Islamists and Women in the Arab World: From Reaction to Reform?

Najib Ghadbian

Introduction

Broadly speaking, contemporary discourse assumes that Islamists are bad for women. Any gain in Islamist political influence is considered a disastrous regression in women's human rights. At a time when the movement to put women's rights on the international human rights agenda—a valuable movement indeed—seems on the brink of joining the group of world and regional powers targeting Islamists as the next great threat to humanity, it is urgent that Islamists formulate a strong and just analysis of the gender issue.

While the stereotypical view of Islamists, like most stereotypes, has some basis, it is, as are all stereotypes, completely inadequate for understanding the issue. The fact that one can locate a Saudi shaykh, an Egyptian imam, or a young Algerian militiaman who is unmistakably misogynistic does not provide the key to understanding the entire range of Islamist views on gender roles or the implications for women of rising Islamist influence. The indictment of Islamists as oppressive to women emerges from the context of western hegemonic power in the world and deploys the language of women's liberation to justify political and economic assaults against contemporary Islamist states and political forces. The problem is that women do face oppressive conditions in the Muslim world, as do their counterparts in the West, but these are different from the oppressive conditions imagined and constructed for Muslim women from a western frame of reference.

Najib Ghadbian is associated with the City University of New York. A draft of this paper was delivered at the 90th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, 14 September 1994. The author is indebted to Mohja Kahf for her contribution to this paper and to the Islamist men and women whom he interviewed.

The political co-optation of feminist discourse on Muslim women has created a formidable obstacle to addressing those conditions. A first step, for Islamists, toward addressing gender relations must be the shifting of the frame of reference from one that considers secularism the norm and Islamic reconstruction an aberration to one that looks to Islamic sources for ways of acknowledging Muslim women's oppression and developing alternatives. Real alternatives must consist of more than a fear of change, protective reactions, traditional formulas, and a reassignment of blame. Before undertaking the development of alternatives, Islamist positions on women and gender must be examined. This article will outline a framework for this task as a beginning.

I propose three points toward a more accurate evaluation of Islamists and their implications for women. First, contemporary Islamist views of gender roles need to be contextualized in their local and regional settings. Islamists should be evaluated on the basis of traditional local conditions, which they often challenge, rather than to a Greenwich Village ideal of feminism. Against the traditionalism that makes up much of their backdrop in Middle Eastern societies, Islamists emerged as the bearers of reformative agendas regarding women: for example, their belief in the importance of education for women and their attack on the customary attitude of dismay at the birth of a girl. Second, any model of evaluation must be able to acknowledge the diversity among Islamists and the development of their ideas over time. It is important to listen to Islamist men and women as they debate these issues in their own voices and with their own vocabulary, and to account for their practices in the area of gender relations and gender roles. Finally, if any one issue can be considered a litmus test for the direction of the Islamists' agendas for women, I suggest that their stand on women's political empowerment be considered as such an issue. Any evaluation of Islamists and their implications for women's lives must survey the degree to which they include women in decision-making and policy-making.

Islamist Views of Gender in the Local Context

The ideological context of gender in which Islamists emerged in the Middle East is made up of two contesting elements: traditionalism and secular women's liberation movements. Oppressive conditions for women in the Arab world have accumulated over centuries, beginning from pre-Islamic times and then reinforced by certain Islamic interpretations, and eventually assumed the mantle of Islamic authority. Traditional culture gave the patriarch authoritarian control over the family. Although this could be mitigated by the informal influence of individual strong women, incidental mechanisms that gave women negotiating power in certain circumstances,[1] and by the educational and economic privileges of upper class women,[2] women in the Arab world have had a distinctly limited access to resources and autonomy (sometimes almost as limited as that of western women).

Dependency and subordination has been the de facto condition of the vast majority of Muslim women, just as it has been for western women, only not as abject. At a later date, western colonial powers entered the picture and manipulated the issue of women's oppression to their own ideological ends. Patriarchal European men who bitterly opposed feminists at home became extremely benevolent in their concern for women in the colonized lands and regarded "civilizing" her as the most pressing part of the white man's burden. The condition of women was considered a sign of the intrinsic worthlessness of Islam and Arabic culture, an attitude that was a staple of western ideology and repeated over and over at all levels of culture until it seemed true by virtue of sheer repetition. As Leila Ahmed points out, it has never been argued that because male domination and injustice to women have existed throughout the West's recorded history, the only recourse for western women is to abandon western culture and find themselves some other culture. The idea seems absurd, and yet this is routinely how the matter of improving the status of women is posed with respect to women in Arab and other nonwestern societies.[3] By espousing a program in which women's liberation was equated with westernization and with the abandonment of an Arabic and Islamic cultural identity, the colonial powers afflicted the Arab women's movement with a handicap that it has never been able to unload completely.[4]

Arab feminism, which emerged hand-in-hand with Arab nationalism, was perceived as having been learned at the feet of the western colonizer, taking Qāsim Amīn as its model. In fact, many advocates of feminism, both bourgeois and leftist, did and still do consider secularization along a European model as intrinsic to their struggle and agree with the western dismissal of Islam in toto as inherently misogynistic. To make matters worse for those who were genuinely concerned with the betterment of women, the authoritarian nationalist regimes of the postcolonial era also played "the woman's card" for their own aims. In such states as Syria and Tunisia, dictatorial regimes affected "reforms" from above that purported to improve women's lot but, in reality, served to increase the gap between the bourgeois elite of educated women, who benefitted most from them, and the masses of women, who continued to live in traditional conditions.

