Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Middle East Project

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Openings for and the Constraints on Women's Political Participation in the Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

HALEH ESFANDIARI

As part of its series on gender issues in the Middle East, the Woodrow Wilson Center's Middle East Project held, on October 2 and 3, 2001, a two-day conference on "Middle Eastern Women on the Move: Openings for and the Constraints on Women's Political Participation in the Middle East."

Since its inception, the Middle East Project has devoted a substantial number of meetings to issues relating to women's rights in Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries. The series hosted speakers from Egypt, Syria, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Afghanistan and Iran to talk on women's issues in their countries. Thanks to the spread of technology and especially the Internet, the Project was able to communicate with a great number of women in countries of the regions by putting the presentations delivered at the Center on its website. The idea for this two-day conference resulted from discussions we at the Wilson Center had with Pamela Pelletreau from the Center for Global Peace at American University in Washington DC; her input was invaluable.

The first day of the two-day October meeting consisted of three panels. The first panel examined the impact of globalization on women's empowerment. Panels two and three examined both the experience of Iranian women over the last two decades and the road that lies ahead for them. The panels on the second day of the meeting looked at women's issues in a number of Middle Eastern countries. We decided to schedule these alongside the panels on Iran because of the impact the Iranian women's movement had on other Middle Eastern countries, especially since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

This publication contains some of the presentations made at the conference. We left the format of the articles to the speakers, and some added footnotes to their articles. Dr. Azar Nafisi presented comments still a work in progress, and chose not to have her remarks published at this time.

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Over the last two decades, gender issues have gradually moved to the center of the debate regarding the nature of democratization and civil society in Middle Eastern countries. The debate varies from country to country and society to society. While in Egypt and Iran women have a much longer history of emancipation and enfranchisement, in other regional states, women's suffrage and election to legislative bodies or city councils are either very recent or the issues are still being debated. In some countries women's suffrage does not necessarily mean that women are elected to parliament. In Jordan, for example, women were enfranchised in 1952. Yet in the last Jordanian elections not a single woman was elected to parliament. By contrast there are 26 women deputies in the Syrian parliament. In the Iranian parliament 13 out of the 270 members of parliament are women. In most Persian Gulf states women don't have the right to vote. Iran's neighbors, Pakistan and Turkey, have already each had a woman prime minister. But with the exception of Israel, no Middle Eastern country has had a woman prime minister. Jordan and Egypt have women in the cabinet, but Iran, which already had women ministers thirty years ago, is yet to appoint a woman to the cabinet under the Islamic Republic. Does this mean the region is lagging behind when it comes to gender issues and women's empowerment? Are the changes taking place—only very slowly?

Despite the efforts of the United Nations and other international agencies to ameliorate the social, legal and economic status of women in developing countries, despite the various United Nations conventions regarding women, and despite numerous international conferences on women which adopted proposals of action, women are still not being treated as equals in most Middle Eastern countries. Women activists in the Middle East, like their counterparts in other countries, have sought to use international conventions dealing with women and the resolutions and platforms of actions regarding women's rights approved at various international conferences to bring pressure on their governments to alleviate the discrimination against women in their societies.

In the last two decades, the change in the nature of the debate over gender issues in Middle Eastern countries is nevertheless striking. We may still be talking about the same issues, but the women's movements, the

leaders of these movements, and the women non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not the same. On the contrary, the women are much more active, vocal, and fearless. These changes derive from the imperative necessity women in Middle Eastern countries feel to break with restrictive traditions more openly and fight discriminatory laws and customs that have confined them to their homes, excluded them from society, and marginalized them. The drive for empowerment, leadership positions and access to full citizenship is at the forefront of the agenda of activist women in these countries.

Take the example of Iran. Thirty years ago women activists in Iran aspired to political, economic, social, legal and civil rights for women. Today, women activists in Iran and in the region are pushing for the same goals – and more. As before, they seek now full citizenship rights, but they are no longer satisfied with incremental change in the law. Their history has been one step forward and two steps back, or two steps forward, one step back, depending on the political environment in the countries in the region. The history of the women's movement in the Middle East has been inseparable from internal political developments in individual countries. Reformist regimes provide women with a modest space while conservative, autocratic regimes try to exclude women from the public sphere and politics. But in the last decade, even conservative regimes reacting to pressure from women activists at home and abroad have been paying lip-service to the constructive role women can play in society.

Nevertheless, it is disheartening to note that, at the beginning of the new millennium in the Middle East, we are still discussing women's family rights, i.e. the right to divorce, child custody, and permission to work; the right of a woman to choose her place of domicile and her apparel; full citizenship rights; access to education, health care, and economic opportunities; and women's empowerment. We are still talking about honor killing, genital mutilation, and polygamy; and to top it all we now have the phenomenon of international trafficking of women.

Basically we are still grappling with the same problems that we have been addressing for the last five decades or longer. But women in the Middle East are moving. Women's issues are no longer discussed in isolation. They are part of the discussion on global issues.

There is another big difference with previous decades. The rate of literacy among Middle Eastern women is increasing at a phenomenal rate.

Today even the most conservative states in the region support education for girls. We may frown at segregated education, but segregated education draws girls from all strata of society into the classroom even from families uncomfortable with sending their girls to school.

Thanks to the spread of technology and instant communication among women's networks in the West and the Middle East, the plight of women and discrimination against them is immediately publicized. I describe this as an international gender lobbying and mobilization effort. Take the plight of women under the Taliban. Women organizations around the world did not allow the injustices committed against Afghan women to be forgotten. As soon as the Taliban government fell, the international community focused on how to re-integrate Afghan women into society and open up schools for girls barred from education under the Taliban. Women's organizations around the world today do not keep silent when women are stoned, flogged, or subjected to political and legal discrimination. The sheer volume of books and articles written on women in the Middle East attests to this.

When we discuss gender issues in the Middle East, the Islamic Revolution of Iran and its aftermath stand out. In the last two decades the relationship of Islamic law and women's rights and roles have become a dominant issue in the region. The Islamic revolution led to a revival of Islam but also to a revival of attention to issues related to women's rights. The people who came to power in Iran didn't know much about women's rights, the progress achieved by women in the previous decades in the country, or women's aspirations and demands. But they saw the mass of Iranian women actively participating, along with the men, in revolutionary protests and knew they could not ignore them—although they did their best to deflect their demands.

In order to put the presentations on Iran into context I will say a few words about where Iranian women were on the eve of the revolution. In 1979 when the revolution occurred Iranian women had made considerable progress. I am not talking only about an elite class of women—absolutely not. The women's movement in Iran was not an elitist movement, nor was it run by a group of light-headed, flaky, westernized women cut off from their roots, as alleged by many in and outside Iran. Both the generation of Iranian women's activists in the sixties and seventies, and the generation that came before them, comprised groups of ded-

icated women who fought for women's rights in an inhospitable environment. The male-dominated establishment was not ready or willing to share power. Women activists gave up interesting careers to devote their time to the women's movement.

Mahnaz Afkhami gave up teaching at Melli University; I left journalism; others gave up tenure as government employees or shared their time in private enterprises to work for the women's movement. These women were able to change a dormant, cautious women's movement, that nevertheless deserves a lot of praise for its pioneering work, into an active Women's Organization. One has to give credit to Mahnaz Afkhami, who in 1970 became the Secretary General of the Iranian Women's Organization, for launching the women's movement in the seventies.

On the eve of the revolution, the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) had numerous branches in the provinces of Iran, and each of these branches had a paid person as its director. The volunteers had paved the way for the professionals. The Women's Organization was a professional organization dealing with women's legal, social and educational problems and women's employment. The WOI was instrumental in drafting the Family Protection Law, which, among other rights, gave women the right to seek divorce and gain child custody. *(To this day, the Islamic Republic is debating the right of divorce and child custody for women)*. The WOI distributed an explanation of these laws in simple language among women of all classes and arranged free legal counseling for women at its centers across the country. The vocational classes and adult literacy classes run by the WOI centers for women were very popular, as were the day-care facilities and free family planning services. These centers were run by women and for women. They were always located in the less affluent parts of town and accessible to whomever wanted to visit them. In the provinces, centers run by local women were trusted by the inhabitants.

The changes for which the WOI pushed were not meant for a special class of women, as erroneously portrayed in the last two decades. Changes affecting women's rights had permeated to the less advantaged classes of the society. Let me give you an example. When a few months after the revolution the new government suspended the Family Protection Law – the law that gave women the right to divorce – it was women from the less affluent strata of society who started writing letters to the offices of leading clerics and to women members of parliament complaining about

the ease with which their husbands could divorce them. Don't forget that in the early days of the revolution the voices of professional, educated, working middle class women, and women who had held decision-making positions, were barely heard. Professional women were purged, silenced, or chose to keep a low profile. The torch was passed on to your average Iranian woman who had benefited from the legal changes, the day-care centers, the family planning counseling, and the push for economic independence made possible by the WOI.

These women didn't want to give up their rights. These women's demands awakened the revolutionary establishment to the power women could exert. We again saw a display of this *women's power* in the election of President Khatami in 1997, for whom women voted in great numbers. If we see Iranian women on the move today it is because they had a solid foundation on which to build. On the eve of the revolution we had women sitting in parliament and in the cabinet, and serving as ambassadors, deputy ministers, and directors-general of ministries. Women were serving in the literacy and health corps to fulfill their military service. They held decision-making positions in the provinces. They had access to education and employment. Women had the choice to wear what they wanted. Women could take their family disputes to Family Protection Courts and talk to women judges. Polygamy was virtually abolished. Husbands could no longer stop women from working. Family planning was encouraged. I am going through this list of pre-revolution achievements because I believe that had we not had women in positions of responsibility before the revolution, today we wouldn't see a woman vice-president, women in parliament, in ministries, in universities, in politics and in other venues.

But many shortcomings remained and women activists were aware of the discrepancies in the laws, and of the practices that favored men. Pre-revolution women activists were not ostriches with their heads stuck in the sand. Nor were the gains they made served to them on a platter. They fought hard for every little piece of legislation. There were discussions, fights, humiliations, and promises which were not kept. Finally, let me say that if any of the laws for which the WOI pushed was not in accordance with Islam, there was little chance it would even be considered let alone approved by the authorities. The WOI had to make sure that when a law regarding gender issues was presented it was *Islam proof*. Interestingly, the

women activists were criticized by those who thought that the women's movement was not going far or fast enough, as well by those who thought that women were too visible and threatening the fabric of the society.

The point I am trying to make is that in 1979 there was an awareness regarding women's issues, both among educated and less educated women. Because of this awareness the next generation of Iranian women activists was able to withstand the assaults on women's rights witnessed in the last two turbulent decades in Iran and to continue to fight for these rights.

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The Iranian panelists taking part in the October 2001 on Women in the Middle East reflected considerable generational and professional diversity and also diversity in outlook. Jaleh Shadi Talab, from Tehran University, discussed the seven year process of setting up a Women's Center at Tehran University, the first of its kind in a university in Iran. Golnar Mehran, from Al-Zahra University, an expert on education in Iran, discussed the impact of the expansion of higher education on women students and the ways in which women have resisted being pushed towards a female-oriented education. Mansoureh Ettehadieh, a director of Nashr-e-Tarikh-Iran publishing house, and Roza Eftekhari, a journalist for the women's magazine *Zanan*, talked about professional women in the publishing and newspaper business. Ettehadieh explained how and why, despite censorship, high cost and other perils in the publishing business in Iran, the number of women publishers in Iran has increased over the last two decades. Eftekhari used an account of the history of *Zanan* to show how a woman's magazine transformed itself into a feminist magazine and how the magazine overcame taboos to discuss the relationship between Islam and women's rights and other subjects.

Sussan Tahmasebi, an expert on women NGOs in Iran, discussed the development of NGOs as advocacy groups and their involvement in development efforts. Farideh Farhi, a political scientist at the University of Hawaii, talked about the role of women in the reformist movement in Iran and asked whether the reformist movement had lived up to its promises since Khatami came to power in 1998. Azar Nafisi, from Johns

Hopkins University, dealt with the role of women in the cultural sphere since the revolution, and demonstrated that, despite the efforts of the revolutionary regime, the continuity between the past and the present was not cut off. Women artists, like other women, refused to accept an invisible role and an "Islamization" of culture. Nayereh Tohidi, from California State University, Northridge, talked about Islamic Feminism and warned against any ideology that presents itself as the only accepted alternative to express women's demands. She argued that for the success of global Feminism, diversity is crucial. Valentine Moghadam, from Illinois State University, gave an overview of how Middle Eastern women have fared under globalization in its different dimensions. Mahnaz Afkhami, from the Women's Learning Partnership, presented opportunities opening to women thanks to the spread of technology, as long as it is harnessed wisely and does not widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Lilia Labidi, from the University of Tunis, Kathleen Kuehnast, from George Washington University, Diane Singerman, from American University, Philippa Strum, from the Woodrow Wilson Center, and Laurie King-Irani from the University of British Columbia, talked about the development of the concept of women's rights, women's participation in civil society and what the future might entail for women, respectively, in Tunisia, Central Asia, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan and Palestine.

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WOMEN, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

MAHNAZ AFKHAMI

The relationship between information, empowerment, and quality of life is becoming increasingly evident in the age of globalization. Sustained development, justice, and, consequently, peace depend largely on how the people of the world succeed in sharing in the production and consumption of knowledge, which increasingly depends on the production and distribution of information technology. To have information is to be empowered. With it, we can become participants in the developmental process, not only materially, but, more importantly, ethically and morally.

At the moment we are faced with an information divide – a digital divide – that arises from unequal access to information and knowledge and unequal capacity to produce and use the information and knowledge needed for development. The divide is economic, technological, political, and gender-related.

The 20th century witnessed a 100-fold increase in the income discrepancy between the poorest and the richest countries. Of the six billion population of the world today, 20 per cent, or 1.2 billion, live in extreme poverty, on less than $1 a day; 20 per cent lack access to safe drinking water; 40 per cent, or 2.4 billion, lack adequate sanitation; 20 per cent live in inadequate housing. Twenty-five per cent of the world's countries have less than one telephone per 100 people. Thirty per cent of children under five suffer from malnutrition.

In the 21st century, knowledge has taken the place of land in the age of agriculture and capital in the age of industry as the source of wealth. However, "the new wealth" is increasingly the property of a select few across the world. The United States has more computers than the rest of the world combined. A computer costs one month's salary of an average American compared with eight years' income of the average South Asian. South Asia, home to 23 per cent of the world's people, has less than one per cent of the Internet users. At the end of the 20th century, 90 per cent

of data on Africa was stored in Europe and the US. The United States, with a population close to the population of the Middle East, has 110 million computer users, the Middle East has two million, and of these two million only four per cent are women. 80 per cent of the web sites are in English with 10 per cent of the world's population as English speakers.

The divide is particularly gender-related. In the United States, where fundamental conditions are superior to most other countries, by the summer of 1998, women accounted for more than 40 per cent of the 42 million Internet users, up from 10 per cent just a few years before. However, computer science, in research, teaching, and production, remained essentially a male province.

In the developing countries, everyone's access to Information Communication Technology (ICT) is minimal. In many countries the problem is not simply poverty, but also government restriction. According to a 1999 Human Rights Watch report, censorship, restriction on access, and high prices stunt Internet growth in the Middle East, North Africa, and China, among others. In many countries information cannot be freely exchanged via the Internet. Authoritarian governments usually claim to protect the public from pornography or subversion. The claim of subversion is not too far off because there is nothing more conducive to mobilizing for democracy as free flow of information and unfettered contact among people. In the Islamic Republic of Iran and in Saudi Arabia, Internet hosts per 10 thousand people are 0.04 and 0.15 respectively; in Egypt the same ratio is 0.31. By contrast, in the United States the number of Internet hosts per 10 thousand people is 1,131.52. There are more hosts in Finland than all of Latin America and more in New York than Africa.

This does not bode well for the future of the peoples in the developing countries. Telecommunications, as a means of sharing information, is not simply a connection between people, but a link in the chain of the development process itself. The information revolution confronts countries with a major new equity issue, no longer only of wealth but also of information. Among the developing countries, the first to enter the information age will reap the greatest reward and likely set the agenda for those that must follow. Countries that are culturally or politically restrictive, temporize, or favor half-hearted solutions, are likely to face disastrous declines not only in investment and employment, but also in education and competitiveness. If a country fails to achieve widespread access to

information services, it will face a double hardship, lacking both information and economic opportunity.

An adequate national information infrastructure needs both the telecommunications networks and the strategic information systems necessary for widespread access to communications and information services. Deployment of this infrastructure is a task of many years and billions of dollars in most developing countries. It is possible only through the efficient functioning of national and international markets for financing, engineering, and management services, and an information-friendly environment, as a precondition for investments.

The problem, however, is more complicated than just a lack of access. To narrow the gap, it is necessary, but not sufficient to provide avenues to information and knowledge. It is just as critical to empower the people with appropriate educational, cognitive, and behavioral skills and tools to access information avenues efficiently and wisely; to acquire and internalize knowledge; to apply knowledge to develop personally as well as to achieve social and economic development; and to upgrade that knowledge continuously and systematically. We need a strategic consensus and systematic cooperation among international organizations, states, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector for the combination of material infrastructure and human component to succeed.

