.<sup>(27)</sup> Islamic religious modernity, as opposed to secular Western modernity, is linked not just to legitimacy but also to considerable power in social and political spaces.

Many Muslim women join Islamists to find a legitimate place for their identity, social presence, and political activism. The so-called "fundamentalist" threat, however, has put many secularists and feminists groups on the side of the government, with the price of being silent about the

violations of human rights perpetrated by the state in the process.<sup>(28)</sup> Another fundamental problem is that the majority of women in Egypt remain excluded from the globalization process because of their lack of presence and representation in Egyptian politics.<sup>(29)</sup>

In Pakistan, the key identity problem since the inception of the country in 1947 has been whether it is an Islamic state that is committed to implementing the Shari'a (Islamic law) or simply a state for the Muslims of the Subcontinent.<sup>(30)</sup> Some state elites saw in modernization an instrumental value to push for the emancipation of women. The improvement of the position of women came to be seen as the central elements of the modernization by the secular-nationalists.<sup>(31)</sup> The alliance between women's movement and the modernizing state in Pakistan under Ayub Khan (1947-1970) and Zulifkhar Ali Bhutto (1970-1977) must be seen in this context. Women's organizations such as All Pakistan Women Association (APWA) started in 1949 by the wife of the then Prime Minister, Liqueate Ali Khan.

The passage of the Muslim Family laws Ordinance of 1961 under Ayub Khan marked an era of confrontation between Ayub Khan on the one hand and Ulama and the Jammatti-i-Islamic on the other. The tenure of office by Zulifkhar Ali Bhutto witnessed continued support for the women's rights as part of the government's modernizing agenda.<sup>(32)</sup> The General Zia Ul Haq era (1977-1988) led to the changes in the three areas of law-Huddud Ordianance of 1979, 1984 Law of Evidence and Qisas (retribution) and Diyat (blood money) that dramatically affected women's status and lives.

The challenge to the Islamization programs of Zia Ul Haq came from the urban professional women who organized Women's Action Forum (WAF). Some members of WAF relied on Muslim feminist theologians, such as Riffat Hassan, and worked at a feminist interpretation of Muslim laws and history. This approach offered a possibility to expand the base of the WAF beyond middle and upper class professional women to include women from lower-middle class and working poor.<sup>(33)</sup>

The cultural centrality of family and its connection with the preservation of the desired moral order have become intricately linked to the women's struggle for their rights. The imposition of Western cultural practices on

Muslim families is disruptive. In the recent years, the women's movement in Pakistan has evolved from the politically orientated WAF to the project-oriented NGOs, which has shifted the movement's focus from abstract ideological struggles toward women's practical needs. Asma Jahangir, for example, successfully defended a case involving an adult women's right to marry of her own free will. In early 1997 a Lahore High Court decided by a 2-to-1 margin to validate the marriage of twenty-three-year-old Saima Waheed against the wishes of her parents.<sup>(34)</sup> One senior advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan strongly objected Asma Jahangir's rationale, arguing that the most troubling aspect of this case was the fact that the institution of the family was being portrayed as "oppressive." This undermines, it is argued, the love, protection, the intimacy, and the connection that the family provides. This explains the peril of externally imposed cultural practices on Muslim families.<sup>(35)</sup>

Contrary to the Huntington's "clash of civilizations," paradigm, the heterogeneity of cultural and religious beliefs has not precluded the emergence of cross-national alliances that challenge the course of modernity. The gender-based divisions in the world conferences on women's issues attest to this reality. Jane Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi argue that the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was the site of competing trends between a new transnational, cross-cultural conservative and religious alliance against equal rights for women on the one hand, and the growing globalization of women and gender politics on the other. Bayes and Tohidi argue that the societal and structural conditions, such as cross-time, cross-class and cross-cultural variability or diversity in the status of Catholic and Muslim women demonstrate that religion is not the only or even the primary variable in determining women's rights in shaping gender relations.<sup>(36)</sup>