There is no question that these reforms did produce some positive changes, for example, in raising literacy rates and legally enfranchising women. But they had all the moral persuasion and transformative impact of a snub-nosed weapon. Rather than change deep-seated attitudes, they changed surface appearances through intimidation, the crudity of which reached its utmost height in the Asad regime's 1982 paramilitary attack on *muḥajjabāt* in Damascus: Women in the street were forced at gunpoint to strip off their Islamic garb.

Thus twentieth-century Muslim and Arab women have had to choose between a suffocating traditionalism and an alienating feminism. Arab feminism has been unable to shake off the suspicion of an alliance with imperialism and to attain any semblance of cultural legitimacy or any

grounding in a wide popular base, despite its occasional conciliatory gesture toward Islam. Consider the following example: to an Egyptian population, the majority of which retains the belief in God at a very basic level, the English title of one of Nawal el Saadawi's novels—*God Dies by the Nile*—points to a cognitive gap between her discourse and the grass roots of Egyptian society. She disguised the book in Arabic under the title *The Death of the Last Man on Earth*, but its secularist content remains as alien as ever from those whose oppressive practices against women she would change.

In this novel, as in her *Woman at Point Zero* and others, Saadawi depicts the bankruptcy of traditionalist gender ideology and the brutality of traditional society toward women. While she is more interested in indicting ruthless Egyptian powerbrokers and global capitalism than Islam as an essence, the social representatives of Islam in her works are always complicit with the brutal order: peasants praise Allah and beat their wives at the same time; deformed and repulsive shaykhs enforce a cruel patriarchy; Azhari scholars sexually molest young girls[5]; and rapists pray sanctimoniously next to imams at village mosques.[6] These are the things that represent religion, and the resulting model of religion is the only one available in her narrative world. Any possibility for liberation in her bleak polemical fiction includes and entails liberation from religion. From Saadawi's position of militant secular socialism, monotheistic religion is inconceivable as a vehicle for the alleviation of women's oppression.

Fatima Mernissi is often mentioned, in contrast to Saadawi, as a Muslim feminist seeking to ground herself in Islamic referents. Her vague notion that "each person should have their own Islam,"[7] her emphasis on Mu'tazilism and Sufism[8] have had little more than academic appeal and offer little in the way of wider mobilization for social change. Mernissi interprets the resurgence of Islamic dress (*ḥijāb*) as a "mask"[9] whose meaning is inherently and essentially repressive. In her project of deconstructing Islamic discourse, she uses the term *ḥijāb* to make a connection between the veiling of women and the lack of democratic values. Just as women must be veiled from participation in the public sphere, she says, throughout Islamic history the populace had to be veiled by a *ḥijāb* from the decision-making process of the caliph and his ministers: "Veils hide only what is obscene. And even more obscene than the sovereign will of women is that of the 'amma, the mass of people. . . ."[10]

Mernissi's essentializing of the meaning of *ḥijāb* throughout her various works assigns to it a single, permanent meaning for all of history and geography. From 'Umar's court to Berlin of the cold war era—whose obscene *ḥijāb*, Mernissi says, was the Berlin Wall[11]—it has one meaning: repressive control. Such absolutism completely bypasses women's experience of *ḥijāb* as a valid starting point for understanding its meanings and fails to account for how differing sociohistorical contexts can construct widely different meanings for this dress:

> To assume that the mere practice of veiling women in a number of Muslim countries indicates the universal oppression of women through sexual segregation not only is analytically reductive, but also proves quite useless when it comes to the elaboration of oppositional political strategy.[12]

Mernissi speaks of the Islamist embrace of *ḥijāb* as indicative of both their desire to control women and their lack of democratic values. She manages to do this without mentioning any actual Islamist scholarship, because she writes for an audience primed to believe that and worse about Islamists. Mernissi speaks of battling Muslim "fundamentalists" over democracy as if they are not the ones who are being excluded from democratic participation in many Arab states.[13] Her stance on the "fundamentalists" locates her at a particular post in postcolonial politics, a post that at the present time is especially useful to the anti-Islamist campaigns in numerous western nations. Mernissi, whose views in this instance are similar to those of Saadawi, sees Islamists ("fundamentalists") as the enemy, although it is difficult to understand where either of them gets their information about Islamists—certainly not by surveying Islamist sources. By directing much of their invective against the disempowered, oppositional Islamists of their home countries and in the Arab world, Mernissi and Saadawi play right into the hands of repressive Arab regimes and established world powers.