Reaching strategic consensus is a difficult but very important initial step toward an information economy. Just as important is the process by which consensus is reached. The information revolution creates new possibilities to attack vexing problems of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation with the potential to achieve unprecedented gains in economic and human development. It also poses a serious challenge to the people of good will who recognize the pitfalls of relying too much on the unfettered functions of the market, or, the natural goodness of human beings. There is a growing tendency in the United States and other wealthy technological societies to emphasize the virtue of philanthropy on the part particularly of those who have benefited by the technology revolution. We must, of course, encourage philanthropy in all manners and forms it takes. But, we must never forget that unless we forge a communal political consensus on the need for structured and persistent action that may involve some immediate foregoing of profit for an assurance of long term gain, we will not be able to achieve the goal of helping the

weak and the poor out of third class citizenship. This, unfortunately, constitutes the present reality. But, the possible, from which we must take heart, still remains. We must give it substance and form.

Clearly, there exists a tension between the real and the possible in the 21st century. The real is determined largely by significant advances in knowledge and knowledge industries that are, however, lodged in the social and cultural structures we have inherited from the past. In both developed and developing countries these structures are geared to values that privilege power, profit, and command. They do so not because those who are in control – almost always men – are intellectually false or morally wanting, but rather because they see the world through lenses that are constructed and provided by the system in which they succeed. Thus, reality almost always tends to self-perpetuate, not in the sense of standing still, but rather in the sense of shaping the possible to its needs.

The question, therefore, of who will participate in shaping the consensus is of great importance. In the past, men in governments and the private sector have been partners to these and similar endeavors. It is time now to focus on the role that women, who are the majority of the people on the earth, and have been largely excluded in the past, should play in the development process. This is indispensable if we seek a future that is different from the past. We need to create an information-friendly environment, characterized by coherent telecommunications reform and information policies. But our policies and laws should not only protect investment, intellectual property, and individual privacy, but also promote the right of women to participate in development and to partake of these protections. We need open and well-regulated information and communications markets, but also policies that enhance women's participation in these markets. We need education policies that favor a skilled labor force, but also a system that encourages women to become part of this labor force. We need effective regulatory and standard-setting institutions, but we need standards and regulations that are just and equitable for all. Such an environment supports availability, diversity, and low cost of information services and products, but also gears them to the cultural, socio-political, and economic needs of various communities, and within each community, to the special needs of the more disadvantaged members.

We have several examples of such policies to draw on. One example is the collaboration between Women's Learning Partnership and organiza-

tions in Afghanistan, Cameroon, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Turkey, and Uzbekistan where partners use information technology to produce culture relative, language relevant, and community created multi-media curricula for democracy and leadership training for Muslim women. Our work involves a process of interaction and dialogue that places the newest leadership development strategies within the framework of local cultural and linguistic conditions. It encourages leadership styles that are democratic, consensus based, and horizontal. It promotes the creation of learning partnerships that are open, flexible, and participatory. The project involves capacity building for the use of technology not as an end, but as a tool for sustainable development. Underlying the program is the supposition that we all will be richer if we partake of the diversity of human experience and wisdom across the globe. If we fail to meet the challenge of reaching out and including all, we will likely end up living in a world unworthy of the best and most humane in our vision of the future.

The task of establishing such collaborative efforts falls on not one but all of the partners for development. Fortunately, women across the world have become increasingly able to assume the responsibility their participation in promoting development, democracy, and peace places before them. Encouraged by the four United Nations World Conferences on women that took place in the last decades of the 20th century, women have become much better organized nationally and internationally. In many developing countries, including in Muslim societies where they face some of the harshest gender-related laws and practices anywhere, there now exists a nearly critical mass of educated women ready to participate in making and executing policy and to act as intermediaries for raising consciousness and organizing the grassroots. Information technology has changed the possibilities for communication, not simply in terms of facilitating the imparting of knowledge from one group to another, but, more importantly, in terms of allowing all groups to take part in creating knowledge. This is a way of saying that, as we move into the 21st century, women will increasingly have to take on the responsibility of defining the dimensions of the "good life," that is, a plentiful but also just and equitable life, as they become players in a world whose parameters are determined by forces not only beyond individual control, but, sometimes, seemingly beyond national control.

ZANAN: TRIALS AND SUCCESSES OF A FEMINIST MAGAZINE IN IRAN

ROZA EFTEKHARI

I would like to share with you some of my experiences with the contemporary women's press in Iran. This experience is, of course, personal, first because it is mine and second because I narrate it. However, if this were a purely personal experience, I would not have presented it to you here. I think my experience can, in a representative or symbolic way, be reflective of the experiences of a generation of Iranian women who have gone through a religious revolution, witnessed an all-encompassing and destructive war, and struggled for their rights. In this process, they have come to know themselves better than before. They have shed their more sensitive skin and developed a tougher one. It is true that my experience has occurred within the context of the publication of a women's magazine called *Zanan*, but I assure you that it is not merely a "press" experience. We were born with *Zanan*, and when we learned to write in it we found our voice. Now we have reached an age when we can look back and say that we went through the life of a nation with this publication. My talk is divided into three main parts. In the first part, I will give a short background of the magazine *Zanan*. In the second part, I will talk about the content of the journal. In the third part, I discuss its achievements.

THE SHAPING OF *ZANAN*

Zanan was the first independent journal after the Iranian Revolution that specifically dealt with women's issues. It went into production in February 1992 with Shahla Sherkat as the publisher and managing director. Before publishing *Zanan*, Sherkat was the managing director of the governmental weekly *Zan-e Rouz* or "Today's Woman." This weekly was aimed specifically at a female readership and continued under the guidance of Kayhan publishing house. The post-revolutionary ideal women that *Zan-e Rouz* offered its readership was a Muslim woman, wearing a chador and

carrying a gun. It addressed a particular type of religious woman, had no interest in attracting the readership of culturally and socially influential and educated women, religious or non-religious, and did not elicit written material from them. Only women who were accepted by the regime were given a platform in the magazine, which explains why this publication is still around. The journal is controlled by the conservatives.

Sherkat's eight-year presence in Kayhan publishing house as a managing director ended with an important political event in June 1991. The post-war factional conflicts that were beginning to intensify in this period led to the wholesale purge of many people from Kayhan who were considered to be the opponents of the conservative faction. Sherkat was the only woman from the editorial group who was pushed out. The rest, all men, who later turned into public figures collectively known as "religious intellectuals," all began to develop non-governmental and independent publications of their own.

Sherkat had already a license to publish the monthly *Zanan* before she was pushed out of *Zan-e Rouz*. In her own words, she was clearly already unhappy with the cliché and formulated representation of women in *Zan-e Rouz*. Yet, she did not see herself as financially capable of producing an independent journal. The men who were pushed out of Kayhan, however, were in a better position. Mostafa Rokh-sefat, Reza Tehrani, and Mashalla Shamsolvaeazzin together began to publish *Kiyan*, the monthly magazine, in November 1991, focusing on the ideas of religious intellectuals in general, and Abdolkarim Soroush in particular. And after a short while they suggested to Sherkat to start an independent journal. This offer was more out of political calculations than concern with women's issues per se. Male religious intellectuals really did not believe that there was such a thing as the "women's question" in Iran. They believed that if their general project of rationalizing and modernizing religion was successful, the problems of women, along with many other social problems, would be solved. However since political and intellectual conflicts were heating up, the starting of new publications in sympathy with the reformist ideas of religious intellectuals was considered important both politically and culturally.

Sherkat, however, had another concern. She, who was the only woman in the religious intellectual circles, believed that women's issues were specific and should be dealt with as such, and was gradually able to

involve the male religious intellectuals with women's issues. In this way, the first issue of *Zanan* was produced in February 1992, in a small room adjacent to the very male-centered *Kiyan* monthly, with very little money. I began working with *Zanan* by its third issue.

Zanan's Context

Zanan's objectives were the enhancement of women's position in society in legal, social cultural, and political arenas. We can divide the content of *Zanan* into three categories: 1) religious discussions; 2) feminist discussions; and 3) social discussions. I will deal with each separately. Religious discussions: *Zanan* believes that women's social and individual lives are deeply influenced by religion. Religious teachings and duties show themselves in different aspects of women's lives. This is why undertaking Iranian women's issues without knowledge of religious doctrines, beliefs, and commands would not be possible. Any changes in the women's situation are also not possible without a rereading and reinterpretation of these same doctrines and beliefs.

Sherkat, who herself has many religious concerns, referred to the importance of religion in her first editorial. In the first issue of *Zanan* she wrote that in putting forth women's issues and religious discussions, *Zanan* must deal with juridical discussions since Iranian civil law has become mixed with the analysis of Islamic jurisprudence. Among inequalities are laws related to divorce, guardianship of children, the amount of criminal culpability, women's ability to act as witness in the court of law, punishment, blood money, and women's role in the family. *Zanan*'s question was how to analyze Islamic jurisprudence in relation to family law, social and political participation of women, and punishment. It insisted on the need for the review of religious commands regarding women, so that the path for changes in laws relating to women opened as well.

A young cleric by the name of Moshen Saidzadeh who was very familiar with various religious debates and sources wrote *Zanan*'s juridical material. The importance of this material, in addition to analytical content, was the clarity and simplicity with which the material was presented. By referring to a variety of sources and by relying on the variety of jurist opinions in various eras, Saidzadeh showed with certainty that there

is no unanimity regarding women-related religious commands, and secondly that these commands must change over time on the basis of the needs of the time.

The discussion of women-related jurisdiction in a simple language extended the debate to a larger audience. It allowed experts and writers active on women's issues to begin critiquing the existing legal inequalities in a more open way. This critique of existing laws was presented along with juridical discussions and was mostly written by Mehrangiz Kar, the capable female lawyer and writer. Saidzadeh and Kar, one a male religious scholar and one a feminist intellectual – side by side – pursued discussions regarding women's related jurisprudence and law.

As the discussions expanded, fundamentalists became more sensitive. First they complained that these discussions belong only to Islamic jurists, and even more restrictively only to certain Islamic jurists. Slowly, pressures increased. On the one hand, Sherkat was being called to court to explain an article that had appeared in *Zanan*, or to explain her cooperation with a particular writer. On the other hand, a number of writers for the magazine had to endure all sorts of personal and social pressures, ranging from being pushed out of their jobs to inflammatory articles about them in conservative-controlled newspapers and journals.

Nevertheless, *Zanan*'s persistence paid off. The result of this period was the popularity of juridical and legal discussions about women in other publications of religious and non-religious intellectuals, involvement of elites with various aspects of women's issues, and even some reform in laws related to women. In fact, although the conservatives heavily criticized the discussions, some changes were introduced in the Fourth and Fifth parliament controlled by the conservatives. Of course, it is still important to note that because of the dominance of the fundamentalist point of view in legislation, which insists on equality in laws and opportunities, fundamental changes have yet to occur.

Reflections and experiences slowly led the people who were running *Zanan* to an awareness that women's problems cannot be solely solved through legal and juridical avenues. Jurisprudence is based on anthropological, sociological, and psychological presuppositions, without the analysis and critique of which it cannot fully be understood. This is why a decision was made to extend the discussion to the realm of philosophy and theology. The first step was to pose a series of important questions to

religious intellectuals. The main focus was to assess whether these men, who were attempting to look at religion from a new perspective, were ready to do the same for the women's question. Do they even acknowledge that there is such a thing as the women's question? Do they offer a specific path for solving women-related problems or do they find the resolution of these problems to be dependent on the resolution of broader and more important problems?

To answer these questions, *Zanan* interviewed a number of well-known religious intellectuals, including Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari. Many of them had never expressed an opinion on women's issues. The overall result was positive. It seemed that although religious intellectuals had yet to offer a clear analysis of the women question in Iran, they were beginning to accept that there is indeed a women problem and they were at least willing to get involved in thinking about the issue.

Another positive result was that the forum created a critique of the ideas presented both by religious and secular women, inside and outside of Iran. Interestingly, some secular men reacted by defending the specificity of the women's question in Iran, critiquing the maleness of the religious intellectual tradition and discourse in Iran.

FEMINIST DISCUSSION

Along with critical religious discussions, which generally were intended to offer a particular reinterpretation of religion, *Zanan* attempted to offer its readers theoretical discussion, particularly a reinterpretation of religion. *Zanan* attempted to offer its readers particularly feminist discussions. Feminism in Iran has always been equated with "Westoxication," social permissiveness, violence against women by men, and homosexuality. In general the perception of feminism and feminists was negative and few were willing to carry the title. The act of accepting feminism is a scientific, social, and philosophical phenomenon that must be seriously studied by intellectuals and elites. Accepting that the experience of others can be helpful to Iranian women, *Zanan* began to introduce to its readers the history of feminism, its various branches, and its important leaders. One can imagine how sensitive such topics could be for a religious publication. Of course, *Zanan* was taken to court because of these discussions.

SOCIAL DISCUSSIONS

Along with religious and feminist discussions, a large part of *Zanan*'s effort has been spent on discussions and reports about the Iranian women's contemporary social reality. *Zanan* has brought together many male and female experts to talk about what they consider to be most important issues for women in Iran. They have been asked to talk about the extent to which they think these problems are specific to Iranian women, or are these problems global? And finally, what are the roots of these problems?

   Zanan has published reports on female prisoners, women beggars, runaway girls, and the serial murder of women, family courts, and many other issues. In addition, the magazine publishes articles on male/female relations among the youth, student marriages, and active political participation in general. *Zanan* has also reported on successful women in the private sector – lawyers, publishers, sculptors, painters, filmmakers, and even stock traders. The intent has been to suggest that despite social, cultural, and political obstacles, women have been able to advance.

ACHIEVEMENTS

I feel very strongly that *Zanan*, in its tenth year of publication, has had many important achievements. But here I want to talk about one of its most important successes: its efforts to establish relations with non-religious or secular reformist women. I think it is important to talk about this achievement because my limited knowledge and experience with the delicate women's movement in Iran has taught me that women's efforts to achieve equality given the incredible cultural, social, and political odds, cannot be successful without the cooperation of women of all backgrounds and beliefs.

   I find establishing relations with secular women intellectuals to be important because there has always been a wall of distrust between religious and secular intellectuals. This wall of distrust has deep historical roots, and was further thickened by the Islamic revolution. Many educated women were ousted out of the public sphere. Many emigrated, while others stayed at home. Some women who went to study abroad never returned. In short, their voices in the public sphere were seriously lacking.

From the beginning, *Zanan* extended its hands to educated and well-informed women of all backgrounds. But this cooperation was always faced with external and internal tensions. Externally, on the one hand, as mentioned above, the magazine was faced with severe fundamentalist criticism for its cooperation with secular women, accusing the magazine of relating with suspicious, anti-religious characters who were seen as spies for foreigners. Their constant attacks made the threat of closure very real. On the other hand, some secular women, both inside and outside of Iran, were under psychological pressure among their friends with similar ideological tendencies, and were even at times called "mercenaries for the Islamic Republic" because they were writing for *Zanan*.

Aside from external pressures, the most important obstacle for cooperation continues to be the high wall of distrust that exists among these women. *Zanan*'s relationship with some secular women and the reaching of a tentative agreement for challenging their forces in one direction to solve women's common problems has not come about easily. Historical experience, a tense and complicated political atmosphere, a lack of a calm environment for the critique of past activities, and cultural and personal differences continuously threaten this newfound and very delicate relationship. Many times our writers left our offices angry and hurt that their words and sentences were deleted, and many times we have been angry and hurt for being forced to act as censors. Not even our close associates understand our predicament. We have gone our separate ways on any given day. However, the continuation of work has shown that both sides – the managing director and the writers – agree firstly on the basis of good will, and secondly on the need for one other to continue the work.

Many of these relations have turned into warm relations, themselves becoming the source of strength in difficult and crisis-ridden days. The presence of Shahla Sherkat as the managing director of the magazine and the one that must be accountable for all of the magazine's political problems, her bold stance on the need to talk about women's problems, and the sincere cooperation of writers of all backgrounds, have made *Zanan* a tribune for genuine discussion of women's social, legal, and cultural problems.

The wall of distrust that exists between secular and religious women now has only developed a very thin crack. It has certainly not collapsed. *Zanan* believes that the women's movement in Iran, more than anything

else, is in need of cooperation among women of all backgrounds since the atmosphere is still male-dominated and the influential men, even the reformist ones, still do not have a clear understanding of gender divisions in the Iranian society. There is no doubt that the burden continues to be on the shoulders of the culturally and socially influential women of Iran, religious or secular, to make their specific demands heard and accepted.

THE ART OF FEMALE PUBLISHING

Mansoureh Ettehadieh

Evelyn Vaugh, the British novelist, divided the literary communi- ty into "those who can write but cannot think, those who can think but cannot write, and those who can neither think nor write, but employ themselves at international congresses lecturing on the predicament of the writer in modern society." I feel somewhat justified in lecturing before you today because I shall be speaking not on writers, but on publishing. Publishing is at once a cultural and industrial enterprise. Perhaps few business are as adventurous, dangerous, problematic and yet so enriching, rewarding, satisfying and pleasurable. Publishing is in touch with every aspect of life and culture in the society we live in. Publishers can create a trend or can negate one. They can be effective and have an impact on people and society. They are in touch with the various cultural layers of society and can influence producers and consumers of the book as a commodity.