In Sudan, which has mainly an agricultural economy with a sparsely developed urban population with the exception of the capital, Greater Khartoum, Sondar Hale points out that "the cultural positioning of women by men is relevant to the Sudan situation, i.e., women seen as the embodiment of the culture and expected to serve the culture/society through

particular forms of labor.”<sup>(37)</sup> Sudanese women have distanced themselves from Arab identity or an “authentically Arab” identity by displaying more willingness to be liberated from certain patriarchal Arab cultural traditions and customs, while returning to “pure” Islam. Under Shari’a, they have insisted, women would have a higher status and more respect.<sup>(38)</sup>

## **Globalization and State Feminism**

Economic globalization has created a unique situation in which the role of state in promoting socioeconomic conditions has become more critical than the past. Some human rights scholars have argued that an alliance between human rights advocates and state elites, who are generally known to be unsympathetic to human rights, may prove to be the best way to maintain or (re)establish social control over free markets necessary to guarantee economic and social rights for all.<sup>(39)</sup> In parts of the Muslim world, this pragmatic orientation has led to the emergence of state feminism, in the process creating varied opportunities and posing many difficulties for women.

The Jordanian Women’s Union (JWU) has aimed at changing a variety of laws to advance greater equality between the sexes, while improving family relations and curbing domestic violence. Yet this and other women’s organizations, such as the General Federation of Jordanian Women (GFJW), are unlikely to play a vanguard role in the country’s political development. In 1992, Prince Hassan established the Jordanian National Committee for Women (JNCW). Likewise, the Jordanian National Women’s Forum (JNWF) was created with Princess Basma as its head and with logistical and financial support coming from the governorates and ministries. With its mission the implementation of the government’s National Strategy for Women, this proved to be a quasi-governmental organization.<sup>(40)</sup> This embryonic Hashemite state feminism has not been without its limitations. It has marginalized authentic civil-society activity and closed a political opening initiated during the 1989-94 period. The weakness of civil-society institutions is in turn the key domestic reason for the continuation of such

top-down NGOs, which undermine meaningful participation in the political system.<sup>(41)</sup>

In Tunisia, this type of state feminism within the broader construct of a corporatist political system has faced similar difficulties. Caught between the regime, which offers tolerance and a modicum of secular empowerment, and Islamists, who offer the reassurance of cultural authenticity and traditionally-defined gender roles, Tunisian women face hard choices. Emma C. Murphy portrays the colossal challenge facing the government: “However much largesse it is inclined to hand down to women from its bureaucratic heights, it has made few inroads into countering the social conservatism upon which political Islam feeds.”<sup>(42)</sup> The Islamic paradigm, Murphy argues, entails a message that “offers women a solution to the contradictions of a society that demands they not only be the guardians of family honor and purity, but also participate in a modern, technologically advanced, and socially liberal environment.”<sup>(43)</sup>

While considerable progress has been made in women’s status in the 1990s, “women do not achieve high ranks in more traditionally male-dominated ministries, such as the Ministries of the State and Interior, Justice, National Economy, Finance, or Foreign Affairs.”<sup>(44)</sup> With regard to economic liberalization programs, Murphy writes that Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and economic liberalization programs are not gender neutral: women are the first to be laid off when wage cuts are implemented or when poverty rises. The female unemployment rate has increased in the early years of economic reform. But more importantly, women are caught in a cultural dilemma. Economic liberalization becomes synonymous with the enforced importation of alien cultural values. In trying to “gain cultural emancipation, women lose their economic freedom.”<sup>(45)</sup> To prevent women from being drawn to Islamic groups, Tunisian governments have tried to incorporate women into the regime and accommodate their interests within government policy and legislation.<sup>(46)</sup>

The restructuring of the economy in Sudan, Sondra Hale notes, has thrown women into new or reinvented roles that directly involve them in rebuilding the Islamic nation while seeking out “authentic” Islam for their

rights and emancipation.<sup>(47)</sup> The shift in identity construction of the women citizen-mother, Muslim, militia woman, and national service volunteer has sharpened since the regime has come under attack militarily and in international critiques.<sup>(48)</sup> In reality, Hale argues, state feminism, as manifested in the “new Muslim woman,” indicates that women are active in the workforce, but only under conditions that fulfill the requirements of the party/state and of the *umma*-that is, the Muslim community.<sup>(49)</sup>

The Saudi Arabia’s state feminist has led to the emergence of an elite women with *wasta*, connections in high political places.<sup>(50)</sup> Not surprisingly, women who break through the established gender paradigm are carefully dressed in full *hijab* (Islamic dress code), invoking models of liberated women from an Islamic past, while adhering closely to Islamic values. The traditional gender paradigm has been incorporated into the mandatory religious studies curricula to satisfy the country’s powerful and culturally defensive *ulama* (scholars of religion).