In a context that viewed the feminisms of the Arab world as tainted by their seeming alliance with imperialism, Islamists provided another model. Early Islamists (i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood, which was established in 1927 in Egypt and then spread to Syria, Sudan, Jordan, and Iraq with its auxiliaries for women) as well as the independent Muslim Women's Organization, founded by Zaynab al Ghazālī in Egypt in 1936, made significant breaks with tradition. The model proposed by the Islamists for women in the 1950s and 1960s was certainly more liberating than traditionalism, but it was also a defensive reaction against the colonial cultural assault and then feminism's frontal attack on traditional values. As a result, the distinction between Islamists and traditionalists was initially blurred. Islamists were dismissed, then as now, as reactionary and obscurantist, and the fact that they held out a third alternative was overlooked.

Yet the distinction between Islamists and mere defenders of the traditional patriarchal order is important, for that is what drew many women into Islamist ranks. The fact is that Islamists provided a more viable and a more accessible kind of liberation for the masses of women than that provided by the various secularist, nationalist, and leftist feminisms. The primary stress of Islamists on educating women, especially in religious subjects, for example, gave women access to the only kind of authority that could override patriarchal authority in traditional settings. Receiving a religious education made it possible for women to enter Islamist circles, to gain the self-esteem lacking in their traditional counterparts, and to

acquire the confidence needed to put some limits on the power of their fathers and husbands. For example, they rediscovered their rights to marry by consent, to negotiate nuptial contracts, to receive their own dowry (*mahr*), to pray in the mosques, to be respected in their own right by their children and families, and to have a life of their own and a sense of self. The opinions of pious wives and religious mothers carried more weight in Islamist families than in traditional ones. As women raised in Islamist families sought to marry men with a similar religious commitment, they were likely to be more assertive in the marriage negotiations and were not as likely to be burdened with alcoholic or gambling husbands as were traditional women. The birth of daughters in Islamist families was not treated with the dismay such an event generated in traditionalist circles. One concrete example of the difference between Islamists and traditionalists is the fact that many Sudanese Islamists, to the shock and resistance of traditionalist members of their extended families, began opposing the custom of female clitoridectomy decades ago.[14]

Also, recent studies have finally acknowledged the physical and ideological differences between traditional veiling and the veiling of Islamist women. Homa Hoodfar, for instance, is among those researchers who have noted that the "reveiling" of young Islamist women in contemporary Egypt is a strategy that gives them more—not less—access to the public domain. In other words, it is not a retreat into the patterns of seclusion that accompanied traditional veiling but a means of consolidating those aspects of Islamic values that are most advantageous to these women.[15] Another important factor that should be noted is that Islamists threw themselves into charitable and social work from the very beginning of their movement in Egypt and elsewhere. In this way, they provided the health care and other services needed by the urban and rural poor. This demonstration of compassion for the neglected sectors of society drew many women and men toward Islamists as an alternative to the crumbling institutions of traditionalism and the government's bureaucracy. Also, as Sudanese Islamist Su'ād al Fātiḥ remarks, social work was an accessible path by which Islamist women could enter the arena of public and political work, for it was often based on female house-to-house networking and established grass-roots connections between women.[16]

On the other hand, the Islamist vision for the roles of women was narrow and restricted when compared to that of the Arab women's liberation movement. In addition, it was preoccupied in battling what it saw as threats to the Muslim family as well as the real injustices of the authoritarian regimes that imposed these reforms. This preoccupation drove Islamists into a reactionary phase, in which they campaigned against some of the advances that women had made, as if these advances were un-Islamic. Rachid al Ghanouchi, a leading Tunisian Islamist, describes how, during the 1970s, Islamists in his country betrayed their poverty of vision by objecting to women working outside the home and to coeducation, defending polygamy as if it were some sort of religious duty instead of an exceptional remedy, encouraging women to satisfy themselves with

a minimal education, and opposing every relationship between men and women that was not one of marriage or kinship. Such campaigns were a distortion of Islamic values and priorities, Ghanouchi concludes.[17] In some Arab countries, Islamists eventually overcame their defensive stands against feminism and began to expand their outlook on gender roles, a development that will now be explored in some detail.

The Range of Islamist Positions on Gender

The first step in producing a clearer understanding of the significance of Islamist views of women is acknowledging that Islamists are not one static and unitary group. It follows, therefore, that there is diversity and development in their positions on women. Three trends can be characterized as comprising the range of Islamist positions on gender roles. I will call them, for lack of better terms, conservative, extremist, and reformist.