There are different types of publishers. At one end of the spectrum there are those who receive a manuscript, turn it into a book and have no more concern about what becomes of it, who reads it, or what impact it might have on society. There are publishers at the other end of the spec- trum who are actively involved in all stages of the book production. These are the publishers who promote an idea. They ask an author or a researcher or an expert to write a book, they then publish and launch it. These publishers realize the needs of society, they can initiate a trend or retrench a thought at will. They target the readers and are an intermediary between a thought and the public. Most publishers however are posi- tioned between these two extremes.

Of course the criterion for publishing varies in different countries. In developing countries in general and in Iran in particular, the market is fragmented, populated by private companies and a few government- owned entities. Publishers, male or female, have limited capital, limited possibilities and therefore a limited range of production. In fact their

whole world is a limited one. In general these publishers do not initiate trends but react to them. They are affected and influenced by the volatility of the market and by the politics and the economies of the country. They are vulnerable and therefore conservative in general. Problems faced by these publishers shape their business and restrain their initiative. They are neither up to date nor the promoters or originators of a thought.

Having made these preliminary remarks, I now wish to consider the position of Iranian women in this cultural and industrial enterprise. However before going any further I must say a few words about the effect of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and eight years of war with Iraq, which touched the lives of people and women in particular.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, established in 1979, tried to push women out of the public sphere into the home, and many advantages and freedoms gained during the first half of the twentieth century were lost. But the Revolution, the war with Iraq, and their consequences worked to the benefit of women and partially negated the efforts of the government.

During the previous regime there were few publishing houses, and none was owned by a woman although neither laws, religion, nor culture inhibited women from entering this field. Publishers were shopkeepers who owned a bookshop and also published a few books a year. They exchanged these books amongst themselves. In general, these were limited in scope, with a meager output. The whole process of selling, publishing, accounting and distribution was undertaken by a few employees and the shop owner himself.

There were a few larger publishing corporations with a chain of bookshops, the most successful of these being the Amir Kabir publishing house which was taken over by the government. After the revolution, Amir Kabir never achieved its previous success. The government did not hold the publishers responsible for what was published; it was generally the authors who were held responsible and censorship concerned them. The impact of the 1979 Islamic Revolution was to confront all citizens with a sudden explosion of news and publications of all kinds. Newspapers, pamphlets, and books appeared with meteoric speed, pushing out the older conservative publishers who were incapable of coping with the new demands which were revolutionary and adventurous, and with totally different aims. It was no longer necessary to own a shop as the sidewalks of

the capital and other cities were given over to a display of all the latest books. Anyone with a small capital could begin publishing. Now publishing had become an intellectual undertaking of great prestige. Women from all walks of life were involved in all these activities.

During the war many women whose husbands were called to duty found themselves alone and were obliged to take the bread-winning responsibilities, which had hitherto been the domain of the husband. For instance, each family was issued a community identity card, and in the absence of the man, the woman became responsible for everything and was officially the head of the family. In many instances women had to gain their livelihood and to look after the children. They often resorted to selling the food coupons they were issued on the black market, or resold goods assigned to the families of the soldiers. Many families migrated to safer areas during the war, while the husband stayed behind at his job, and looked after their house. Men left Iran to go to Japan or Turkey to find jobs, leaving their families behind. Women were dismissed from jobs they had held during the previous regime, and had to find new occupations. In all these instances women gained in confidence and became combative, more outspoken and independent.

Another interesting development where women were concerned stemmed from the government's attempt to segregate men and women. People had to be bodily searched going into government's offices. This meant that many women had to be employed for this purpose. I have seen women in charge of security in their assigned cubicles, chopping vegetables and meat with a baby in a crib, while waiting for someone to enter to be searched. These women would not be working before the revolution. There are many more such instances, which have brought women out of their homes. To learn to drive, a woman must be taught by a woman, or have another woman sit in the car. When marriage celebrations are held in a public place such as a hotel for instance, women and men are segregated and only a woman can photograph or film the women guests. Also, women's clothing cannot be sold by a man. The study of gynecology is another field closed to male students.

Thus despite the government's original wish to push women back into the home, circumstances worked to the contrary. In general women took advantage of every work opportunity, which was not directly forbidden by law, and publishing was an example of one such opportunity.

Publishing was not attached to any government operation, rather it was in the private sector where there were not so many openings for women in general.

Publishing involves several stages of technical work, which traditionally were absolutely male-dominated. Before the revolution there were no women working in this business except perhaps as secretaries and typists. Today, with the advent of the computer, typesetting by hand or machine is obsolete. Women are employed as computer operators in large numbers. The next stage after typing the manuscript is the stage when a finished manuscript is lithographed, and women are employed in this process, though perhaps not in very large numbers. In the printing stage of book production no woman was employed previously, but today we have a number of women who actually own their printing houses. Some women are also employed in certain stages of printing and binding of books. The distribution of books is, however, a male-dominated domain. It does not need a particularly educated lot and although it is a very important stage in the production of books, it is out of the hands of the publishers. Recently a number of publishers, both men and women, have gotten together to set up their own distribution businesses and in some instances they have been successful. However, the interesting, new phenomenon to which I wish to draw your attention, is the fact that a number of women have founded their own publishing firms and have been successful in this business. This enterprise has given women the opportunity to express their freedom in a repressive society. It is an unexplored venue for women, who aspire to be useful and taken as serious intellectuals and entrepreneurs.

A major change after the revolution was the role the government came to play in this sphere. Publication and publishers became the concern of the powerful Ministry of Culture and Guidance, which made it necessary for publishers to obtain a permit in order to work. This entailed a number of requirements, which included a university degree. None of these discriminated against women going into this business, so women began their own publishing firms and made great efforts to succeed in a previously male-dominated area. In 1991 there were five women publishers. By 1995 there were 40 women who had acquired a permit and were running their own business. In 1997 women held their first book fair in Tehran. Of the 104 registered women publishers, 50 participated. In 1999 a book fair for

women publishers was held in Abadan, 85 women participated. Since then the number of women publishers has grown steadily. According to a survey made in 1999, there were 2,046 publishing firms in Iran. Of these, 216, about 10 percent were owned and generally run by women, which is an increase of, on average, 27 a year.

In the year 2000, 1,460 Iranian publishers participated in the International Book Fair of Tehran. Of these, 157 were women publishers. I should point out that in the list of these participants, there were 15 new names among women publishers who were not registered in the 1999 survey. I would suggest that their numbers are increasing continually. To obtain permission to participate in the Book Fair, a publisher must have published at least 15 books, so this automatically eliminates the newcomers to the trade. This would suggest the number of women publishers is more than meets the eye.

In the early days of the revolution, before the Ministry of Culture and Guidance took a grip on its duties, publication enjoyed an immense boom. Books, which had been out of print for years due to censorship, began to appear in large numbers. Politically subversive books and pamphlets were also printed and distributed widely before the Ministry heard about them. This bout of freedom so unfamiliar in Iran, came to a quick end, when the ministry began to strictly control the number of copies and the price of books published, and in this way imposed a control. Often they purposely under-priced the books so the publishers could not make a profit. However, this control had little deterring effect. So a real censorship was imposed. At the beginning the book was submitted to the censor after it was actually printed, and if it met with some objection, it had to be burned or shredded or parts of it had to be changed. I published several books, which passed the censors first but after a while the censors changed their minds and the books had to be destroyed, which meant a great financial loss. I should add that the general attitude at the time was one of utter hostility towards all the publishers, male or female. It was as if the Ministry had been caught unaware and became very suspicious of the publishing trade altogether.

All cultural activities including music, films, books, children's literature, school books, magazines, even advertisements and wrapping paper, names put on boxes, etc. are what they euphemistically call "edited." I must add that publishers were not altogether innocent and often resorted to ways to

get around the censor. For instance they left a white space where a word or paragraph was eliminated to show the text had been tampered with. But soon the Ministry realized this, and publishers had to find a different ploy. Another ploy was to take the occasion of a breathing space. When a minister is changed or someone high up in the ministry is removed, to quickly publish a controversial book and send it out into the market.

When we first entered the business the Ministry decreed a number of discriminatory rules against women publishers. At one time it was said women had to be married to obtain a permit but this was either removed or never implemented. It was also decreed that women could not go to the ministry in person and had to be represented by a man. But this was gradually relaxed. One woman publisher interviewed told me that once when she had gone to the Ministry to discuss a point with the censor, the man had told her she must state her case in five words only because it was not right that they should be talking together. Those days are passed now. Women, by perseverance and stamina, I think, and by their sheer numbers have made their presence an undeniable fact; they are treated well and respected.

Much has changed at the Ministry of Culture and Guidance since those early days. The attitude is more liberal towards publishers in general and this has encouraged women publishers. The Ministry helps by buying books in bulk to distribute to libraries of the poorer provincial towns or sell paper to publishers at a discount. The yearly book fair also helps as people come from all over the country to buy books. The Ministry also makes short term loans at a reasonable rate. In fact, the feeling is that we are no longer mistrusted by the ministry.

Censorship of course has not been removed but one important improvement is the fact that one can go and see the censor who read the book and personally discuss the points he objects to, and sometimes he changes his mind. In fact the severity or leniency of the censor depends on him personally as well as the general policy of the Ministry. At one time the ministry made a list of the words or sentences to be changed in a book, and suggested replacements. This became the occasion for mirthful jokes. So the tactic was changed, now they call the publishers to their office, and suggest what needs to be changed, but you are handed no list. The difficulty is that the Ministry does not give us any guidance as to what is forbidden and what is acceptable, so we learn by trial and error. However one

concession they have made is that we now submit the typed manuscript, so that changes in the manuscript are done before publication.

Of course some women publishers are not very active, but as the Ministry of Culture and Guidance has decreed that each publisher must at least publish four books a year. They could not remain inactive for long, or they would lose their license. Some women publishers inherited their business, some obtained a permit for their husbands who could not obtain one for one reason or the other. In general the women themselves run their own business, and those I spoke to were very proud of it. They don't deny that there is a financial interest involved, but they all emphasize the cultural aspect of their undertaking.

Women publishers have tried to organize their own trade union. But the Publishers' Trade Union opposed this demand arguing, rightly I think, that there should be no discrimination, and that it would weaken the Trade Union in general. Some male fundamentalist publishers, who hate to see women doing what they consider to be a man's job, are particularly opposed to a women's trade union and any suggestion of women's independence. Women have given up this attempt but they have elected a committee of women publishers, which meets weekly to discuss points of common interest. They particularly inform new members especially the younger women, about their own experiences and the road to take. I think in this way the next generation of women publishers will be much more professional than they have been hitherto. Two years ago they organized a round table conference on the questions of concern to them, which was well-attended.

I discussed with these committee members why they thought there was such a remarkable number of women participating in this field. They were of two opinions, some women thought the fact that the government did not stop or discourage their participation was an important boost, and that if it had been uncooperative there would have been fewer women in this field. Others thought it was due to the women's own initiative and had nothing to do with government policy. They thought however that women had little or no experience of cooperative work, and that they had to learn a lot about trade union activities.

In general, when I discussed the case of women publishers, most women objected to my question stating in strong words that there was no difference and that we should not differentiate ourselves where there was

no discrimination. But when I probed more, they admitted to some difficulties which are general to all businesswomen. For instance they pointed out the fact that women have to prove their competence and capability, whereas men do not have to prove anything. Another disadvantage women have in comparison to men is their connections. Women in our country are not in a position, for instance, to invite a man to a business lunch. Another problem for a woman who runs her own business is to obtain obedience from her employees, whether men or women. This of course is a matter of personality and administrative efficiency, but in Iran, women are considered emotional, unreasonable, and unstable and it takes a lot of stamina and self confidence to behave in a way that would command respect.

Many women took advantage of their own field of study to go into the publishing business. I am a historian and I specialize in the publication of history books. The same is true of a woman poet who publishes poetry books, especially those of young women poets. Another woman who is an artist publishes art books. Another one is an activist, she publishes books on the women's movement and feminism. A child psychologist publishes children's books, and still another woman is a lawyer who specializes in law books. But this is not a general rule and most publishers do not specialize in one particular field, which is no doubt more remunerative.

What should be pointed out in this context is the fact that none of these women began as professional publishers nor did they have previous experience before they stepped into this field. They had to learn the business as they went on. None of the women publishers live by their business. In fact out of all the publishers in Iran, whether men or women, perhaps 50 could be considered professionals.

From a business perspective, it has been calculated that a publisher must produce at least two books a month. This quota is not achieved by Iranian publishers for various reasons, and those who make a living through this business do so with the aid of other enterprises such as having a book shop, a printing house, or provide other services. Of course government owned publishing houses are a different matter and I am not talking about those here.

I interviewed 35 women publishers, who also filled a questionnaire. They objected to the distinction I was making. Interestingly they all emphasized their cultural aims and their idealism which one would not

hear in the case of most male publishers for whom publishing is merely a business. In fact the women I talked to all took the opportunity to interpret their enterprise as a mission. They stated they were optimistic about the future of their profession, though none was so naïve as not to realize that the government could change its policy towards them at any time. In general they said they had two aims, to improve the cultural awareness of society and, as women, to assert their individual identity.

Some of these women have two occupations and are teachers, artists, professors, or retired civil servants as well as publishers. One woman I interviewed said she considered herself to be a bridge between the intellectuals and the public. Another said she loved the publishing business because it was so diverse and challenging. Of course experiences vary. One woman thought that the publishing business was feminine in spirit because it proceeded step by step and accorded well with women's mentality, which is also a step by step process. One woman thought that men did not take her seriously as a publisher, whereas another one thought that as a woman she was treated better than men in this business. My own experience is that I am always given advice by men who might not have had any experience in the publishing business.

I had an interesting talk with a very successful woman who is a linguist by training. She started publishing language text books in order to expand her activity. She now cooperates with a large number of language teaching centers, 39 in the country and 40 centers in Tehran. She explained that she never had any problem with the Ministry of Culture and Guidance, but rather with the Ministry of Education. They insisted for instance that classes had to be segregated for girls and boys, and that they should not only be held in different buildings but that the buildings had to be separated by so many meters. However she added that by sheer persistence and argument she had managed to rescind this order. She is expanding her work still to include computerized language laboratories, and she hopes to be able to export some of her software.

As far as remuneration is concerned, men as well as women publishers would agree that they work at a loss, and that the return on their capital is slight. In general people do not read much in Iran, the number of copies of a book is limited and therefore the price of books is high. Despite this, most publishers put up a struggle. One woman runs four different publishing houses – each deals with a different field.

In general the book market is changeable, government policies unpredictable, and the difficulties of distribution are insurmountable. Then one wonders why there are so many publishers including women, and the number is increasing. I believe that one reason for the increase in the number of publishers, both men and women, is the high level of unemployment. One woman told me she founded her own publishing firm to create a job for her son who was unemployed after graduation. Most publishers keep going hoping for a hit to make a profit. Some try to vary the topics they publish. Of course sometimes a book is a success and runs into several editions. However competition is stiff, and at times, books published abroad about Iran are pounced upon and translated as fast as possible. Sometimes it happens that two or more versions of a book is published simultaneously.

Women who love the publishing business, who create and sustain it, who mentor those who want to go into the business, who idealistically forgo profit and accept loss, do so under conditions which are volatile economically, politically, socially and culturally. Despite many challenges, however, women publishers are committed and hard working, disciplined and active. Conditions might be fleeting and volatile, but women are constant and are a challenge to the stereotype of the woman I described above.

IS REFORMIST POLITICS GOOD FOR IRANIAN WOMEN?

FARIDEH FARHI

T he summer of 2001 was an unusually active time for political women in Iran. After Mohammad Khatami's resounding victory in Iran's eighth post–revolutionary presidential election, the big talk of the town was about whether or not there would be women ministers in his second term cabinet. Implicit and sometimes even explicit in these talks was the question of whether there would be a "real" effort to draw from the field of available and qualified political women in a variety of areas, not limiting the presidential effort to the tokenism that had characterized Khatami's first cabinet. There were talks of women possibly heading ministries of education, culture and Islamic guidance, and even labor as well as important state organizations such as the social security agency. The result of all these talks of course proved rather disappointing. In fact, for those of us always expecting more than what he seems able to deliver, Khatami once again proved his inability to put his words into action, presumably in the face of conservative opposition (although the word on the street is that Khatami personally has a hard time working with assertive women and that would limite his choice to Massoumeh Ebtekar, the existing head of the Environmental Protection Agency, a rather unobtrusive woman despite the billing she has gotten in the United States as Mary, the spokesperson for the hostage takers). Fatemeh Rakei, the head of the women's caucus in the Majlis, said it most bluntly, even if perhaps presumptuously. She declared that after twenty years of the Islamic revolution women have not been able to find their "real social and civil position" given "the patriarchal perspective that dominates the society." Talking as though providing political opportunities for women was one of the prime objectives of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, she then went on to assert that the presence of women in Khatami's cabinet was a "minimal right" for women, subverted by some of the leading clerics who had threatened to react. Even more troublesome has been the fact that Khatami's reformist administration (as distinguished from the

reformist parliament) has had a dismal record regarding women's issues and in fact, in its first term, failed to offer a single legislation specifically geared towards the improvement of women's position in society.