### **Fighting Against Patriarchy**

In the contemporary Middle East, the family is a powerful signifier, and there is a strong conservative move to reinforce women’s maternal roles, even as nuclear family setting becomes prevalent.<sup>(51)</sup> It is important to remember, as Valentine Moghadam argues, that patriarchy should not be conflated with Islam, but rather should be placed in social-structural and development context. Patriarchal structure of Muslim societies undergoes change as a result of economic and political developments.<sup>(52)</sup> Outside of the household, the source of patriarchal control is political-judicial-that is, the state and legislator. Known as neo-patriarchy, this modernized patriarchy is featured by the dominance of the father within the household and at the level of the state. Women inherit less property than men do; they are required to obtain permission of father, husband, or other male guardian to marry, seek employment, start a business, or travel. Men still enjoy the right to unilateral divorce.<sup>(53)</sup>

The Arab region of the Muslim world, according to *Arab Human*

*Development Report 2002*, is hampered by three key deficits: the freedom deficit, the women's empowerment deficit, and the human capabilities/knowledge deficit relative to income. Out of seven world regions, the Arab region had the lowest freedom score in the late 1990s and also had the lowest value for voice and accountability.<sup>(54)</sup> Similarly, the Arab countries suffer a noticeable deficit in women's empowerment. Arab women occupy 3.5 percent of parliamentary seats, the lowest in the world with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>(55)</sup> Although they have made great strides in girls' education, female enrollment rates are lower than those for males, particularly at higher education levels. These countries also lag far behind other regions of the world in female enrollment in higher education.<sup>(56)</sup> Likewise, the Arab region has the lowest level of access to information and communication technology (ICT), as measured by the number of Internet hosts per 1,000 people, of all regions of the world, even lower than sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>(57)</sup> Further, with the exception of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, all Arab countries seem to be equal in their ICT deprivation, regardless of their Human Development Index.<sup>(58)</sup>

Arab women's campaign to push their governments to allow women to enter parliament has met with resistance by the Muslim groups, such as Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, throughout the Arab world. But progress has been made. Qatari women voted in 1999 elections for municipal councils and they ran for office, albeit unsuccessfully. The Sultan of Oman appointed two women to the country's Advisory Council (*Majlis al-Shura*). Bahrain has named its first female ambassador; and in Saudi Arabia, a royal princess was named assistant undersecretary for education.<sup>(59)</sup> In Jordan, a new law now prescribes a heavy sentence against the practice of "honor killings" of wives or female relatives by man.<sup>(60)</sup>

The Arab women from eighteen nations met in the Arab Women's Summit in Jordan (November 2002) and demanded equal representation in the form of quotas. They also acknowledged the problem was not simply the lack of legal reforms or low female literacy rates, but a patriarchal culture in which "women do not vote for each other. [In the last election] they didn't elect a single woman in Jordan. Women want men to rule."<sup>(61)</sup> The

militarization of states and numerous bloody conflicts in the region have helped keep power in the hands of male leaders.<sup>(62)</sup>

Under Taliban rule, the women of Afghanistan were not allowed to study at schools, universities, or any other educational institutions. A year after Taliban rule was removed from the country's political scene, millions of girls and women have returned to school and work. International agencies and NGOs, unable to operate under the anti-Western Taliban, have returned to major cities. Although the lot of Afghani women appears to be improving, much needs to be done to secure these new improvements and reduce the hardships of life. The women of Afghanistan today call into question the nature of foreign aid, historically premised on military and other strategically-oriented objectives, lest they be excluded from such assistance.