Early Islamists were mostly conservative as regards the role of women. While they differed from traditionalists in respecting women as individuals and as equal souls, and in the other ways that I have mentioned, when it came down to lifestyle they looked much the same: the best place for women was at home, where they were to function in the supportive roles of wife and mother. Allowances were made, however, for exceptional circumstances. Ḥasan al Bannā, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, addressed women as well as men in his drive to awaken a sense of personal religious consciousness, which would then be used to construct the Muslim individual who would build the Muslim family and the Muslim society. He established an auxiliary group for women, the Muslim Sisterhood, to pursue the general aim of reforming the individual Muslim, the family, and the society. However, one cannot simply classify al Bannā as a conservative, for he laid the groundwork upon which later reformists would draw.

Even in the early decades of the Islamic movement, there was some de facto diversity among Islamists. He himself worked closely with a woman: Zaynab al Ghazālī. In her memoirs, this popular Islamist activist details her work with the organization's top decision makers, her activist role in the 1950s and 1960s, and the torture she suffered in Nasser's prisons because of it.[18] Moreover, an Egyptian Islamist published a book in 1952 asserting that women had a right to political participation, which included voting and running for office. The book became part of the Muslim Brotherhood's teaching curriculum.[19]

However, at that time the conservative view remained predominant. Conservative Islamists subscribed to the idea of separate spheres: men and women were equal in worth, but were created for different and separate work in life. In practice, that meant that women were always to be under the authority of a male in the home. Education was to make women better wives and mothers. Such conservative Islamists as Syed and Quṭb and Mawdūdī limited their vision of a woman's central role to educating the children. While women were not forbidden to work outside the home

if necessity forced them to do so, conservative Islamists made a point of discouraging their entry into the labor force.

Likewise, conservatives do not regard politics as a suitable realm for women. For example, Mawdūdī, who founded India's Jam'at-i Islāmī in 1947, believed that women were confined to the private sphere and excluded from holding public office. Muṣṭafā Sibā'ī, founder of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, wrote that not only would women's involvement in politics cause them to neglect their wifely and motherly roles, but it would involve too much mixing of the sexes. Writing in the mid-1950s, he was quick to point out that even the most advanced country on earth (Switzerland) did not allow women to vote.[20] Islamists in Kuwait opposed women's suffrage as recently as the 1980s, although even they have since relented.

The majority of Islamists in the early decades of the Islamic movement adhered to the conservative position. Although it can still be found today, its parameters have shifted. For example, hardly anyone in the Muslim Brotherhood disputes a woman's right to vote, and the conservative position is becoming less prominent among mainstream Islamists in many countries. However, the conservative position on gender retains some influence in the Islamic movement.[21] The consequences of conservative Islamist views on women include female dependency, a lack of physical mobility, and a reduced capacity to negotiate the conditions of her life—all of which encourage more serious oppressive conditions. Dependency and a lack of options leave women vulnerable to the abuse of their rights.

Ironically, because there is a normative belief in respect for women in Islamist households, the consciousness of Islamist men and women as regards gender-based oppression in society is retarded. Conservative Islamists tend to respond by personalizing the issue in order to deny it: "My wife is happy. I don't beat my daughter" or "My father encourages me to study in the university. My parents treat me as well as my brothers." More importantly, because the conservative view does not prioritize investigation of the self-identified concerns of women, such crucial issues as the problem of domestic violence against women become nonissues. It is not so much that conservative Islamists participate actively and blatantly in the personal persecution of women—in fact, in this regard they may have a better record than society at large—but that they do not actively seek justice for all women. Their women's agenda has been defensive and superficial, reactive rather than proactive, and therefore complicit with the oppressive forces of their societies. This is inconsistent with Islamic principles, for the abuse of women is unjust, and one must take a strong stand against injustice no matter who the victim may be.

A second position is that of some small but noisy extremist Islamic groups that dot the landscape in the Middle East, such as Egypt's Jihad and al Jamā'ah al Islāmīyah, whose adherents have a narrow, literalist grasp of Islamic texts. On gender, as on many other issues, their thinking is defensive, reactive, and underdeveloped. They also generally see separate

spheres as divinely ordained, with women belonging in the private sphere and men in the public, but then carry it to the extreme. Although they make little intellectual contribution to the Islamist cause and are of minor numerical significance, they attract a disproportionate amount of media attention, for they engage in radical activities, including terrorist acts, and because the government-controlled local media and the international media play them up to exaggerate the so-called Islamic "threat."

The third trend is what might be termed a liberalizing or reformist Islamic position. In the 1970s, some Islamists began a serious reexamination of the dominant conservative position. They concluded that the inclusion of women in all facets of the political process was entirely consistent with Islam, that Islam does not require strict segregation of the sexes, and that much of the conservative position was based on custom rather than on the absolute principles of Islam. This ideological shift had the effect of opening the organizational structures of some groups to women, the Islamists of Sudan and Tunisia being the earliest. It was an important step in which many Islamists finally recognized the necessity of a clear break with traditional gender ideology and began to articulate a different vision.