Added to all this is the reality that there is still hardly any organized women's movement to speak of in Iran to nudge the reformist men in the right direction by its presence in the political domain. Mehrangiz Kar's response to Effat Mahbaz's question about the situation of the women's movement in Iran remains as apt as it was uttered several years ago: "Which movement?" was Kar's riposte. "Which theoretical foundation? Which direction?" And most importantly, "Which organization?" The so-called "women's movement" in Iran remains very limited, splintered, unorganized, and without direction about how to relate to the broader societal movement – itself splintered and not highly organized – to reform state/society relations.

Yet despite this, we know that "women" as a category continue to remain at the center of the Iranian political discourse. We also know that women have made important strides in the past twenty years in terms of education. This year a little over 50 per cent of the universities' entry classes were women. It is astounding that 62 per cent of students in the pre-university classes getting ready for their university exams next year are women. Even the nature of their presence in the workforce is remarkable. Furthermore, we know of women whose presence in the public sphere as role models may simply be reflective of isolated cases at this time in history, but who will surely have a more important impact in the years to come. I have no doubts, for instance, that the high public profile of women lawyers such as Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi has had something to do with the increasing number of women in law schools who will surely have an impact on the Iranian legal system in the near future. I also have no doubts about the impact of role models such as filmmakers Tahmineh Milani and Rakshan Bani-Etemad, in the same way I have no doubts about the eventual and decisive importance of the rise of a different kind of political woman such as Soheila Jelodarzadeh, Elaheh Koulai and Fatemeh Haqiqatjou (members of Iranian parliament) who can deliberate on women's issues as well as more "serious concerns" of workers' rights, domestic security and international relations and, more importantly, who can seemingly operate independently of familial political connections.

But here I want to reflect upon the duality that seems to grip the reform movement as it pertains to women's issues and concerns: the lack of organization, agenda, and cohesive leadership on the one hand, and the persistence of women's issues at the center of the Iranian political discourse, as well as important strides women seem to be making as a category despite the shortcomings. In other words, I want to make an effort to understand the limitations as well as possibilities the reform project poses for women in Iranian terms as a means to explain the current situation.

So the question is how can this duality be explained. As I tried to suggest above, the reform movement has certainly not offered women an organizational venue or comprehensive vision of what the desired state of women should be in a transitional society. In fact, this summer in Tehran I witnessed a much better organizational effort on the part of Islamic Iran's Participation Front, the main reformist organizational vehicle, in organizing the youth (many of whom were young women) rather than women per se. In other words, among the categories of citizens aspiring to gain a voice, the so-called reformists seem to have found a more comfortable alliance with the "youth" than with "women." This is certainly not a good sign as the so-called "youth," or "first time voters" are suspiciously more prone to the "non-youth" leadership than women are to a non-women leadership; and believe me, non-women leadership is one of the most apt descriptions of the reformist leadership in Iran. But despite all these deficiencies and ominous signs, I would still like to suggest that the reform movement has offered women a gaping hole or an arena for stepping into.

Courtesy of the agenda of fundamentalist forces, the reform project has become a venue through which opposition to unequal laws, forcefully imposed and defended by fundamentalist forces, could be channeled without them being branded as anti-state activities. I say courtesy of fundamentalist forces because in an almost ironic fashion, by making use of women and women's bodies as instruments of state building, the fundamentalist case against women opened the way for women to make counterclaims on the state for further rights. This essentially "liberal" struggle for the rewriting of unequal laws, for more economic opportunities, and for more political representation and power sharing has all been directed at the state that has explicitly used women to make an anti-liberal claim. But as soon as this state constituted itself in those terms, it had to respond to these liberal claims and quite often take pride in its positive response to

those claims. To be sure, women's struggles to claim rights by focusing on their women's problems as sets of issues that need to be dealt with has not been a story of uninterrupted success. Real changes in family laws and inheritance laws as well as criminal laws are yet to occur. There is no doubt, however, that fundamental changes have occurred in the contest over the representation of women and women's issues.

First of all, a fundamental change that occurred is that the symbolic use of women and their bodies as a means to close the public space is no longer a useful strategy. This rejection of the symbolic use of women allows for direct public discussion about the issues involved with less concern (although by no means vanished concern) over the possibility of being branded counter-revolutionary, immodest, liberal, secular, and so on. More importantly, this rejection of symbolic use has allowed a move from an era in which "anti-women" legislation was a norm and their discussion taboo to an era in which the reform of existing unequal laws is considered necessary, even if difficult, given the political exigencies of the time.

In the political terrain, this contest over various interpretations of Islam has meant competitive electoral politics and there is no doubt that competitive politics this time around has been good for women. I say this time around because competitive politics during the revolutionary period led to completely opposite results. During the revolutionary period, various political factions attempted to gain legitimacy by establishing their ability to control the state, and they did this essentially by coercing others. Women and their bodies offered the best site for the forceful display of Islamic power. The slogan *Rousari ya tousari* (scarf or head blow) was intended as much for women as for the rest of the population. But in this round of competitive politics, based on electioneering, women as a category are not to be coerced, but wooed. This of course opens the way for the possibility of empty promises and unfulfilled expectations but the point is that in this round of competitive politics women are now positioned a bit differently, and I would argue that their position is not only different but also better. Being wooed, after all, is always more appealing than being coerced.

Having said this, I want to end with two caveats about the limitations the reformist struggle poses for women. First, as long as women are unable and unwilling to organize on the basis of their interests, their

presence in the public sphere will be loudly noted, acknowledged and celebrated; yet concrete results in terms of policy change will be very slow and not necessarily part and parcel of a long-term agenda. Legislative change will come about in a piecemeal fashion, mostly focused on rectifying the immediate problems generated from a series of legislations that were instituted in the beginning of the Islamic Republic. This is a predicament for the broader reformist project as well. Secondly it is important to understand that, as mentioned above, this is an essentially "liberal" struggle for better and more secured rights of citizenship. As such, the definition of equality is limited to equality of opportunity for "women" without much interrogation of the variety that is embedded in that category, particularly in terms of class but also ethnicity. Middle class city women will increasingly benefit from the rights of citizenship embedded in and called for in the middle class reformist movement. Middle class reformist men cannot build their democratic arena by excluding their middle class female counterparts in actuality and rhetorically, the same way the earlier democrats in Europe and the United States did during their own revolutionary times; they need all the allies they can get in their fight against what has come to be known in Iran as the "power mafia." The way this middle class move-ment will position itself in relation to women in lower strata of the soci-ety and women of various ethnic background and the kind of needs they have will have to be negotiated in the years to come. For now the language of Iran's women's "movement" remains essentially devoid of any class and ethnic component. As such, a united front of women stands ready to push for their rights; they seem not deterred by a lack of organizational backbone.

FROM PROGRAM TO PRACTICE: TOWARDS WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL AND EFFECTIVE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN JORDAN AND LEBANON

LAURIE KING–IRANI

"Politics…cannot be merely a matter of power, of divisions between ruler and ruled, or of distribution of economic goods. Politics has to be, among other things, a realm of self-creation through free, voluntary action undertaken in consort with and in relation to other people. The public realm in which politics takes place is above all else a space between people, created by their discourse and mutual recognition."[1]

—Hannah Arendt

Examining Jordanian and Lebanese women's progress in reaching positions of political power and decision making over the last decade, we find less to be optimistic about than we might have expected, given the ambitious programmatic pronouncements voiced in both countries following the Beijing conference in 1995. Although Jordan and Lebanon both sent impressive governmental and nongovernmental delegations to Beijing, and despite significant media attention to the conference itself as well as lively public debates in both countries afterwards,[2] Lebanese and Jordanian women have yet to achieve effective and meaningful political power or key decision–making positions in government. In fact, Jordan's sole female parliamentarian, Toujan Faysal, was not elected to a second term, and no women candidates in Jordan's 1997 parliamentary elections attained office. In Lebanon, three women currently serve as parliamentarians. Two (Nayla Mouawwad and Bahia Hariri) are close relatives of powerful male politicians.[3] Their initial accession to political office did not follow conventional electoral processes.

One bright spot in Lebanese politics was the election of 121 women in the last municipal elections. This warrants attention, and it is expected that several Lebanese nongovernmental organizations, chief among them the YWCA, will encourage and assist these women's development as political actors at the local level throughout the country.

This paper addresses the importance of nurturing, supporting, and revitalizing grassroots networks concerned with women's issues in Jordan and Lebanon. It emphasizes the cultural, intersubjective, and socioeconomic matrices of everyday life that either advance or hinder women's effective and meaningful participation in the political process, broadly-defined, in both countries. Attaining positions of political leadership presupposes the generation of significant "people power" from below in both societies, and not only among women's groups or feminist activists, as suggested in the quotation cited above. The obstacles preventing Jordanian and Lebanese women from attaining political power are too complex and multifaceted to be summed up as simply gender issues alone. Broader political, cultural, and economic issues are at play; hence, wider political networks and alliances are required to enhance women's political participation in Jordan and Lebanon.

Before embarking on a deeper analysis of women's political roles and potentialities in Jordan and Lebanon, it is illuminating to examine each country's demographic and gender profiles, based on 2000 UNDP statistical data. Jordan's Human Development Index (HDI) rating is 88, while Lebanon's is 65. Jordan spends more on public education—a key determinant of women's social and political advancement—than does Lebanon (7.9 per cent of GDP versus 2.5 per cent of GDP respectively). Both countries have witnessed dramatic decreases in female adult illiteracy over the last 30 years. In Jordan, 89 per cent of adults are literate, while in Lebanon, despite nearly two decades of war, 85.6 per cent of adults are literate.

Yet fertility rates reveal wide disparities between the two countries: Jordan's is 4.7 live births per woman while Lebanon's is only 2.3. Another disparity centers on the number of women in the work force. Lebanon, with a female workforce of over 28 per cent, is the leader in female employment in the Arab world. Just 15 per cent of the Jordanian workforce is comprised of women, despite significant efforts by two national organizations devoted to increasing female participation in all sectors of the labor force, the Jordanian Businesswomen's Association and the Jordanian National Women's Commission. In Jordan, a substantial percentage of working women are engaged in agricultural and other forms of unskilled labor. Lest we conclude that this statistic is a correlate of a greater prevalence of rural lifestyles in Jordan as compared to Lebanon, it

is crucial to note that both countries' populations are now predominantly urban: 92 per cent of Lebanese and 80 per cent of Jordanians are city dwellers, a statistic that deflates common stereotypes of Jordanians' Bedouin origins. A key critique of Jordan's and Lebanon's policies concerning women's development and advancement has been governmental overemphasis on women in the capital cities of Beirut and Amman to the detriment of women in the rural hinterlands of both countries.

In theory, Lebanese and Jordanian women are allowed to vote and to run for any office in the land. The constitutions of both countries uphold the equality of women and men. Actual practices do not reflect constitutional writ, however, largely because of the maintenance of Personal Status Laws, to be discussed below. Currently, there are no women in the Jordanian parliament, though Jordan does boast a number of women ministers and sub-ministers, which Lebanon has never known. Women comprise six per cent of all governmental officials in Jordan, which is well above the regional average. In 1999, a woman deputy prime minister was appointed in Jordan.

Lebanese women achieved suffrage in 1952, and the first woman was elected to parliament forty years later. Jordanian women only achieved suffrage in 1974, but less than two decades later, Toujan Faysal was the first woman elected to the Jordanian parliament in 1993.[4] Both Jordan and Lebanon have signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), but both have also entered strong reservations concerning issues related to Personal Status laws. In both countries, women married to non-nationals cannot pass their citizenship on to their children. Soon after the cessation of the war in Lebanon in 1990, Lebanese women won the right to obtain passports and travel abroad without the permission of their male relatives. Jordanian women are still pressing for this same right more than a decade later.

Although they are very different countries—one a constitutional monarchy, the other a parliamentary democracy—Jordan and Lebanon share some historical and political commonalities that may account for women's lack of political progress in both countries. Jordan and Lebanon are both new nation states; their borders were carved out of the remains of the Ottoman Empire by colonial powers from without, not shaped by local, organic political processes from within. Both countries' populations (Lebanon's is 4 million; Jordan's is 4.7 million) are heterogeneous.

Lebanon is comprised of 18 different officially recognized ethno-confessional sects, while Jordan's population, although predominantly Sunni Muslim, is 60 per cent Palestinian and only 40 per cent Jordanian.

As Jayawardena (1986) and Kandiyoti (1991) have emphasized, the ideological underpinnings and the political and legal structures of any state greatly influence the cultural construction and social organization of gender roles and relations. Suad Joseph notes that citizenship in many Middle Eastern countries has not developed in the same ways as it has in Western nation-states, thanks largely to the strong and central role of the family. This helps to account for the continuing determinative influence of Personal Status Laws, which not only give religious authorities extensive powers over women's lives in situations of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, but also emphasizes women's roles as wives, mothers, and daughters at the expense of their roles as citizens.[5]

Personal Status laws can and do reduce women to the status of "legal minors" requiring the agency of male relatives or male religious specialists to maneuver in society outside the domains of family and home. This is a primary hindrance to women's ability and willingness to initiate action as political agents on their own.

Neither Lebanon nor Jordan has a history of strong nationalist movements. Indeed, national identity is fraught with competing tensions in both countries, probably more so in Lebanon than in Jordan, as evidenced by the long and brutal Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). It may not be an exaggeration to say that Jordan is a nation-state disguised as a federation of tribes,[6] while Lebanon is a collection of ethno-religious tribes disguised as a nation-state—a living remnant, in fact, of the Ottoman millet system. In both cases, citizenship, citizens' rights and a sense of national, supralocal identities, collective membership, and political belonging are not as clear or as compelling as are local kinship, religious, or ethnic modes of identification and political action. The sense of an "imagined community"[7] in both countries is described in kinship and confessional tropes more so than through nationalist terms. This has far-reaching implications for women's participation in national politics, given that the cultural construction of kinship and the social and political organization of local-level confessional communities in both countries are profoundly patriarchal.[8]

Added to a prevailing ambivalence about the ranking of various matrices of meaning and belonging associated with attaining and exercising

political power, both countries have also had distressing experiences of the dislocations, disruptions, and contradictions of global economic and political developments since the end of the Cold War. Lebanon emerged from its own civil war and the end of the Cold War to find itself profoundly disadvantaged by a devastated infrastructure, a weakened political system, economic collapse, and lingering legal, moral, and psychological dilemmas – a legacy of the war years. Jordan also suffered economic shocks and set-backs with the return of thousands of Palestinian workers from the Gulf states in 1990 following their expulsion by Arab governments angered by Yasser Arafat's initial support of Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait. This influx of returning workers and their families provided an initial jump-start to a sagging Jordanian economy, but their return also meant the cessation of valued remittance payments from the Gulf. Jordan also began to receive thousands of Iraqi refugees once the Gulf War began and then, later, once the sanctions regime was put into place.

Neither Jordan nor Lebanon ever enjoyed the promised benefits of the New World Order's market miracles. This has naturally engendered popular frustration, sharpened class disparities, and heightened political instability in both countries. In such stressful periods, women's rights are not likely to be high on the national political agenda. Indeed, basic human rights for both genders can fall by the wayside under such circumstances. As the late Laure Mughaizel, a Lebanese human rights activist, feminist, and lawyer noted shortly before her death: "What will it serve us to fight for women to have rights equal to those of men if men's rights are also deficient?" Empowering women to participate effectively and meaningfully on the national level will necessitate opening up the political system of both countries for both genders, while monitoring and guaranteeing human rights for all, a difficult course of action that will necessitate political and economic transformations outside the two countries' borders, i.e., alleviating regional poverty, rethinking the Iraqi sanctions regime, and solving the conundrum of Syria's role in Lebanon—which is obviously related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Regional and international developments, particularly Jordan's participation in the Euro-Med partnership and the Middle East "peace process," have already had a noticeable impact on the official framing and treatment of women's issues and concerns. Jordanian governmental and

nongovernmental bodies evince a more convincing, coordinated, and professional presentation of women's concerns and struggles for women's rights than do their Lebanese counterparts, in part because Jordan is more dependent on international donor aid than Lebanon. Jordanian governmental officials and members of the royal family are prominent spokesmen and spokeswomen for Jordanian women's rights and economic and political advancement. Jordan has recently appointed women to high positions in ministries and in municipal councils, and (partly in response to the Euro-Med partnership) the government has created a family-protection unit within the Ministry of Public Security to deal with domestic violence.[9]

Upon returning from the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, the Jordanian governmental and nongovernmental delegations quickly stated national goals and prepared a comprehensive national plan in a coordinated, forward-looking manner that utilized the discourse of gender and development. An important consequence of this coordinated activity was the establishment in 1996 of the Princess Basma Women's Resource Center, tasked with linking local community groups to national policy makers while also serving as a center for research, training, and advocacy.[10]

Lebanon lacks comparable institutions or facilities for women at the national level.[11] After the Beijing conference, the Lebanese national delegation simply dissolved, and scant official attention was paid to implementing the Platform for Action in any sustained or coordinated manner. Clearly, Jordan's national machinery for women's rights is more substantial and better organized than Lebanon's, which is not surprising given that the Jordanian state is much stronger than the Lebanese state.