Several networks and NGOs have worked to assist the women in Afghanistan. The Afghan Women's Network (AWN) and Afghan Women's Council (AWC), and the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) have used advocacy networks, fund-raising, and education to aid Afghan women.<sup>(63)</sup> Moreover, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), established in 1946 as a functional body of ECOSOC, has urged the transitional government of Afghanistan to fully respect the equal rights and fundamental freedoms of women, give high priority to the issue of ratification of the CEDAW, and consider signing the CEDAW Optional Protocol. The CSW draft resolution (March 25, 2002) urges the government of Afghanistan to repeal all legislative and other measures that discriminate against women and girls, ensure the full, equal, and effective participation of women and girls in the civil, cultural, socioeconomic, and political life, and enable the equal rights of women and girls to education<sup>(64)</sup>

Women's rights advocates in Iran have attempted a feminist rereading and interpretation of the Qur'an, in which they demonstrate its emancipative content and dispute existing patriarchal interpretations and codifications. Many Islamic and secular feminists argue that the Qur'an has not prohibited women from becoming a judge, making a distinction between Islam and patriarchal traditions. Echoing a similar viewpoint, one progressive Iranian

cleric regards gender inequality in Shari'a law as a mistaken construction by male jurists: "Gender is a social and human concept and does not enter the divine realm, thus it could never have been a consideration for the divine Law-Giver."<sup>(65)</sup>

They have questioned the male privilege in areas such as divorce, child custody, and inheritance, while calling for the adoption of international conventions and standards. They have participated in the Beijing Plus Five deliberations in June 2000, formed links with global feminists outside the country, and have received support from Iranian expatriate feminists and other feminist organizations and networks across the globe.<sup>(66)</sup>

Education, central to demographic transition in the Muslim world as elsewhere, is the single most important determinant in the age of marriage. Many surveys have found links between declining fertility rates and rising age of marriage in the Middle Eastern countries.<sup>(67)</sup> Access to education and the expansion of schooling for girls continues to be an important factor in the decline of patriarchy. Social change as such has caused a conservative backlash within Muslim societies: "The relative rise in the position of women is seen by conservative forces as having the greatest potential of any factor to destroy the patriarchal family and its political, economic, and demographic structure."<sup>(68)</sup> The profound family changes under way in some Middle Eastern region indicate the impact of such socioeconomic transformation. "Whereas a few decades ago the majority of women married before the age of twenty," Moghadam writes, "today only 10 percent of that age group in Algeria and 18 percent in Iran are married."<sup>(69)</sup>

## **The Struggle against Islamic Extremists**

In addition to male chauvinism in Muslim patriarchal societies and neopatriarchal states, another formidable challenge for Muslim feminists is to confront Islamic radicals and traditionalists. The rise of religious fundamentalism has unleashed two opposing trends: (1) the intensification of women's subordination and (2) the emergence of a backlash in the form of women's legal rights in particular and women's rights to religious freedom more generally.

Islamic fundamentalists (traditionalists) and neofundamentalists (radicals) see major threats emanating from the pace and quality of social change. Education for women, they insist, “has dissolved traditional arrangements of space segregation, family ethics, and gender roles.”<sup>(70)</sup> Both of these groups promote the segregation of the sexes and enjoin women to adopt *purdah*-that is, veiling and seclusion. They also stress extreme modesty in dress in educational institutions.<sup>(71)</sup> Traditionalist Islamists reject the right of any Muslim to tamper with the practice of polygamy. Both the traditionalist and the revolutionary Islamists believe that the court testimony given by one man is equal to that of two women.<sup>(72)</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, the official education policy of the kingdom, written in 1970, places Islam at the center of the curriculum. The school texts for women review the *mahram* rules (a *mahram* is a woman’s closest male relative and her guardian, usually her father or husband, or someone to whom the woman could not be legally married) and applies them to women’s work, while listing permissible places for women to work. Girls are taught comprehensively about “the duty of obedience that a wife owes her husband, such as pleasing a husband sexually upon request, not leaving the home without his permission, and taking care of the house and children.”<sup>(73)</sup> These texts create a closed system that forestalls creativity, experimentation, and logical reasoning.<sup>(74)</sup>