For example, in 1973 Ḥasan al Turābī, prominent leader of the Sudanese Islamists, circulated a paper entitled "Women in Islam and Muslim Society" for discussion within party ranks. Women had already been included in all ranks of the Sudanese Brotherhood (later known as the Islamic National Front) since its early days in the 1950s. This paper, which laid down the theoretical basis of the reformist approach to gender relations, endorsed unequivocally a fully participatory role for women in politics and in every other sphere of society and declared that traditional restrictions on women's freedoms had nothing to do with Islam. It was published for the general public only in 1991, and by then gave voice to what many in the mainstream were thinking.

During the 1980s, more and more leading Islamists raised their voices in favor of the increased participation of women and a revision of conservative thinking on the whole gender issue. Specific circumstances encouraged such a rethinking. First, existing regimes experienced crises of confidence at the exact time that Islamists were gaining in popularity. This caused Islamists to relax their overly defensive postures and to reconsider the hotly debated gender issue in a calmer manner. Second, the number of women within Islamist ranks increased during these years. Rather than standing still and waiting for permission, Rachid al Ghanouchi states:

> Tunisian Islamist women jumped into the action and began to contest the restrictions on women, demanding more input . . . . We began to ask ourselves sheepishly, to what extent does our movement express Islam's approach to women, and to what extent have we freed ourselves from the residue of the era of decline and from our reactions against the Bourgibian degeneracy?"[22]

Third, this was a decade in which many Middle Eastern regimes (i.e., Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Sudan) loosened their authoritarian grip and allowed some democratic participation. For the first time, Islamists had the opportunity to campaign openly, run candidates, develop platforms, and compete against other parties, parties that featured male and female supporters. Islamists realized rather suddenly that they needed women's votes. This caused them to search the Qur'an and hadith literature for answers. To their amazement, an actual reading of the texts showed that Islam's position was really much more flexible than that presented by the conservatives for so many years. "Honorable sister," a campaign flyer for the Islamic movement candidates in Jordan's 1989 parliamentary elections announces, "all of the problems and challenges are burdens not for men alone nor for women alone. They are concerns and burdens that require the cooperation of all sincere men and women." "Virtuous sister," it continues, "you stand today before the trial . . . Let your decision to choose the strong and trustworthy be made out of awareness and conviction . . . for it is a solemn trust . . . ."[23]

The 1980s and 1990s saw several ground-breaking milestones in the gender debate. In 1989, Muḥammad al Ghazālī, a reknowned Islamist scholar (no relation to Zaynab al Ghazālī), published a book that boldly challenged the methodoloy used by conservatives to interpret basic Islamic texts. Entitled *al Sunnah al Nabawīyah bayn Ahl al Fiqh wa Ahl al Ḥadīth*, it focused on those verses and hadiths that the conservatives interpreted as excluding women from positions of authority. The author asserted that some authentic juristic interpretations of Islamic law allow women to serve in any public capacity—as judges, ambassadors, cabinet members, and rulers.[24] The book provoked intense debate. Many Gulf-state scholars published outraged responses, while Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto reportedly ordered it translated into Urdu. Al Ghazālī was very visible among those Egyptian Islamists who supported the right of Saudi women to drive, in 1991, in defiance of current Saudi practice. While the driving protest and its suppression in Saudi Arabia was reported widely as evidence of what Islamists held in store for women, al Ghazālī's response, and those of Islamists like him, was ignored by the western media. A 1990 collection of his essays on women, *Qaḍāyah al Mar'ah bayn al Taqālīd al Rakīdah wa al Wafīdah*, continues the attack on traditionalism and understandings of Islam that uphold oppressive customs.

Another breakthrough in the reformist shift in Islamist gender positions was the 1990 fatwa of the Egyptian scholar Yūsuf al Qaraḍāwī, one of the most respected leaders of moderate Islamists, in which he said that women could seek parliamentary offices, be judges, and issue fatwas with the same authority as men. Commenting on the Queen of Sheba (mentioned in the Qur'an) and other female rulers, he stated that "many of them were more astute and competent in politics and administration than many of the males—I won't call them men—who rule Arabs and Muslims today."[25] He cautions, however, that women in such positions should still abide by Islamic manners and should not forsake their husband, children, and home.

Also in 1990, 'Abd al Ḥalīm Abū Shaqqah published a four-volume work, *Taḥrīr al Mar'ah fī 'Aṣr al Risālah*, that immediately became influential in setting new parameters for the gender debate. This was an exhaustive, comprehensive review of all of the primary Islamic texts on the issue that would clear the path for a reform that was, for Islamists, radical.