Nonetheless, public attitudes in Lebanon are probably more progressive than they are in Jordan. A May 2000 study commissioned by a coalition of Jordanian human rights groups found that over 50 per cent of Jordanian men believe that women should not be involved with political or trade-related work, and a third believe that women should not be allowed to drive or undertake volunteer work.[12] Furthermore, the key demand of Jordanian feminists—the rescinding of Article 340 of the Penal Code, which effectively permits men to kill female relatives in order to avenge "crimes of honor"—has yet to be realized. A Jordanian forensic doctor recently estimated that a quarter of all murders committed annual-

ly in Jordan are "honor killings."[13] Yet to appease an opposition that utilizes discourses of Islamic authenticity and family inviolability, the Jordanian government allows this outrage to continue.

Although "honor crimes" have yet to be criminalized in Lebanon, either, avid public discussions and debates about honor crimes, as well as other controversial issues such as domestic violence, homosexuality, mixed marriages, civil marriage, and abortion, are standard fare in Lebanon. Televised debate and call-in shows have broken new ground in redefining not only the terms and topics of public debate, but its parameters as well. Programs such as LBC's *Ash-Shaater Yehki* ("The Wise One Speaks") or Tele-Liban's public affairs program addressing every aspect of domestic violence and the challenges of confronting it in Lebanese society created the type of public spaces necessary for galvanizing opinions, forging networks, nurturing alliances, and shaping an intersubjective domain of common political demands.

Discussing recent political trends in Iran during this conference, Dr. Valentine Moghadam asked if it is possible for the institutions of a democratic civil society to be sustained in a country lacking a democratic system of governance. Lebanon seems to represent just such a case. As a student once told me, upon observing that lively public discussions of women's rights rarely resulted in legal reform or altered social conventions: "Lebanon is a country where everything is permitted, but nothing is possible." The Lebanese state is weak, and although Lebanese civil society is unabashedly and inescapably pluralistic, the plethora of NGOs in Lebanon either duplicates efforts or works at cross-purposes. The presence of so many NGOs—religious and secular, national and local—serves to diffuse and fragment the potential social bases of effective reform movements, and ironically can also serve to exacerbate the structural isolation of Lebanese women from each other, as well as from positions of power they might attain through broader-based, better coordinated grassroots efforts.[14]

The extent and danger of Lebanese women's structural isolation was brought home to me with special force while I was working on a series of journalistic articles about women and AIDS in Lebanon in 1996. While conducting interviews with the staff of the World Health Organization's AIDS Program office in Beirut, it became clear that the cultural construction and social organization of gender in Lebanon was having potentially

lethal effects on increasing numbers of Lebanese women.[15] According to the staff's resident epidemiologist, Dr. Elissar Radi:

"Christian and Muslim religious leaders were initially very receptive to the message of the National AIDS program, i.e., that married couples should behave responsibly and commit themselves to monogamous sexual relations within the marital context. They were less supportive, however, of the National AIDS Program's dual strategy of disseminating information about the use of condoms and encouraging women's empowerment....We see behavioral changes [to prevent AIDS] as the man's responsibility, so we emphasize traditional cultural expectations that stress men's important roles as providers and protectors of the family....But the most disturbing obstacle to AIDS prevention in Lebanon is the powerlessness and passivity of the Lebanese wife....We quickly discovered just how powerless and structurally isolated women are in the marital relationship. They exercise little if any decision making power in the home, and place crucial decisions concerning health, sexual relations, and contraception in the hands of their husbands, on whom they are utterly dependent economically....This shows a basic imbalance in the marital relationship here: the wife has all the obligations, the husband has all the rights. We face a number of interrelated problems to women's empowerment here, particularly a fatalistic mentality expressed by the phrase *qidaa' wal-qadar*, which implies that it is a woman's fate or destiny to contract this entirely preventable disease."[16]

Women who had already contracted AIDS did not enjoy support groups or public understanding due to the deep shame attached to issues of sexuality in Lebanon. Their powerlessness and structural isolation was particularly severe. For these women, as well as victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse in Lebanon, the "wall of silence" (*haajiz as-sumt*) was the first and perhaps most formidable obstacle to be surmounted in addressing their private sufferings publicly and thereby transforming their shared personal issues into political causes.

Two positive examples of women coming together to voice concerns and build political alliances in the public realm were the Women's Tribunal, first held in Beirut in 1995, and the activities, initiatives, and

pronouncements of the League of the Families of the Kidnapped, an NGO formed primarily by the wives and mothers of men and youths "disappeared" by various militias and invading armies during the long Lebanese civil war. The Women's Tribunal was an international event, as opposed to being a strictly Lebanese affair, but its convening in Beirut caused a public stir and generated fruitful and lively discussions about the psychological dynamics and the ideological underpinnings of women's domination in patriarchal societies.[17]

The Tribunal, the first event of its kind ever to be held in the Middle East, dramatically broke through the silences that isolate women behind walls of shame, fear, and despair. It provided a rare opportunity for Arab women from different countries and various backgrounds to join together, share experiences, and form networks to confront the issue of violence against women in all of its forms: domestic, political, economic, sexual, and military.

The moving force behind the Lebanese League of the Families of the Kidnapped is a group of dynamic women who lost their husbands, fathers, and sons during the war years. While the war was raging, they came together to join forces and offer one another moral support and technical assistance—across class and confessional lines during perilous periods—to help find their missing relatives. With the war's cessation, the accession of many warlords to public office, and the realization that their missing relatives were indeed dead, this group spearheaded efforts to hold the post-war Lebanese government accountable for their missing loved ones. They asked for commissions of inquiry, special services to provide assistance to families that had lost their main breadwinners, and most significantly, they refused the government's suggestion that each family individually submit a death claim for their missing relative in order to obtain state pension payments and insurance compensations. The women refused to "kill their loved ones" by pronouncing them officially dead. They insisted that officials in the Lebanese government make this pronouncement publicly, which was a volatile demand, since many Lebanese governmental officials had been war lords and were thus in a position to know many details about the final resting places of the 17,000 Lebanese citizens kidnapped and killed during the war.

One woman in particular, Widad Helwani, emerged as a powerful political and moral voice during the League's public campaign to ascertain

the whereabouts of the kidnapped.[18] Through her public role as one of the leaders of the League of the Families of the Kidnapped, Helwani modeled new modes of political action and inclusive, constructive uses of power, building on the cultural construction of a good mother—compassionate, nurturing, fiercely loyal and persistent—while bravely voicing the sorts of moral concerns and questions about justice that many Lebanese were hesitant to raise publicly after the war. Although the League did not achieve most of its aims, it provided a compelling example—to Lebanese women as well as to Lebanese men—of new ways of being political. It offered a lesson in the generation of "people power" capable of forming broad based social movements and bringing new categories of people to positions of political leadership.

CONCLUSION

In both Lebanon and Jordan, the primary obstacles to women's effective and meaningful political participation are 1) cultural and psychological obstacles that hinder the transformation of personal experiences, attitudes, and stances into political agenda; 2) women's continuing pronounced economic dependence on men; and 3) legal and political structures that do not respect the human rights of either men or women, as well as the enforcement of Personal Status Laws. To surmount these obstacles, which are obviously interrelated and interlocking, broad social movements based on grassroots networks transcending class, ethnic, confessional, ideological, and gender divisions are crucial. An example of such a movement is the aforementioned League of the Families of the Kidnapped. Politicizing issues, building broad networks, and empowering women to take on leadership positions are all key processes required to generate the sorts of "bottom-up" social power and movements that can help Lebanese and Jordanian women alike to exercise effective power at the national level while also making politics more meaningful—and just—for men and women alike.

ENDNOTES

1. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (1997) "Introduction: Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics," in Calhoun, C. and McGowan, J. (eds.)

Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. p. 9.

2. In the weeks preceding the 1995 Beijing conference, a leading Lebanese television station featured short documentary films each night, collectively entitled "Lubnaaniyaat" (Lebanese women), portraying the admirable achievements and qualities of a variety of Lebanese women from all walks of life.

3. Both Mouawwad and Hariri have won elections more than once. Despite the fact that their initial key qualification for public office was their relationship to the late President René Mouawwad (assassinated several days after assuming office in November 1989), and Prime Minister Rafic Hariri respectively, both women have been energetic, diligent, and admired parliamentarians. Bahia Hariri has spearheaded and supported social and economic development projects for the Sidon region and the south of Lebanon, while Nayla Mouawwad is a strong voice for environmental concerns, education, and citizens' rights.

4. Since Lebanon did not hold parliamentary elections regularly during the war years (1975-1990), and since regular electoral politics were suspended in Jordan for most of the 1970s and 1980s, statistics concerning women's parliamentary participation over the last quarter of the 20th century are not as meaningful as they would be for countries untouched by war or the suspension of elections.

5. Personal Status Laws limit women's legal recourse in the event of divorce to the archaic rulings of religious authorities. In Lebanon, this is a particularly complex and vexing issue. Christian women have a much more difficult time obtaining a divorce than do their Muslim sisters. Whether Christian or Muslim, however, child custody in the event of divorce always favors the father. His family ultimately has custody of the children, as they are defined as members of his patriline under Personal Status Laws. Inheritance also presents a variety of legal rulings. Sunni religious courts grant daughters less than sons. In the event that a Sunni man has sired only daughters, they usually will inherit less from their father than will their male paternal cousins and uncles. Shi`a religious rulings on daughters' inheritance are much more equitable. There have been cases of Sunni men who have no sons, only daughters, becoming Shi'i so as to be able to pass their wealth and property directly to their daughters. Public calls for the institution of civil marriage in Lebanon have been growing in recent years. If a Muslim and a Christian wish to marry, they must, under the current Personal Status Laws, go abroad (usually to Cyprus) for a civil marriage, or one of the couple must convert to marry in the religious tradition of his or her spouse. Upon becoming a Lebanese citizen in 1994, I was astonished, upon signing my name into a large book in the Ministry of Personal Status Affairs, to see

the clerk write in, after my name, under the category of "religion" that I was a Maronite. Since my husband was a Maronite, I automatically became one, too. Having a confessional membership is part and parcel of being a Lebanese citizen. Atheism and secularism are not, legally and administratively speaking, options.

6. See Andrew Shryock's 1997 ethnography on Bedouin genealogies and their contribution to national identity and a nationalizing political discourse.

7. Benedict Anderson (1991) Imagined Communities. London: Routledge.

8. Suad Joseph (1999) Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

9. US Department of State Annual Human Rights Report (2000).

10. This organization has a very impressive, well-designed web site, featuring pull-out quotes voicing the discourse of Gender and Development ideologies. Visitors to the web site quickly notice, however, that its primary language is English. Arabic readers must download a program to read the newsletter, which is only available in a PDF format that takes several minutes to download. This raises critical questions as to the intended audience for the site: Jordanian women, or European donor countries concerned with Jordan's proper adherence to the criteria of the Euro-Med partnership. See Sheila Carapico's article, "Euro-Med: European Ambitions in the Mediterranean" in Middle East Report 220 (Fall 2001), pp. 24-29, for more insights into the politics of Euro-Med partnerships.

11. As I note elsewhere, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University in Beirut has the potential to serve the same ends as the Princess Basma Women's Resource Center, but the will to realize this is lacking among the university and national leadership cadres in Lebanon (King-Irani, 1998).

12. Christian Science Monitor (2000) Special Series on Women in the Middle East.

13. US Department of State Annual Human Rights Report-Jordan (2000)

14. See the Spring 2000 issue of Middle East Report (No. 214) for a thorough critique of the NGO phenomenon in the post Cold War Middle East. In my editorial in that issue, I noted: The Lebanese writer, Fawwaz Trabulsi, recently observed that NGOs in Lebanon "have the opposite structural effect as political parties; NGOs are the result of the absence of parties, but they also hinder the emergence and formation of effective parties since they splinter popular demands into a multiplicity of interests, which are addressed by specialized professionals. This encourages a 'top-down,' personalized provision of services—a new kind of clientelism—that prevents the public from realizing that services provided by NGOs are not gifts, but

rather, elementary human rights that are due to them as citizens of modern states." NGOs' tendency to diffuse and weaken broad-based political demands could be one reason why Western governments are so eager to fund them….From Arab states' perspectives, NGOs are suspect competitors for power, if not covert agents of foreign intervention. Most regional NGOs' reliance on foreign funding, whether from Western governments or private foundations, only increases state and even popular suspicions about their aims. If regional NGOs are to attain their noble goals of social and economic justice, strengthening the rule of law and guaranteeing human rights, they must mobilize popular support within their own societies by tailoring their projects and methodologies to the needs and concerns of their fellow citizens, not to the latest agenda of agencies abroad. In so doing, they may just generate new political movements.

15. Of the 100 Lebanese women who had tested positive for HIV in 1996, 99 had contracted the disease from their husbands—the only sex partners most of them had ever known. Most of these men had contracted AIDS from prostitutes or from heterosexual extramarital affairs abroad or in Lebanon.

16. Laurie King-Irani (1996) "Women and Aids in Lebanon: A Question of Rights and Responsibilities," in Al-Raida, Vol. XIII, Nos. 74&75, p. 50.

17. The Arab Women's Tribunal was organized by El-Taller, an international nongovernmental organization, in cooperation with Secours Populaire Libanais, and was conducted under the patronage of Lebanese First Lady Muna Al-Hrawi.

18. Helwani's story is told in two films by Jean Chamoun: "Suspended Dreams" (1991), a documentary about Lebanese coming to terms with the devastation of their country and society after the war, and in Taif al-Madina ("The Shadow of the City"), a 2000 feature film in which the leading female character is based on Helwani.

FEMINISM AND POLITICS IN THE MAGHREB AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE FAMILY

Lilia Labidi

I would like to introduce my subject by painting a broad picture of the impact of feminism – whether it is what we might simply call feminism (both Egypt and Tunisia have a long history of feminist thought and action throughout the 20th century), feminism in a masculine style (as when Habib Bourguiba, President of the first Tunisian republic, imposed his own vision from the top-down), state feminism (where the state takes charge of creating ministries and national commissions responsible for programs concerning the Women's Condition, the Condition of the Family, Human Rights, as has occurred throughout the Maghreb), or transnational feminism (referring to programs put into operation by international organizations) – and the policies toward the family following independence.

The invocation of models of identity construction has very important implications for these societies, which are confronted with new cultural and political challenges posed by the process of globalization. The success of programs conceived by political thinkers and managed by field staff depends on their own relationship to these models of identity construction. Reexamining these domains allows us to show that the dynamic of representations is not fixed by positions termed "traditionalist" or even "schizophrenic." These programs evolve according to models and their application requires wisdom and education. Without these, how can one address questions of the democratization of family relationships if the members of this family do not understand what democracy is? How can a doctor explain to a woman with three daughters and expecting a fourth child who she hopes will be a boy, that she cannot provide for the child, that today she no longer needs a son in order to have standing in her society?

How can a social worker address a husband who refuses to allow his wife to return home because she has given birth to a girl at the hospital? How does one make a policeman understand that he must record a fami-

ly's complaint that a daughter has been raped, rather than put it into the category of violence, subjecting the daughter in this way to self-hatred and allowing the rapist to go free? And there are other examples that could be cited.

The implications are also very important for the future. What images of family are to be shown on television if the woman who is victimized within the couple's home is not discussed? What models should be expressed in school textbooks if we don't want girls to simply fill up space in the university classrooms in Humanities and Social Science but to also choose scientific, medical and political careers? What mechanisms should be put in place so that women are not mere voters but also office-holders? These are just some of the issues at stake behind our questions concerning constructions of identity.

Women's rights vary from one country to another of the Maghreb and Egypt,[1] in ways related to the historical and political context of each. In 1965, the population of the region[2] was in the neighborhood of 63 million, today it numbers approximately 137 million, of which 68.5 million are women. The region – Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt – will have more than 100 million women in 2025. Some live in monarchies, others in republics. Many are in nations with military men as heads of state. Elections which took place in recent years show that gaining women's votes has been a central objective of political parties and the parties in power continue to be, until today, the main beneficiaries of this vote.[3]

Women's social situation varies, too, from country to country and varies within each country. Across the region, where the level of urbanization is over 60 per cent, one woman in three works, and we find them in fields as diverse as the judiciary, medicine, information technology, teaching, manufacturing, services, agriculture, etc.[4] Alongside state programs, national, international and non-governmental organizations have also provided women with some mechanisms to protect their rights. Among those developments which have contributed most significantly to the growing freedom of women are programs combating maternal mortality and promoting birth control. Today, the average age of marriage has increased and more than half of the women in the region between the ages of 15 and 49 have access to birth control. Whereas during the 1980s, each women gave birth to six children on average, by the end of the

1990s this number had decreased to 3.5 children. Women are also living longer and the rate of infant mortality has decreased.

On the political and cultural levels, women's impact has also been felt. Whereas a small minority of women at the beginning of the 20th century questioned their conditions in the framework of charitable and cultural associations, today they are represented in great numbers in women's organizations, trade unions, and political organizations. During the 1920s and 1930s, the subjects of discussion were primarily the right of women to choose a spouse, gain an education, etc.[5] Since the 1970s, these discussions involved promoting women's rights and encouraging democracy.