Especially problematic is fundamentalists’ attempt at controlling women’s bodies, sexuality, and reproduction. To fundamentalists, as Asma M. Abdel Halim notes, women’s sexuality is destructive of society, family, and social norms. Their interpretations of the *Shari’a* have focused on sex and sexuality as the determining factor for women’s rights and duties. They reject the concept of “gender” in an attempt to delink the status of women from their sexuality.<sup>(75)</sup> “Muslim women’s claim to their human rights,” Halim writes, “is destined to be treated by fundamentalists as a move by lustful women seeking to Westernize the life in Muslim societies.”<sup>(76)</sup>

## Gender Solidarity: Looking Ahead

Strategies for promoting women's rights in the Muslim world must be specifically tailored to the realities of these societies. The imposition of external standards as a precondition for exogenous support can do more harm than good. Equally problematic is counting on state initiatives to create processes and institutions of fair governance. State-guided reforms are politically calculated, slow, and inconsistent. Patriarchal structure of Muslim societies, private and public, account for some of the fundamental barriers to women rights. Given these realities, the real question remains: how best to protect women's rights in the Muslim world? In many Muslim countries revolution is highly unlikely and outside intervention is widely regarded as illegitimate.

The task of textual reinterpretation, though critical to challenging religious fundamentalism, is insufficient in and of itself. The reform in political economy and legal empowerment of women are imperative. Socioeconomic development and women's collective action are the most effective tools to reform archaic laws and traditions. Grassroots movements stand a decent chance to initiate reforms via the activities and ideas of non-conformist dissidents. They represent a force from within that legitimately challenges the status quo.

Claims of universality of human rights need to be negotiated and challenged within the internal discourse of contemporary Muslim societies. To create common values and norms through dialogue and debate appears to be the most sustainable form of enhancing human rights. The convergence between Islamic and secular feminists on the matters relating to negotiating culture and human rights has gained more public appeal than focusing on distinct or profound differences among such groups. ❖

## NOTES:

1. John L. Esposito, "Women in Islam and Muslim Societies," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. ix-xxvii; see p. xiii.

2. Jan Jindy Pettman, "Gender Issues," in John Baylis and Steve Smith, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 582-598; see p. 592.

3. Farhat Haq, "Jihad Over Human Rights, Human Rights as Jihad: Clash of Universals," in Lynda S. Bell, Andrew J. Nathan, and Ilan Peleg, eds., *Negotiating Culture and Human Rights*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 242-257; see especially p. 251.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

5. John L. Esposito, "Women in Islam and Muslim Societies," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. ix-xxvii; see p. xxvii.

6. Jan Jindy Pettman, "Gender Issues," in John Baylis and Steve Smith, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 582-598; see p. 586.

7. An-Na'im Abdullahi, "The Dichotomy Between Religious and Secular Discourse in Islamic Societies," in Mahnaz Afkhami, ed., *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995, pp. 51-60.

8. Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "Rhetorical Strategies and Official Policies on Women's Rights: The Merits and Drawbacks of the New World Hypocrisy," in Mahnaz Afkhami, ed., *Faith and Freedom*, pp. 104-132.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-129.

10. Mahnaz Afkhami, "Introduction," in Mahnaz Afkhami, ed., *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995, pp. 1-15; see p. 4.

11. Quoted in Caryle Murphy, "In the Throes of a Quiet Revolution: Muslims Reexamine

the Meaning of Islam and Rethink Its Place in Modern Life," *Washington Post*, October 12, 2002, p. B9.

12. A. M. Weiss, "Challenges for Muslim Women in a Postmodern World," in Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan, eds., *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge, pp. 127-140.

13. Mahmood Monshipouri, "Islam and Human Rights in the Age of Globalization," in Ali Mohammadi, ed., *Islam Encountering Globalization*, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002, pp. 91-110.; see p. 104,

14. Kathryn M. Young, "Discourses on Women, Gender, and Health in Muslim Societies: An Historical Perspective," in Suad Joseph, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, forthcoming.

15. Cathy Benton, "Many Contradictions: Women and Islamists in Turkey," *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 2, April 1996, pp. 106-127.

16. Ayse Gunes-Ayata, "The Politics of Implementing Women's Rights in Turkey," in Janes H. Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi, eds., *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 157-175; see p. 159.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

19. Ali Akbar Mahdi, "Iranian Women: Between Islamicization and Globalization," in Ali Mohammadi, ed., *Iran Encountering Globalization: Problems and Prospects*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp. 47-72; see especially p. 54.