That women can hold office is no longer disputed within mainstream Islamist thought. Only the position of "imam of the world community of Muslims"—which is, right now, a theoretical office in any case—is still excluded by most Islamists. Ma'mūn al Hudaybī, official spokesperson of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, concurred that women could hold office when I interviewed him last year. In addition, the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood released a statement to this effect in March 1994. The secretary-general of Jordan's Islamic Action Front, Iṣḥāq al Farḥān, said that his group believes in the legitimacy of, and the need for, women's participation at all levels. In a personal interview, he added that there were twelve women members among the founders of the Islamic Action Front and that just recently they had admitted a woman to the decision-making council. "We are open-minded," he said about including women in the political process, "but we admit that we have yet to follow through on this in practice."[26]

The problem is that all three types of attitudes toward gender are circulating among Islamists, a situation that sends mixed messages to observers of political Islam. For example, Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS [its French acronym]), which swept local and parliamentary elections in 1990 and 1991, contains elements of all three trends. Due to the views of its conservative members, however, the FIS has antagonized secular Algerian feminists to such a degree that many endorse the government's brutal military repression that continues to be directed against it. Although Islamists disagree about the extent of women's participation, even the minimum parameters of this variation do not warrant the kind of alarmist reaction found in the international media. This group is held up to higher standards than the FLN-backed government that suppresses it. As 'Azīzah al Hibrī testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs:

> FIS has issued a statement guaranteeing equal status to men and women. On the other hand, the present Algerian government continues to espouse a medieval patriarchal interpretation of Islamic law.[27]

The international reaction to the FIS is based on the long-standing orientalist tradition of deploying the cause of women liberation as a weapon to justify intervention, repression, and sanctions against Islamic challengers to the established order.

Women's Participation under Islamists in Practice

Despite the ideological shift favoring the inclusion of women, in practice women's participation in the highest decision-making bodies of Islamist organizations has been very limited, except in Sudan and Tunisia. This participation has existed mostly in the form of auxiliary groups for women, ultimately answering to male leadership, or in the form of individual women whose strength of personality has pushed them to the top, such as Egypt's Zaynab al Ghazālī. Recently, modest steps have been taken to include women in the decision-making councils of Islamist organizations, in Algeria's Hamas and Jordan's Islamic Action Front, for example. Islamic groups in Tunisia and Sudan are exceptional in that they have gone furthest in integrating women. Leaders of the Tunisian Islamic Tendency Movement have made a concerted effort to develop leadership from the ranks of women members. For example, Ghanouchi asserts that in order to foster the emergence of women leaders along the models of the early Muslims 'Ā'ishah, Fāṭimah, Khadījah, and Umm Salamah, affirmative action should be taken to ensure women a minimum number seats in Parliament. One indication of women participation in the Tunisian Islamic movement is that government sweeps of activist ranks have produced many women prisoners. Their abuse and torture has been documented in numerous human rights agency reports.

As Islamist women become more assertive, a self-directed women's movement among them is beginning to gather momentum. Encouraged by all the scholarly reinterpretation of basic Islamic texts, women themselves are beginning to take part in this reinterpretation. "I declare myself an Islamist, but this does not mean that I accept the dominant discourse about women inside the Islamist movement," says Heba Ra'uf Ezzat, who typifies this new energy.[28] Ezzat teaches political science at Cairo University and writes for an Islamist newspaper. Her research on political theory refutes the public–private dichotomy so central to most Islamist gender ideology.

In Sudan, the Islamic movement has integrated women in its ranks to a greater degree than Islamic movements in any other country in the Arab world. Sudanese Islamist women also entered the political arena quite early, and at first had to overcome the same kind of conservatism and conformity to tradition found among Islamists elsewhere. The Islamic Liberation Movement included women from its inception in 1949: Fāṭimah Talib, Su'ād al Fātiḥ, and other women rose to prominence among Islamists.[29] Simultaneously, Fāṭimah Ibrāhīm was rising to prominence as a feminist among Sudanese communists. In fact, Sudanese Islamist leader Ḥasan al Turābī admits that the communists' success in recruiting women challenged Islamists to come up with a better approach to the issue of gender.

What happened in the 1980s in other countries happened in Sudan in the 1960s: Democratization experiences forced Islamists to reexamine and reform their attitudes about gender.[30] By the mid-1960s, as the first wave of women graduates emerged and sought jobs, it was obvious to Islamists in Sudan that women were going to play a public role in society. Islamists came out strongly for women votes in 1965. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a great deal of soul-searching and text-searching among Sudanese Islamists, and they emerged with the firm conviction that the full integration of women in politics would produce the best Islamic society. This was not merely an intellectual revolution; it resulted, in the mid-1970s, in the desegregation of the movement's parallel organizational structures for men and women and their consolidation into one organizational structure with equal participation for women.