Throughout this entire period there has been one constant element, however: the collaboration of women regionally and internationally, regardless of the political context or system – be it colonial, authoritarian, or democratizing. The Islamist phenomenon led to some serious tensions, and in a number of ways these movements entered into competition with the state. Whereas urban women benefitted more fully from the advantages of the welfare state, the hijab – which should be distinguished from the traditional veil – was very quickly adopted by women living on the urban periphery, areas settled by the middle classes and families recently arrived from rural areas. For these women, the hijab often provided the secondary benefits of enabling easier movement in public space and promoting a positive self-image. However, the wearing of the hijab became less common in both Egypt and Tunisia starting in the mid-1990s.[6] The tensions engendered by this confrontation between the state and the Islamist movements often resulted in serious social crises, such as those that occurred in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. However, in Tunisia, in part because of the Personal Status Code in effect since 1956 and adopted prior to the state's constitution, these tensions led, in the context of the second republic, to a renewed emphasis on preserving those rights of women already enshrined as statute and on implementing new ones, with women mostly allied with the state in its struggle against religious fundamentalism.[7]

Participating in the deliberations of national committees (present in person or via their writings), women contributed importantly towards a restructuring of the cultural order.[8] Even though these writings are marked by the same cleavages that pervade the society – religion/secularization, tradition/modernity, left/right, authoritarian/democratic ten-

dencies – as well as by essentialist approaches regarding class and gender, they show that the older paradigms no longer are relevant to the current reality of women.[9] Added to the critical works devoted to the women's condition and treating questions such as financial, psychological autonomy,[10] to legal guides, to women's biographies, and to films and work in the new media – all constituting cultural support for women in struggle – we find since the 1970s other efforts supplementing the role played by women journalists on television who bring news from abroad to women of the region and demystifying the region's own public relations.

While there have certainly been many significant changes in these societies, facts such as the wide mobilization in Morocco to collect one million signatures demanding changes in the *Mudawwana*, women and children in Algeria becoming victims of armed groups, Egyptian and Tunisian women's writings being censored, Tunisian women authors legally charged with disturbing public order, other women imprisoned for having defended the right to be informed, and still another woman writer having to defend her marriage in Egypt against a legal complaint introduced by a third party demanding her divorce,[11] make clear that politics remains, up until now, largely the preserve of men.

ENDNOTES

1. We see, on the political level, various efforts at regional integration, the most recent being Egypt's request, at the end of the 1990s, to adhere to the Arab Maghreb Union. On the level of women's rights, differently formulated and implemented from country to country, Tunisian women are opposed to political recompositions which might call into question the rights they have already gained.

2. The data relating to Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt have been taken from the World Development Report, 2000/2001 and from the Middle East Report, Winter 1999.

3. In the Maghreb the ruling political parties have given great importance to women's votes. The USFP (Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires) in Morocco in 2001, in a manner similar to the RCD(Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique) in Tunisia in 1999, requested its members to see that 20 per cent of the 1200 delegates to the national convention be women."(Maroc Hebdo International, N 455, 9-15 March 2001) During the same period, in 1999 in Kuwait, women failed to gain the right to vote in the coming 2003 elections, losing this by two votes — a right that men had gained in 1961.

4. Whereas we have statistical studies in the Maghreb on the relationship between men and women in the workplace, we have few if any anthropological or psychological studies treating the relationship between women and work, their strategies, the relationship to the informal sector, questions relating to unemployment among women university graduates, moral harassment and stress in the workplace. It is only in the press that we sometimes find the "grievances of women" discussed. See the article by Amira Doss " Dans un monde d'hommes" in Ahram Hebdo, 31 October 2001.

5. Labidi, Lilia. " Judur al-harakat al-nisa'iyya fi Tunis." Tunis, Tunis Carthage, 1990 (2nd edition). Marzouki, Ilhem. Le mouvement des femmes en Tunisie au XX ème siècle. Tunis, CERES Production, 1993. Badran, Margot. Feminists, Islam and Nation. Gender and the making of Modern Egypt. Princeton – New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995.

6. Herrera, Linda. " Down veiling. Gender and the contest over culture in Cairo" in Middle East Report, N 219. Summer 2001. pp. 16-19.

7. Labidi, Lilia. " Discours feministe et fait islamiste en Tunisie " in Femmes et Islamisme. Confluences Méditerranée, N 27, 1998, Paris. pp. 69-79.

8. Turki, Soraya. " Woman and Islam " in The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islam. Ed. J.L. Esposito. Vol. 4. New York – Oxford University Press, 1995. pp. 322-327.

9. In " The challenges for Middle Eastern Women in the 21st century,"(Middle East Journal. Vol. 54, N 2, Spring 2000. pp. 185-193) Elizabeth Fernea analyzes how the changes taking place in the region are contributing to new criteria for leadership in the coming century. See especially p. 186.

10. The question of autonomy has focused on different aspects at different times. In the 1980s much of the debate in Maghrebin feminist circles centered on women's control over their bodies with regard to reproduction and the utilization of contraception. During the 1990s one heard more discussion of financial autonomy in the domain of civil society.

11. In 2001 Nawal Saadaoui was at the center of a debate over an interview she gave to a Cairo publication, in which a lawyer claimed that her views were contrary to Islam and that, as a consequence, her marriage of 37 years should be dissolved. This claim, brought before the Personal Status Court, was ultimately dismissed. (See Khaled Dawoud. " Life will go on". Ahram Weekly. 2-8 August 2001.)

DOES THE FUTURE FOR CENTRAL ASIAN WOMEN LIE IN THE PAST? AN OVERVIEW OF CURRENT GENDER TRENDS IN THE REGION

KATHLEEN KUEHNAST

Since declaring independence from the Soviet Union a decade ago, the five states of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—have established their own nation-states, and in the process have reconfigured women's roles in a new Central Asia. My question concerns whether the future of Central Asian women will be based more on norms and values gleaned from the past, or on new models of gender gleaned from other Middle Eastern countries. To briefly analyze this question, I want to emphasize three points. First, I want to underscore that Central Asian women are a highly heterogeneous group. Similar to what Leila Abu-Lughod found in her research on Middle Eastern women, Central Asian women are by no means a homogenous Muslim group.[1] In fact, although approximately 70 percent of Central Asians claim to be Muslim, they alone represent over 30 different ethnic groups. And certainly, the various approaches of nation building underway in each country in Central Asia mean that women's roles and rights are being reconfigured in five very different ways.

Yet, in spite of the vast differences found among Central Asian women, my two other points reveal the common ground that most Central Asian women share as they attempt to navigate through multiple and competing social forces, and to survive the growing impoverishment affecting each of their countries. The World Bank's recent estimates of poverty in the region range from Kazakhstan being the least poor with 38 per cent of the population living below the poverty line, to 98 per cent of the population of Tajikistan who live in poverty. The other three countries fall somewhere in between.

Since anthropologists prefer to make their arguments through conveying a bird's eye view of how the abstract dimensions of culture are practiced in everyday life, I would like to put the three abstract points above

into the context of an event I witnessed during my 22 months of research in Kyrgyzstan.[2]

In the spring of 1994, a motley group gathered at the Ala–Archa Cemetery in Bishkek to commemorate the dead Kyrgyz poet, Alymkul Osmonov.[3] Among those congregated were a few members of the Kyrgyz elite who were once Communist *apparatchiki* and had, more recently, become pro-democracy reformers. As we listened to the prayers recited by the region's head mullah, I found my attention drawn to a woman whose every movement was signaled by the rustling sounds of her paper shopping bag. Wearing a trim, lime-green business suit, sunglasses and a bobbed haircut, the young Kyrgyz woman stood out against the drab palette of dreary gravestones, dark-haired men in dusty gray suits, and the mullah's black gown. As she moved closer to the Muslim leader, her bag came more clearly into view—printed on it was a photograph of a bare-breasted woman with an American flag loosely flung over her shoulders. Unconsciously, I reached for my camera; I wanted this image.[4]

For me, this scene represents all the contradictions co-existing during this post-Soviet time warp—a fashionably-dressed Central Asian woman holding an imported bag stamped with the image of a nude (American) woman, standing next to a mullah who was publicly reciting Muslim prayers over a dead Kyrgyz poet in a Soviet cemetery surrounded by former Communist leaders. This woman defied Soviet norms by dressing brightly and expensively. She defied Muslim norms by praying in public with men. She defied Islamic codes by carrying an image of the female body. She defied former Soviet loyalties by remembering a Kyrgyz poet in "traditional" ways—and the list of social contradictions continue. Although I stopped short of using my camera, the memory serves as an iconic snapshot of the ways in which Central Asian women find themselves awash in the crosscurrents of emergent gender discourses, where their role in the family, their jobs, their position in society, and, ultimately, control over their own bodies are being contested.

In place of Soviet gender ideals, more conservative notions of women in society are being propagated. In addition, the public-private split in women's day-to-day lives has become a chasm in which women have once again been designated to the private sphere of survival. This is not to say that women no longer work in the public sphere, but instead, it is to emphasize that the ideological terrain about where women "should be"

has shifted from the Soviet notion of "women in the work force" to the conservative notion of "women should work only in the home." The contradiction, as many of you are well aware, is that Central Asian women have become significant players in the emergent informal economy as they attempt to make ends meet in their respective struggling economies.

In many ways the pendulum has swung away from the once-colonizing Soviets to a romanticism about the pre-Soviet past, or what psychologists call "reaction formation," that is, the re-incorporation of values or behaviors that were once forbidden, and so we see the embrace of the Kyrgyz medieval ethnic charter, The Manas; the parliamentary debates in 1993 about legalizing polygamy in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; the reintroduction of open prostitution in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; the reappearance of an age-old custom of abducting young girls for marriage (bride-stealing) throughout the region; the return of the nomadic practice of "Leviratelevirate"; and the public discussion among Muslim leaders about reinstating mandatory veiling in Ferghana Valley. In other words, the ideal image of a Central Asian woman has shifted in the public discourse from an emancipated woman who works outside the home to a cloistered woman who tends to her family first. Obviously, the ideal and the reality do not mesh, and here again women must negotiate between social expectations with the pressing need to survive.

ISLAM

In examining these ideological changes, I turn first to the ideological project of Islam and women in Central Asia. After seventy years of state-controlled Islam and the rhetoric of atheism, many people view the restoration of pre-Soviet Islam as an expression of a unified ethnic identity. The question of which Islamic models to adopt is at the crux of both political and economic maneuverings of other Islamic countries, such as Turkey or Saudi Arabia, which hope to exert ideological influence over the Central Asian countries. Certainly, though, to speak of Islam in Central Asia today is different than it was even a few years ago when the discussions were primarily concerned with reinstating religious education, holidays, and the building of mosques. But since the bombing in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on February16, 1999, the hostage-taking of four

Japanese geologists in 1999, the kidnapping of four American rock climbers in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2000, and, now, the most recent terrorists acts in the United States of September 11, 2001—the discussion about Islam has quickly shifted toward extremism in the name of Islam. Certainly, the repercussions of radical Islam are immense, especially for women, considering the most recent example, the difficult predicament of women living under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan between 1995 and 2001. So, simply put, there are far too many "what ifs" here to contemplate in the time allotted. Instead, I will focus on a few examples of the day-to-day impact of the new religious Islam in the lives of women.

There is little argument that the rejuvenation of Islam has filled a huge ideological vacuum for many Central Asian Muslims, men and women alike. But it is important to distinguish between the two ends of the continuum of fundamental religious Islam and daily cultural practices or "everyday Islam," since the latter was maintained throughout the Soviet period. People claim they are Muslim, like stating an ethnic affiliation, but far fewer practice religious Islam.[5] In general, the relative knowledge of religious Islam and Islamic law in Central Asia is still in its infancy, as the region's leaders still prefer state secularism, and legal authority remains vested in the state Islamic law.[6]

Central Asian women who were raised with the Soviet notion of equal rights among the sexes find themselves confronted by pre-Soviet religious ideals. They see themselves caught in what Leila Ahmed calls the "web of double loyalties," i.e. choosing between "betrayal and betrayal." If they publicly express gender-related concerns, they are seen as siding with the former colonizers, in this case the Soviets, while expressing national or religious interests is representative of a denial of their feminine identity and rights.[7]

Even in regions of Kyrgyzstan, which is often seen as the least religious state of Central Asia, mullahs have publicly considered the reinstitution of the custom of veiling women. Local politicians also echo such cries for the restriction of women's rights as a means of winning favor with various influential Muslim leaders. Medical practitioners have also observed such religious conservatism. A female physician in the southern city of Osh described to me how she no longer counsels women about abortion, nor does she like to perform abortions any more as she feels apprehensive about possible repercussions from community leaders. She

further depicted a situation of increasing poverty among women who were not earning an income outside the home, but were having more children instead, as religious leaders urged.

There is also great regional variation in the way Islam is practiced. My colleague, anthropologist Elizabeth Constantine, has challenged the notion of deep religious adherence in the rural regions of Uzbekistan, using the example of women seeking to participate in religious activities (e.g. *bibi seshanba/myshkylshod*).[8] Among members of her age cohort, they found her idea of receiving religious instruction amusing, as such ceremonies were typically attended by older women. In Tashkent, Constantine found a thriving religious center where female leaders *(atunchi)* were turning away young students—all eager to don the veil and begin studying the Quran. Certainly, in Kazakhstan and the northern part of Kyrgyzstan, religious practices of Islam play a far lesser role in women's daily lives. In fact, one of my Kyrgyz colleagues explained in a matter-of-fact way that "men are Muslims, but women are shamans," referring to the Kyrgyz shamanistic traditions which date back centuries.

Nevertheless, whether women are directly or indirectly involved in religious practices of Islam, it is clear that the ideal of what determines a "good Central Asian woman" has changed from Soviet practices and now is being influenced by more conservative values. Obviously, this sentiment has many repercussions for young nations that are creating new constitutions and legal structures, and where the presence and voices of women are being more and more marginalized in public fora.

GLOBALISM AND THE MEDIA

By contrast to the conservative notions about women propagated by religious traditions, one of the great contradictions in the shifting ideological terrain is the incredible increase and influence of global media in the everyday lives of Central Asians, especially upon the young. And since 45 percent of the 70 million Central Asians are under 25 years of age, this trend is significant. While Soviet notions once emphasized and rewarded Central Asian women for not drawing attention to themselves, their contribution of hard work, and reproductive abilities, the other extreme is now embraced by men and women alike: the emphasis on high fashion, youth and beauty. Since *glasnost* and the break-up of the Soviet Union in

1991, the Central Asian home has been subjected to a rapid influx of consumerist imagery and rhetoric through television commercials and programming. The most popular television genre is the imported daytime serial drama—better known as the soap opera. In the absence of educational programs, Central Asians have gleaned information about the Western world through such popular media. Rather than the Soviet model of strong, self-disciplined female workers, television images instead emphasize youth, beauty, promiscuity, and wealth.

The emphasis on youthfulness, for example, has entered into the formal labor market where job announcements in local newspapers now unabashedly advertise for "young, attractive females." Middle-aged Kyrgyz women with whom I spoke often described the feeling of being discriminated against in job interviews, saying that their experience did not count, only their appearance. Thus, the post-Soviet ideological terrain is not only embraced in conservative religious notions or ethnic charters, but also in "globally-defined fields of possibility," in which, for many young women in particular, consumption of both material goods and commodified images are essential for carving out their post-Soviet identity.[9]

IMPOVERISHMENT

No matter the level of literacy or work experience Central Asian women gained over the past 70 years, the last decade has seen many women mired in the new poverty engulfing the region. It is not that women are any more poor than men but they are more burdened. With the loss of socialism and safety nets, including child care, pensions for the elderly, universal health-care, etc., women are not only responsible for taking care of their own families and extended families, but many continue to be the primary breadwinner in the household. There is simply no time for most women to partake in anything beyond survival strategies, much less the public political process. Furthermore, poverty has undermined the voices and participation of Central Asian women. Their silence is articulated by one young rural Kyrgyz mother who expressed angrily in an interview, "New democracies and economies are of no use when people can no longer feed or clothe their families."

Certainly, the legacy of the Soviet period when Central Asian women did have a voice in public forums and in local government, albeit via quo-

tas, should give some hope about the possibility of them playing an important role in current nation-building efforts. Indeed, few Muslim countries compare favorably to Central Asia with its Soviet legacy of high female literacy, child care benefits, work opportunities, and experience in the public sphere of life. It is important not to be blindsided by the return to "traditionalism" and ignore the impact that Sovietization had on Central Asian women, especially in regards to work and educational opportunities. The Soviet experience can, in many ways, be seen as one of the potential strengths that Central Asian women can build on, and utilize in order to gain a voice during these early phases of nation building.

As noted here, while many factors serve to undermine women's involvement in the nation-building processes, some important efforts are being made to help curtail the trend toward women's marginalization. The rapid expansion of the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is a hopeful sign. Even the most conservative state, Turkmenistan, boasts a women's NGO named for the president's mother. We should, however, be wary of putting all our eggs in the NGO basket, since NGOs cannot substitute for good laws that protect the constitutional rights of women. Indeed, women need to be directly involved in the policy and decision-making processes underway. As Partha Chatterjee emphasized in his research of post-colonial realities, there is no substitute for women's active involvement in the nation-building process.[10]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my goal has been to examine the various ways in which the role of women in Central Asian society has become a contested site for political, economic, and religious projects that are intently focused on the past. For those of us who work closely with international institutions, it is important to be cognizant of the processes by which women are silenced, namely through traditionalism or pre-Soviet ideologies recreated in the name of ethnicity and Islam. We must consider the large number of Central Asian women who are facing new and increasing poverty. What are the implications for this large underclass of women and their children, when, as one older women described, women are in the miserable position of having so little that they must choose whether to buy seeds for

planting or shoes for their children? These are critical concerns that must be addressed in the current nation-building efforts in Central Asia, and cannot be ignored by international institutions supporting democratization in this part of the world.