20. Hamed Shahidian, *Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002, p. 270.

21. Mehranguiz Kar, "Women's Strategies in Iran from the 1979 Revolution to 1999," in Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi, eds., *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 177-201; see pp. 198-199.

22. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 59-84; see p. 60.

23. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Second Edition, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, p. 218.

24. Mahboobeh Abbasgolizadeh is quoted in Azadeh Kian, "Women and Politics in Post Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change," in *Dossier 21: Women Living Under*

*Muslim Laws*, Grabels Cedex, Paris, September 1998, pp. 32-55; see especially p. 50.

25. Ali Akbar Mahdi, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

26. Ali Akbar Mahdi, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

27. Heba Raouf Ezzat, "The Silent Ayesha: An Egyptian Narrative," in Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi, eds., *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 231-257; see p. 239.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

30. Farhat Haq, "Women, Islam and the State in Pakistan," *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 2, April 1996, pp. 158-175; see p. 158.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-175.

34. Mahmood Monshipouri, *Islamism, Secularism and Human Rights in the Middle East*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 168.

35. For more information on this account, see Farhat Haq, "Jihad Over Human Rights, Human Rights as Jihad: Clash of Universals," in Lynda S. Bell, Andrew J. Nathan, and Ilan Peleg, eds., *Negotiating Culture and Human Rights*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 242-257; see especially p. 255.

36. Janes H. Bayes and Nayereh Tohid, eds., *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 27.

37. Sondra Hale, "The New Muslim Woman: Sudan's National Islamic Front and the Invention of Identity," *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 2, April 1996, pp. 176-199; see p. 184.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

39. Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights, Globalizing Flows, and State Power," in Alison Brysk, ed., *Globalization and Human Rights*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 226-241; see p. 239.

40. Laurie A. Brand, "Jordan: Women and the Struggle for Political Opening," in Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney, eds., *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, pp. 143-168; see p. 161.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-165.

42. Emma C. Murphy, "Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic

Reform,” in Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney, eds., *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, pp. 169-193; see p. 171.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

47. Sondra Hale, “Sudanese Women in National Service, Militias, and the Home,” in Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney, eds., *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, pp. 195-213; see p. 195.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

50. Eleanor Abdella Doumato, “Education in Saudi Arabia: Gender, Jobs, and the Price of Religion,” in Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney, eds., *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, pp.239-257; see p. 254.

51. M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Second Edition, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, p. 118.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-130.

54. UNDP, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*, New York: UNDP, 2002, p. 27. The seven world region include North America, Oceania, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, South and East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Arab countries.

55. For Gender empowerment measures, see UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 226-229.

56. *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, p. 28 and p. 52.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

59. William Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

60. William Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

61. See Nicolas Pelham, “Arab Women Demand Quotas,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 6, 2002, p. 7. The first Arab Women’s Summit convened in Cairo in November

2001. More information on the first Arab Women's Summit is available at <<http://www.jordanembassyus.org/11122001002.htm>>. Last visited on November 29, 2002.

62. *Ibid.*

63. "On the Situation of Afghan Women, Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan, April 27, 2002, available at <<http://rawa.fancymarketing.net/wom-view.htm>>.

64. Diana Ayton-Shenker, ed., *A Global Agenda: Issues Before the 57<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, p. 197.

65. See comments by Hojjat al-Eslam Sa'idzadeh in Ziba Mir Hossieni, "Hojjat al-Eslam Sa'idzadeh-Iran," in *Dossier 21: Women Living Under Muslim Law*, Grabels Cedex, Paris, September 1998, pp. 56-59; see p. 57

66. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Second Edition, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, p.219.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 136-139.

68. *Ibid.*, 136.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

70. Valentine Moghadam, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

71. Mir Zohair Husain, *Global Islamic Politics*, second Edition, New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc., 2003, p. 106.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

73. Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Education in Saudi Arabia: Gender, Jobs, and the Price of Religion," in Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney, eds., *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, pp. 239-257; see p. 248.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

75. Asma M. Abdel Halim, "Reconciling the Opposites: Equal but Subordinate," in Courtney W. Howland, ed., *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of the Women*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 203-213; see p. 204.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 210.