By the time of the next democratization experiment in 1986, the National Islamic Front was able to send two women to Parliament, Su'ād al Fātiḥ and Ḥikmat Ḥasan Syed Aḥmad. No other party, including the communists, was successful in sending women to parliamentary office in that election. "Thus," al Turābī remarks,

> the Movement was able to use existing social developments to raise women's religious consciousness, and to use the strength of religion to promote women's liberation, so that it really engendered a remarkable liberating phenomenon, one of the most radical developments in the social history of the Sudanese woman.[31]

Both Islamist Su'ād al Fātiḥ and communist Fāṭimah Ibrāhīm were regarded with suspicion by traditional elements of society. However, al Fātiḥ was armed with religious knowledge that gave her authority when she upset traditional powers. Therefore, she and other Islamist women could count upon Islamist men to be supportive as she challenged traditional practices oppressive to women, even on goals that they share with feminists. As Sumayyah Abū Kashāwah, current head of the Sudanese Women's Union, put it:

> The disagreement between us and the feminists is a disagreement over hostility to men, that men are the reason behind all misfortunes, that men must not have any part in women's work. But yes, there are things we agree about: the betterment of women, educating women, raising the consciousness of women about issues of concern to women, supporting women in realizing the rights we have on paper.[32]

In 1989 there was a military coup in Sudan, after which Islamists shared power with the newly installed military government. The United States and other western powers, then as now, opposed the regime and supported secessionist groups waging civil war in the south. Media

reports claimed that *ḥijāb* is being enforced brutally and that the genital mutilation of women is somehow encouraged by the regime because of its Islamist leanings.

What the media do not mention is that the regime has installed a woman judge on the supreme court, that 10 percent of the appointed Parliament is female, that there are three female ministers on the state level, and that the government has established quotas to raise the number of women in office. It is true that such offices are not filled democratically, but that makes the regime's determination to increase these figures even more clear, since they do not have to appease constituents. They give women military training in the Popular Defense Forces, something that has shocked the traditionalists in Sudan.

Abū Kashāwah, secretary-general of the Women's Union, stated in an interview in Khartoum that the two items foremost on the Women's Union agenda are women's literacy and women's economic self-sufficiency, and described in detail the programs the Union administers to promote them. She took pride in the fact that women made up over 50 percent of acceptances at Khartoum University, the best school in Sudan, and that labor guilds have been opened to women for the first time. The government has begun implementing a five-point plan to eliminate clitoridectomy, the pre-Islamic custom of mutilating a girl's genitals by cutting off part or all of the clitoris in an attempt to diminish the sexual drive. No government directive gives *ḥijāb* the force of law, and one government directive was issued specifically to disown and discourage a group of private citizens calling themselves Jamā'at al Amr bi al Ma'rūf wa al Nahī 'an al Munkar (Group for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil) from harassing women who do not dress in the traditional Islamic manner. The nightmare vision of Islamists in power is one of absolute patriarchs imprisoning women in their houses, thereby making them totally dependent upon their fathers or husbands, and stripping them of all access to economic self-sufficiency, forbidding them education, forcing them to cover, endorsing violence against them, and denying their basic human rights under the guise of Islam.

Yet anyone who stops for a moment to actually listen to Islamists will hear something quite different. Even at the minimum, conservative Islamists believe in the equality of women and men in the sight of God, in education and literacy for women, in women's equal access to the religious knowledge that produces Islamic jurisprudence, in some marital rights for women, and in women's right to an independent economic identity. Other Islamists, who are gaining predominance, go much further. They distinguish between tradition, with its many oppressive practices, and the basics of Islamic law, which they see as a valid blueprint for the radical reform of women's current conditions.

It is time for the secular intelligentsia to stop dismissing Islamists as fundamentalist yokels and acknowledge them as bearers of serious proposals worthy of discussion and debate. Islamists see their blueprint as a compassionate alternative to the dilemma of Muslims caught in a moral

vacuum between stifling traditions and alienating imported secular feminisms. It offers much that the Arab women's movement also wants to accomplish, but, unaided by religion, has been unable to accomplish. The fact that many Islamists believe in the inclusion of women in every step of this reform is a crucial indication of their belief in the equality of women. The empowerment of women would ensure that this reform would emerge from men and women working together. However, ending the oppression of men and the double oppression of women also requires a democratic environment within these nations, as well as an equitable global environment that does not hold countries of the South up to a different standard. The national and international targeting of Islamists must stop. Western and Arab intellectuals at least should stop to consider whose interest they serve in directing their assault against powerless oppositional groups rather than against those who wield the economic, military, and political power that oppresses both men and women.

Although they have made important departures from tradition and conservative interpretations of Islam, Islamists have not yet integrated women at all levels, have not changed many conditions that oppress women, and have not empowered women to do so. They are still mired in outdated ideologies based on a false public–private dichotomy that has little inherently Islamic basis. Worse, they have not taken the lead in the world community in denouncing and changing the existing degradation of women. Islamists must begin to acknowledge that gender oppression exists, investigate empirically the specific conditions that create it in each local context, and prioritize in their agendas the task of transforming these conditions. Even the Sudanese Islamists, who have gone furthest in this direction, admit that they have not achieved parity between men and women. But then, as al Turābī remarked on his last visit to the United States, neither has American society, has it?