The woman described in the opening vignette, who stood in the old Soviet cemetery praying with a Muslim leader while holding onto a shopping bag printed with a photo of a nude woman, offers a metonym for the mutability of gender norms interacting in the post-Soviet world of Central Asia. Multiple gender ideologies—Soviet, Islamic, nationalism and globalism have each set their agendas for repositioning Central Asian women. Increasingly, poverty and perhaps a potential war on Central Asian territory will no doubt have the ultimate say in women's ability to play an active role in the fragile process of nation-building underway in these countries today. I close with fewer answers than questions raised, and perhaps a less than optimistic outlook for the region, for I agree with Lata Mani's observation that "the fate of women and the fate of the emerging nation [are] inextricably intertwined."[11] To Or another way to express this is to move from the abstract to the concrete, as one Kyrgyz woman from a southern coal mining region summarized the situation in her vernacular, "Women are the canaries in a coal mine, if we can't survive, then who will?"[12]

ENDNOTES

1. Leila Abu-Lughod, L. (1998) ""The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt; Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics,"" in L. Abu-Lughod, L. (ed.), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East,* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) 243-269.

2. I gratefully acknowledge the Mellon Foreign Area Fellowship, Library of Congress (2000) and the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies Title VIII Research Fellowship (1999-2000) for support of my post-doctoral research in the area of Central Asian studies, women and Islam. I also acknowledge the following institutions for support in my fieldwork research and dissertation write-up: The Social Science Research Council Dissertation Fellowship, 1995-96; The University of Minnesota Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, 1994-95; IREX Long-Term Research Grant, 1993-94; The Wenner-Gren Anthropological Foundation, 1993-94; and The University of Minnesota Block Grants, 1991, 1992, 1993.

3. Kathleen Kuehnast, ""From Pioneers to Entrepreneurs: Young Women, Consumerism, and the "world picture" in Kyrgyzstan,"" in *Central Asian Survey,* Vol. 17, No. 4, 639–654.

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6. Shirin Akiner, ""On its Own: Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia,"" *Harvard International Review,* Spring 1993, 18-21.

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8. Elizabeth Constantine. ""Women and Breaking Gender Stereotypes in Rural Uzbekistan,"" Presentation for The World Bank, February 1999.

9. Arjun Appadurai, ""Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,"" *Public Culture,* Vol. 2, No. 2, 1-24.

10. Partha Chatterjee (1993) *The Nation and its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

11. Lata Mani, ""Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,"" p. 118.

12. As quoted in Kathleen Kuehnast, ""Canaries in a Coal Mine? Women and Nation-Building in the Kyrgyz Republic,"" *The Anthropology of East Europe Review,* Vol. 14, No. 2, 21-33

THE FEMALE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN IRAN: A PARADOX OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

GOLNAR MEHRAN

The educational experience of Iranian women has been marked by contradiction since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Some of the educational measures undertaken by Iran's religious leaders have been:

- Banning of co-education at all levels, except at universities.
- Segregating teaching so that only female teachers can teach in girls' schools and boys are taught by men – unless there is a shortage of female teachers in remote rural areas.
- Introducing compulsory veiling at girls' schools beginning at age six.
- Denying single women access to state scholarships for foreign study at the university level. Since early 2001, single women are allowed to study abroad after having acquired the consent of their fathers.
- Explicit gender stereotyping in school textbooks in which there is clear division of labor between men and women, i.e. men work outside the home, providing food, shelter, and clothing for the family while women stay home to cook, clean, and raise the children.
- Overt guidance of girls towards "female-oriented" studies in order to prepare them for "real" life as wives and mothers.
- Banning female university students from entering "inappropriate studies for women," including mining, petroleum engineering, veterinary science, and agricultural engineering. The ban is now lifted on most disciplines.

What has been the result of such traditional measures? Twenty two years after the revolution, Iran has witnessed:

- Unprecedented female enrollment rates at all levels of education, so that there is now 93 per cent female enrollment at the primary school

level – far exceeding the Middle East and North Africa regional average of 76 per cent.

- During the 1999-2000 academic year, 53 per cent of the students accepted at state universities were women.
- The gender gap has been reduced at all levels. 48 per cent of all pupils at primary school, 49 per cent of those in secondary school, 61 per cent of students at the pre-university level, and 47 per cent of university students are women.
- An increasing number of secondary school girls are studying "masculine" fields – 42 per cent of the students in math-physics and 61 per cent of those studying experimental sciences are girls.
- At the university level, more and more women are studying "male-oriented" disciplines such as agriculture, veterinary science, and engineering. 58 per cent of all university students in the medical school are women.

Why have Iranian women been successful in overcoming the limitations imposed on them? How can a traditional society ruled by religious authorities produce so many educated women? How can there be so many apparent contradictions? What can we learn from the Iranian experience? In this opinion, the coexistence of such seemingly contradictory elements reflects the paradox of tradition and modernity in post-revolutionary Iran. To understand the paradox, one must recognize the nature of the Iranian society since 1979 and the dual role assigned to women ever since.

THE NATURE OF THE IRANIAN SOCIETY

Post-1979 Iran is an Islamized, modernizing, and revolutionary society. The term "Islamized" is used to differentiate it from a simply Islamic society – one characterized by a predominantly Muslim population and the prevalence of Islamic beliefs and practices in the private lives of its inhabitants. An Islamized society, on the other hand, is marked by politicized Islam governing both the private and public lives of individuals. The strict enforcement of religious laws in all spheres of life and the rule of religio-political authorities is what distinguishes Islamized Iran from other Muslim societies.

The command of religious ideology in contemporary Iran has led most outside observers to view this country as a predominantly traditional one. The reality is that Iranian society is bound by both the forces of tradition and modernity. The governance of religious law and the reaffirmation of the Islamic identity have led to a conscious revival of traditional beliefs and practices. On the other hand, the realization of the importance of industrialization and technological advancement, and, more recently, political development has led to a drive to modernize. Yet modernization in Iran is consciously and deliberately separated from Westernization, and a modern society is not viewed as necessarily a Westernized one.

Last, but not least, is the revolutionary nature of the Iranian society. The 1979 revolution has created a society marked by the active participation of citizenry from all walks of life in socio-political affairs. This has particularly been true among Iranian women, whose participation in the 1978-79 revolutionary process and increased awareness ever since has made it virtually impossible to return them to the home – secluded from public life and engaged solely in domestic tasks. What is the role of women in this Islamized-modernizing-revolutionary society? How does the educational system train female students to fulfill this role?

DUAL ROLE OF IRANIAN WOMEN

The Islamic Republic has assigned a dual role to Iranian women. The ideal female citizen of Iran is one who successfully responds to the demands of a traditional, Islamizing society while preparing herself for the exigencies of modernization and the commands of a revolutionary society. The "new Muslim woman" is, therefore, one who abides by the forces of tradition by assuming her role and responsibilities as wife and mother, acting as the "pivot" of the home and agent of stability in the family. Meanwhile, she is expected to be a responsible member of the society, involved in socio-political affairs, and acting as a "soldier of the revolution."

The dual role assigned to Iranian women is illustrated in President Khatami's words. According to him, the central role of the woman at home "as the manager and master of the house" should not marginalize her from public life, while her presence in the social arena should not lead to the deterioration of the family and undermining its strength and stability.

The paradox of tradition and modernity in the duality of the female role is evident in the goals set for female education in the Islamic Republic. The following are examples of educational goals:

- Improving the conditions of women through education and increasing women's participation in the socio-economic affairs of the society and the family.
- Bringing about a higher level of participation among women in social, cultural, educational, and economic affairs while maintaining the values of the family and the character of the Muslim woman.

It is clear that the written policy of the Iranian government has not aimed at isolating women from public life, keeping them uneducated, and restricting them to the performance of domestic chores. It is inevitable that an Islamizing society should view motherhood as a value and emphasize its importance in maintaining stability in the family – this is where tradition is in command. Yet it is in accordance with the dire needs of a revolutionary and modernizing society that women are encouraged to participate in socio-economic and political development. Meanwhile the Iranian authorities have used education as an agent of socialization, Islamization, and politicization.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE IRANIAN EXPERIENCE

One can learn from the Iranian experience by understanding how the paradox of tradition and modernity has been used by Iranian women to their own advantage. The phenomenon of unprecedented female participation in the education sector may be analyzed from three perspectives. On the one hand, it could be argued that the Islamization of education – manifested in the banning of co-education, veiling, using female instructors to teach girls, and increasing the number of hours allocated to the study of religion and the recitation of the Quran – has opened the school doors to the daughters of more conservative and pious families who find post-revolutionary formal education culturally acceptable.

The second explanation is that the revolutionary nature of the society has led to school playing an important role in bringing about social justice. Viewed as an "equalizer" and a critical factor in social mobility, the

Islamic Republic has deliberately used formal schooling to close the gap between the educational level of the haves and have-nots, by expanding educational opportunities for the urban poor, rural residents, nomads, and women. The 1988 *Education Plan* states that "the Ministry of Education should eliminate any form of discrimination against girls, especially in rural areas and among nomads, and give priority to girls in the distribution of resources and opportunities."

Finally, female education has been yet another manifestation of modernization in Iran along with improved health, increased life expectancy rates, accelerated urbanization, greater mass media coverage, formation of the civil society, and increased participation in public affairs. The latter deserves special attention given the increasingly visible role of women in public life. Not only have Iranians witnessed higher rates of female representation in the parliament and local councils, but they have also been exposed to female artists, filmmakers, journalists, publishers, authors, scholars, researchers, physicians, scientists, lawyers, managers, and university professors who have managed to survive and excel despite attempts by traditionalists to "contain" them. Although the dominant model of womanhood prevalent in the Islamic Republic is still one of a wife and mother, the active presence of women in non-traditional professions has provided an alternative image and a modern role model for young girls and their families whose demand for educational facilities often exceeds the available supply.

In the end, one can understand how tradition and modernity, placed in a revolutionary context, can coexist, each curbing the extremism of the other. The paradox can be understood only if one ceases to look at Iranian women as passive recipients of welfare measures and begins to analyze how they have made the best use of the opportunities created by the interplay of tradition and modernity to become active participants in educational endeavors. Could one conclude that the Islamic Republic has failed to create its ideal female citizen – the new Muslim woman? I believe a more accurate assessment would be that Iranian women have used the paradox of tradition and modernity to serve their own purpose – which is none other than empowerment.

GLOBALIZATION AND WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

VALENTINE M. MOGHADAM

I will briefly discuss globalization in its different dimensions, identify its gender aspects, and discuss how it affects the Middle East and especially women in the region.

First, globalization as I understand it: Globalization is a complex and multi-dimensional process in which the mobility of capital, organizations, ideas, discourses, and peoples take on an increasingly global, transnational and integrated form. As such, globalization has economic, political, cultural, social, and spatial dimensions, although it is (arguably) at its heart an economic process driven by technological, financial, and business interests.

One may regard globalization as the latest stage of capitalism, with the major institutions of economic globalization being the MNCs, the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, the U.S. Treasury and indeed the ministries of finance of an increasing number of states. Economic globalization has its detractors and its enthusiasts. The enthusiasts claim that economic liberalization – of prices, trade and financial markets – will lead to domestic and foreign investments, economic growth, employment generation, and higher standards of living. The detractors point out that it leads to cutthroat competition, reduced social spending, widening income gaps, growing inequalities, and rising unemployment. Feminists point out that in either case, it devolves upon women to provide both productive and reproductive labor, often with **inadequate** or no remuneration and with few social rewards. Of course, some women do fare well with economic globalization, but the available evidence shows that indeed there is a serious downside to the global shift from Keynesian to neoliberal economics.

Political globalization refers in part to an increasing trend toward multilateralism and transnational political activity, in which the United Nations plays a key role, national nongovernmental organizations act as watchdog over governments, transnational advocacy movements increase their activities and influence, and moves are made toward the establish-

ment of an International Criminal Court. Some have called this the making of a global civil society, while others have raised concerns about the continued political power of the countries of NATO and the OECD. Political scientists and sociologists have pondered the prospects of the nation-state and national sovereignty in a context of regionalization and globalization in which international financial institutions and other institutions of global governance have increasing power over national economies and state decision-making.

Cultural globalization refers to worldwide cultural standardization – as in "Coca Colonization" and "McDonaldization" – but also to postcolonial cultures, cultural pluralism, and "hybridization." The various aspects of globalization have promoted growing contacts between different cultures, leading partly to greater understanding and cooperation and partly to the emergence of transnational communities and hybrid identities. But globalization has also hardened the opposition of different identities. This has taken the form of, *inter alia*, reactive movements such as fundamentalisms, which seek to recuperate traditional patterns, including patriarchal gender relations, in reaction to the "Westernizing" trends of globalization. Various forms of identity politics are the paradoxical outgrowth of globalization.

Consistent with the contradictory nature of globalization, the impact on women has been mixed. One feature of economic globalization has been the generation of jobs for women in export-processing, free trade zones, and world market factories. This has enabled women in many developing countries to earn and control income and to break away from the hold of patriarchal structures, including traditional household and familial relations. However, much of the work available to women is badly paid, or demeaning, or insecure; moreover, women's unemployment rates are higher than men's almost everywhere. The feminization of poverty is another unwelcome feature of economic globalization. Worse still is the apparent growth in trafficking in women, or the migration of prostituted women.[1]

The weakening of the nation-state and the national economy similarly has contradictory effects. On the one hand, the withering away of the welfarist, developmentalist state as a result of the neoliberal economic policy turn is a uniformly negative outcome for women, in developed and developing regions alike. On the other hand, the globalization of concepts and discourses of human rights and of women's rights, and the activities of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) are emboldening women

and creating space for women's organizations to grow at both national and global levels. In turn, this represents a counter-trend to the particularisms and the identity politics of contemporary globalization. Indeed, in my view, the one positive aspect of globalization has been precisely the proliferation of women's movements at the local level, the emergence of transnational feminist networks working at the global level, and the adoption of international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women.

Theorists have distinguished between globalization-from-above and globalization-from-below. The former refers to those neoliberal economic policy measures (e.g., the "Washington Consensus" or "Atlantic Consensus") that have been criticized. The latter refers to those transnational advocacy networks, global social movements, or solidarity movements across borders – environmental, human rights, labor rights, and women's rights movements and organizations. Even the groups that make up what is called the anti-globalization movement in fact reflect the positive side of globalization – that is, the ability of people to unite and act transnationally. Although there have been international solidarity movements in the past (e.g., the abolition movement, the suffrage movement, the workers movement), contemporary globalization-from-below is distinguished by its breadth, scope, and efficacy, largely the result of the technological revolution.

Compared to other regions in the world economy, the Middle East and North Africa is, for better or for worse, less integrated into the trade and financial circuits of the global economy, participating largely as an exporter of oil, and receiving less foreign direct investment (FDI) than other middle-income regions. This has implications for female labor and employment patterns. Compared to other regions in the world-economy women still have lower rates of employment. [See Table 1.] This may also be a factor in the low rates of political participation among women. [See Table 2.] Women's political participation in formal organizations – trade unions, women's organizations, political parties, solidarity networks – is usually correlated with employment and educational attainment.

Another issue that concerns me is the apparent absence of Middle Eastern women from transnational advocacy networks, especially the transnational feminist networks that I study, such as DAWN and

Table 1. Gender Gaps in Economic Activity, Arab States in Comparative Perspective

Region	Female Economic Activity Rate (age 15+)		
	Rate (%) 1997	Index (1985=100) 1997	As % of Male Rate 1997
All Developing Countries	39.3	111.3	68.0
Least Developed Countries	41.1	99.7	76.5
Sub–Saharan Africa	37.8	97.7	73.9
East Asia	55.1	114.2	86.6
East Asia (excluding China)	41.2	126.1	69.7
South–East Asia and the Pacific	41.7	118.6	74.1
South Asia	29.1	99.4	51.7
South Asia (excluding India)	29.5	114.2	55.9
Latin America and the Caribbean	28.8	140.0	51.3
Eastern Europe and the CIS	45.6	97.3	82.4
Industrialized Countries	41.9	119.4	72.6
World	40.2	111.3	69.8
Arab States	19.2	123.7	38.6

Source: UNDP, *Human Development Report 1999*, p. 236.

WLUML, which are two of the best-known ones. Of course, individual Middle Eastern women are involved in some transnational networks, and the formation of the Amman branch of SIGI is an important example.[2] However, there is still not a critical mass of Middle Eastern women involved in major transnational advocacy networks (compared to, say, the women of India or Latin America); rather, political activism remains within a national and largely nationalistic and religious framework.