The task of developing alternative visions of a woman-affirming Islam calls for work from those who have a great investment in this issue, rather than from those for whom it is a cruise through an exotic locale or an opportunity for a high-profile career. It calls for work from Islamist women—and men—who are committed to such visions because of their spiritual beliefs in social justice and because they have to live—in their homes, their mosques, their towns, and finally, in their judgment before God—with the success or failure of this task. As Heba Ra'uf Ezzat declares:

> It is time to launch a new women's liberation movement—an Islamic one, not only for the benefit of Muslim women and Muslim societies but for all women everywhere.[33]

Endnotes

1. For example, Judith Tucker describes how mahr and kin networks gave women negotiating footholds in their marriages in nineteenth-century Palestine. See her article in "Ties That Bound: Women and Family in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Nablus," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, eds. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale, 1991).

2. See Carl Petry's "Class Solidarity versus Gender Gain: Women as Custodians of Property" and Jonathan P. Berkey's "Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period," in Keddie and Baron, *Women in Middle Eastern History*.

3. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale, 1992), 44.

4. Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 167.

5. These three examples are events in the life of the protagonist of Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed, 1975).

6. In Nawal el Saadawi, *God Dies by the Nile*, tr. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed, 1985).

7 From an interview with Fatima Mernissi by Ann Louise Bardach in "Tearing off the Veil: Back to the Dark Ages," *National Times* (January 1994).

8 Cf. Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992).

9. In Fatima Mernissi, "Muslim Women and Fundamentalism," *Middle East Report* (July–August 1988): 10.

10. Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 179.

11. Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy*, 4.

12. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Women, Culture, and Society: A Reader*, ed. Barbara Balliet (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1992; rev. 1994), 244.

13. Transcript of her remarks in a National Endowment for Democracy discussion, *Civil Society* 3, no. 31 (October 1994): 13.

14. Ḥasan al Turābī, public address to the North American Council for Muslim Women, Alexandria, VA, 13 May 1992.

15. "Return to the Veil: Personal Strategy and Public Participation in Egypt," in *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Ideology*, eds. Nanneke Redclift and M. Thea Sinclair (London: Routledge, 1991).

16. Interview, *al Irshād* (April 1990): 26.

17. Rashid al Ghanouchi, *al Mar'ah bayn al Qur'ān wa Wāqi' al Muslimīn* (Tunisia: Maṭba'at Tūnis, n.d.), 19.

18. Zaynab al Jubaylī al Ghazālī, *Ayyām min Ḥayātī* (Cairo: Dār al Shurūq, 1982).

19. al Baḥī al Khūlī, *al Mar'ah wa al Mujtama'* (Cairo: 1952).

20. In Mawdūdī, *al Mar'ah bayn al Fiqh wa al Qānūn*.

21. For a criticism of the conservative Islamist position, see Mohja Kahf, "Al Mushārakah al Siyāsīyah li al Mar'ah fī al Ḥarakah al Islāmīyah," in *al Ḥarakah al Islāmīyah fī al Ẓil Taḥāwulāt al Dawlīyah wa Ḥarb al Khalīj*, ed. Aḥmad Yūsuf (Chicago: United Association for Studies and Research, 1991).

22. al Ghanouchi, *al Mar'ah*, 20.

23. *Risālah ilā al Ukht al Muslimah* (Amman: Islamic Movement Candidates Campaign, 1989) (pamphlet).

24. Muḥammad al Ghazālī, *al Sunnah al Nabawīyah bayn Ahl al Fiqh wa Ahl al Ḥadīth* (Lebanon: Dār al Shurūq, 1989), 52.

25. Yūsuf al Qaraḍāwī, *Fatāwā Mu'āṣirah*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dār al Wafā', 1993), 388.

26. Personal interview, Amman, Jordan, January 1993. See also Iṣḥāq Farḥān, "al Islāmīyūn wa al Ma'sirah al Dīmūqrātīyah fī al Urdun," *Qira'āt Siyāsīyah* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1994).

27. "Algeria: The Case for Democracy." Testimony of Azizah Y. al Hibri, Professor of Law, The University of Richmond, to be entered into the record of Hearings on the Crisis

in Algeria, held on March, 1994, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, p. 5.

28. Interview in "Voices," *Middle East Report* (November–December 1994): 26.

29. Sawsan Salīm Ismāʿīl, *al Juthūr al Tārīkhīyah li al Ḥarakah al Nisāʾīyah al Sudānīyah* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1990).

30. See, for example, Ḥasan Turābī, *al Ḥarakah al Islāmīah fī al Sudān* (Casablanca: al Furqān, 1991).

31. al Turābī, *al Ḥarakah,* 139-40. When I interviewed him in 1993, he took pride in the achievement of Sudanese Islamists, both men and women, in theorizing and implementing an integrated role for women.

32. Interview with Sumayyah Abū Kashāwah, *Middle East Affairs Journal* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 70.

33. Heba Ra'uf Ezzat, Interview in "Voices," *Middle East Report* (November–December 1994): 27.