Thus, the women of the Middle East seem to be somewhat marginal to globalization-from-above, and to globalization-from-below. The good news, of course, is that women's groups are proliferating in the region, and some are beginning to work together in a coordinated fashion, such as the

Table 2. Women and Political Participation – Middle East and North Africa

Country	Year women received right to vote	Year women received right to stand for election	Year first women elected (E) or nominated (N) to parliament	Women in Gov't All levels (%) 1996	Women in Gov't Ministerial levels (%) 1996	Women in Government Subminist. levels (%) 1996
Algeria	1962	1962	1962 N	4.8	0.0	8.3
Bahrain	1973 +	1973 +	..	0.0	0.0	0.0
Egypt	1956	1956	1957 E	4.0	3.1	4.5
Iran	1963	1963	1963 E+N	0.4	0.0	0.5
Iraq	1980	1980	1980 E	0.0	0.0	0.0
Jordan	1974	1974	1989 N	3.4	6.1	0.0
Kuwait	C	C	C	4.9	0.0	6.7
Lebanon	1952	1952	1991 N	0.0	0.0	0.0
Libya	1964	1964	E	3.4	4.5	0.0
Morocco	1963	1963	1993 E	0.9	0.0	1.4
Oman	C	C	C	3.6	0.0	4.1
Qatar	C	C	C	0.0	0.0	0.0
Saudi Arabia	C	C	C	0.0	0.0	0.0
Syria	1953	1953	1973 E	3.9	6.8	1.7
Tunisia	1959	1959	1959 E	7.9	2.9	10.9
Turkey	1930	1934	1935 N	5.0	2.9	5.6
UAE	1997 +	1997+	D	0.0	0.0	0.0
Yemen	1967 f	1967f	1990 E+	0.0	0.0	0.0

Source: UNDP, *Human Development Report 1999*, Table 28.

+   No information or confirmation available

a.   Refers to year in which right to election or representation on a universal and equal basis was recognized. In some
     countries confirmation and constitutional rights came later.

b.   Including elected heads of state and governors of central banks.

c.   Women's right to vote and to stand for election has not been recognized.

d.   The country has not yet elected or nominated a woman to the national parliament

e.   Exact date when a woman was first elected or nominated to parliament is not available.

f.   Refers to the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen

Maghreb–Mashreq Link. Women's organizations include professional asso-
ciations, charitable societies, women's studies centers, women's rights
organizations, development NGOs that service women, and worker-based
organizations, as well as the official or governmental women's organizations.
Women's groups, and especially feminist groups, are working toward the
following: (1) modernization of family law; (2) criminalization of violence
against women, including domestic violence and honor crimes; (3) granti-
ng women nationality rights; (4) enhancing women's employment and
political participation. These objectives entail efforts to enhance women's
civil, political, and social rights. There is some evidence of human rights
and women's rights groups working together, as well, and such coalitions
could positively affect public policy in countries of the region in the future.

On the other hand, there are serious obstacles to women's political
participation, and these limit the potential for social and gender transfor-
mations in the region. The absence of democratic institutions and the
continuing influence of Islamist forces are the major structural constraints
to women's political participation and advancement. In addition, socio-
demographic factors such as the relatively small population of educated
and employed women preclude widespread activism by women *as women,*
attenuating the development of feminist activism or a social movement of
women. These structural and socio-demographic factors attenuate the
formation of a critical mass of politically engaged women who can influ-
ence public policy and the direction of social change in the short term.

In the longer term, secular changes such as increased educational
attainment and participation in the labor force by women, as well as polit-
ical democratization, will accelerate the formation of a critical mass of
politically engaged women. In the meantime, it is important for activists
in the Middle East to link up with transnational networks, which could
provide support as well as foster additional political experience.

ENDNOTES

1. For an elaboration, see Valentine M. Moghadam (Spring 1999) "Gender
and Globalization: Female Labor and Women's Mobilizations," *Journal of World-
Systems Research*, vol. 5, no. 2: 301–314. http://csf.colorado.edu/jwsr
2. DAWN is the acronym for Development Alternatives With Women
for a New Era; WLUML is Women Living Under Muslim Laws; SIGI is the
Sisterhood is Global Institute.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF AN EXPERIENCE: ON SETTING UP A WOMEN'S CENTER AT TEHRAN UNIVERSITY

Jaleh Shadi-Talab

Attempts for establishing the Center for Women's Studies (CWS) at Tehran University were initiated in 1994. Nearly seven years later, we are in the final stages of this process, one that has not always been easy.

The purpose of this paper is to convey the details of such an endeavor in a developing country. The seven-year period can be divided into three sub-periods. Each period witnessed different cultural, social and political conditions. Activities advanced relative to these conditions in each period. The result, in addition to setting up an institution for research on women's issues in Iran, shows two basic particularities with respect to developing countries:

1) Development plans would be more successful when they are prepared through a combination of two approaches, namely bottom-up and top-down; and
2) Changes in women's status and consideration of their demands in development programs depend, in large part, on women's presence at the highest levels of the decision-making process and their active participation in devising plans for development that seek to advance women's status or address their particular needs.

INTRODUCTION

Iranian society, after the Islamic revolution, was faced with an imposed war, many bottlenecks in the economy, and socio-political upheavals. In such a situation, although thousands of questions on different subjects were raised and programs for drastic structural changes were implemented, quick answers and solutions were required. There was no time for conducting research in order to find out the most suitable solutions. As a result,

the changes were created based on an individual's intuition rather than studies and research results. Research was relegated to a secondary status in the country's list of priorities, especially research on women's issues.

Changes in women's status in Iran were possibly the most important and broadest of developments following the Islamic revolution. World media focused on these changes. With the difficulties following the revolution (a normal and expected course of events) and with the presence of war and the existing state ideology, discussion of women's problems or their future demands were not prioritized and were seen as time consuming endeavors. In this atmosphere, even if sociologists or other experts were provided with an opportunity to bring attention to the impact of policies, which had not resulted from research or planned studies, government planners were often unwilling to invest their energies on matters deemed as having little or no priority. To pose the right questions and to find out appropriate answers to social problems and issues required a great deal of time – this was considered as a factor which slowed down the process of change.

At the end of the eight-year war with Iraq, in an environment that can be described as more friendly and calm, and with the recognition of the impact of one of the most important policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) – the population boom policy – and the increasing acceptance of the need for deliberation on the long-term effects of adopted policies in the first decade after the revolution, posing questions on the condition of Iranian women was slowly tolerated. These questions included:

- What do we know about Iranian women after the revolution?
- What are the changes in the status of Iranian women since the revolution?
- What has been the impact of these changes on Iranian society?
- How have women coped with the changes in their lives after the revolution?
- What are women's expectations?
- In what sectors are women most active?
- What is expected of women on a national level?

Without research, these questions could not be answered. The necessity to raise questions on women's problems and study the processes and

outcomes of the changes, which could indeed be labeled as a feminist inquiry, was the basic motivation for discussing the need and proposing a request to establish a Women's Studies Center at the University of Tehran.

The processes I have experienced is the central theme of my discussion. Therefore it is called "A Phenomenology of an Experience."

THE CONTEXT

The seven-year period of setting up the Women's Studies Center could be divided into three sub-periods. The criteria for the division is the cultural-social changes at the macro-level (society) and at the meso-level (the university). In each period, the rate of advancement will be pointed out with qualitative descriptions of the contextual peculiarities.

FIRST PERIOD

I must describe the conditions of the years 1994 and 1995. As we all know, social and cultural qualifications of a society in any time is the outcome of the incidents of past decades, even centuries, although we are looking into a specific time period.

Macro Socio-Cultural Context

In this part, I will be examining the impact of policies and programs designed and implemented before the revolution and the outcome of those programs:

Inherited Polarity in Women's Situation

Development programs and policies and the resulting changes in women's status before the revolution had resulted in a socio-cultural dualism. Despite the fact that many policies were implemented with a view to improving women's status and the positive aspects of these changes, such as the right to vote, increased number of female representatives in Parliament, increased job opportunities for women (especially in industry), reforms in the Family Protection Law, and increasing levels of women's literacy (however very slow), they resulted in a socio-cultural dualism.

To show this duality, I refer to the latest pre-revolutionary information from a census of and research findings at the national level:[1]

- Women's share of higher education (university degree) total number of women 10 years of age and older – 0.7 per cent
- The rate of illiteracy total number of women 10 years of age or older (rate of illiteracy / women in urban areas) (44.4 per cent) (rate of illiteracy / women in rural areas) (82.7 per cent)
- Women's share with higher education among employed women – 4.7 per cent
- Employed women's share among women 10 and over – 10.8 per cent
- Share of housewives among women 10 and over – 68.8 per cent

Comparison of the information provided above shows that while a great majority of women – especially in rural areas – could not even read and write, a very small portion of women had obtained the highest levels of education (elites). Despite all the changes in the Pahlavi regime, a very small percentage of women entered the labor market (11 per cent), in contrast to the majority who stayed at home (68 per cent) who maintained all the characteristics generally associated with housewives in developing countries similar to Iran. However, duality was not specific to the women's situation, but was a characteristic of the system as a whole. Women's situation during that period and with respect to this duality, resulted in changes which were different in type and scope from the rest of society.

Findings at the national level provide a picture of people's attitudes towards women's work. With all the preparations and recommended policies, society as a whole did not approve of women's work. Those with negative attitudes towards women's work were four times greater in number than those who held positive attitudes towards women's work. Even among elites, those who disagreed with women's work were 1.5 times greater in number than those who agreed with it. There existed a more pronounced duality with respect to the practice of women's veiling – both in urban and rural areas – 61 per cent of urban dwellers and 87 per cent of people residing in rural areas completely agreed with the practice of veiling and strongly approved of women's veiling *(hijab)*.[2] However, the increasing rate of urbanization had increased the percentage of the population of those who agreed with policies designed to ban the veil, but in

general (both in urban and rural areas); two groups with two different attitudes coexisted and were recognizable. Social distance and duality in cultural aspects were more pronounced and recognizable in religious behaviors. While 56 per cent of those belonging to the so-called "traditional" sector of society (designated based on their level of education) always prayed, 47 per cent of elites indicated that they never prayed.

With such a duality apparent in social and cultural aspects of Iranian life, consensus could be found mostly in the attitudes of Iranian society with respect to the family, which as a result of the revolution and debates that followed experienced changes – that is, 95 per cent of elites and 90 per cent of masses were against polygamy. Thereby, before the revolution the practice of polygamy was not accepted as a norm of society.[3]

Duality in opinions on social issues concerning women, keeping in mind that the relations and mutual understanding between elite women and masses of women were minimal at best, resulted in a cultural non-homogeneity, all of which was followed by the revolution.

Dilemma in the Women's Situation After the Revolution

The importance of creating structural changes in socio-economic sectors of society and in the society's value system were the most important social issues facing Iranian society after the revolution. One of the first policies adopted by the government following the revolution sought to define women's roles in a manner which was in line with the state's ideology – one which emphasized the value and importance of motherhood and housekeeping as the most suitable role for women. The adoption of this policy was followed by other policies outlining the appropriate types of employment and limited access to a number of fields in education.

Two essential changes in the Family Protection Law which followed the revolution included: (a) lowering the legal age of marriage to 9 years of age for girls; and (b) provision of some advantages for men for the practice of polygamy and divorce. As the result of these new policies, the share of traditional groups who disagreed with polygamy decreased by 40 per cent and among elites by nine per cent (the share of elites with a positive attitude towards polygamy increased from five to 14 per cent). According to the first census after the revolution (1986), the number of girls under the age of 14 who married increased by 2.4 per cent. The increase in the rate of women's employment witnessed a decrease after the revolution (from 13.8 to 8.9 per

cent). The changing definition of appropriate occupations for women impacted the type of occupations in which women were employed after the revolution (mostly, women lost their jobs in industry and moved to educational professions and the health sector). The number of housewives, which was on the decline before the revolution, was expected to continue to decrease, because of expanded educational opportunities for women and new employment opportunities; however, this figure remained constant at 69 per cent for a decade after the revolution. Along with the decreasing rate of women's economic participation, the indicator of their political participation, namely as elected members of parliament, decreased from seven per cent to 1.5 per cent, despite the fact that women were actively involved in the revolutionary movement and as voters in elections.[4]

Changes in the Indicators of Women's Participation

Since policies in different socio-economic and cultural domains were not in harmony, contradictions in their outcomes was an expected result:

- Opposition to women's employment, with unwritten discrimination against women's employment and restriction in job selection, despite no changes in employment laws or regulations.
- Emphasis on the importance of family institution, while changing the Family Protection Law in favor of men and allowing men more legal power in family matters and decision-making.
- Improving the educational system and making higher education more accessible. Encouraging parents to send their daughters to schools which are simultaneously segregated and Islamic, and introducing reforms in the content of educational materials that emphasized women's roles as mothers and housewives.
- The policy to provide higher educational opportunities even in the remotest areas and girls' eagerness to continue their education, while restricting the selection of majors for girls and women in institutions of higher learning.

It seems that the end results of these contradictory policies were not foreseen. Answers to following questions were needed:
- What are women's views on the family and on the changes in family laws?

- Has the rate of polygamy increased or decreased?
- Has women's status in the family structure improved and to what extent?
- Is temporary marriage (*mota')* accepted as a norm of the society?
- Where do women stand in the labor market?
- What is women's mobility in the job market?
- Are changes in women's political participation to the benefit of society?
- To what social class do the female members of parliament belong?
- What would be the outcome of girls' increasing enrollment ratio at the elementary education level?
- What would be the impact of expanding access to higher education for girls in remote areas?

To answer these questions based on scientific research and the need to plan for programs that seek to improve women's status was the main motivation behind the request to establish a research institution. Therefore, the proposition was made in the context of planned and unplanned changes at a time when no one had an idea about the outcome, and the correct answers to the questions that were being raised about the status of women. Policy proposals, which were based on the intuitive instincts of individuals, could indeed be misleading. At the same time, questioning existing policies regarding women was labeled as "feminism," with an extremist definition of the term and concept. At a time when relations with the West were antagonistic, such an act was perceived as unforgivable behavior.

Meso Socio–Cultural Context

As mentioned earlier, this is a narrative of what I have experienced in the process of setting up the Women's Studies Center and others involved in this process may offer a different picture or analysis of the events.

Development literature offers two basic approaches to planning (a) top-down approach and (b) bottom–up approach. The first one is older and has been applied more often. Actually the second approach was developed to eliminate the shortcomings of the first one. The experience of many developing countries has proved the top-down approach as less than desirable, wasteful of time and energy and leading to unsuccessful programs. Since a bottom–up approach starts with the people's needs and

motivations, the outcomes of development plans based on this approach have been more satisfying.

With such a belief, taking into consideration the changes at the macro-level and recognizing the necessity for understanding the problems of half of the population (i.e. women) setting up a research center was suggested utilizing both a top-down and a bottom up approach. A female faculty member (bottom) and the dean of the School of Social Sciences (top) at Tehran University, in September of 1994, led the process. The proposal was acknowledged with gratitude. But for one year I did not receive a reply to my request for setting up the CWS.

For the second time, I sent the same proposal to the dean's office and this time, it was discussed at the Research Council of the School. The Council's agreement was announced, but they suggested starting the activities of the CWS within the existing framework of the Research Institute of Social Science. They hoped that the activities for setting up the Center would be initiated at an appropriate time in the future.

This answer to my request was better than no answer, but it was not a very successful or satisfactory response. The proposed plan placed no restriction on conducting research at the university, if we could provide financial support from other organizations. But the need for an independent center with the facilities and financial support from the university's budget was a part of my original request and the Council's agreement was not very strong and clear on this point.

According to the rules, the Council's ratification should be reviewed in the Office of the Deputy Director in charge of research and then at the University's Highest Research Council, but it did not go that far. I took the initiative of going to the Deputy Director's office with the hope that I would be able to convince him of the importance of research on women's issues, hoping also that face-to-face discussions would help. But my attempts proved unsuccessful. His reasons for not accepting the ideas and rejecting the proposal were the difficulties in changing the structure of the School of Social Sciences and the University's structure – at a time when structural changes were taking place within almost every organization – and scarcity of the budget.

I was encouraged to start the work and seek financial support from the new office on "Women's Affairs" in the president's office. But after weighing options, I reached the conclusion that this strategy would be mislead-

ing and would not prove to be a positive development in for the future of the Center.

SECOND PERIOD (1996–2000)

This period was the longest, but with very little progress toward the goal. It was the beginning of a new period at the School of Social Science, since a younger dean replaced the key figure at the management level of the School with a completely new personality. Nothing else was changed. The new dean, with more courage and eager to expand his domain of authority, moved the project one step forward.

After one year (September 1995 – September 1996) the Research Council ratified a preliminary constitution for the Center, which included 6 chapters and 14 articles, and formally sent it to the Office of the Deputy for Research at the University. Based on lessons learned from previous attempts to gain support from the establishments, for the CWS and with a view to get approval, a principle of the Center was sacrificed. Therefore, the request made clear this time that research on women issues at the CWS would be conducted in response to the needs and the demands of government agencies, NGOs and international agencies. It was hoped that by eliminating the financial burden on the University, the establishment of the Center would move another step closer to reality. But our (now, I was not alone) endeavor did not get a positive reply. The answer, this year too, was similar to the response we received in our request the previous year: "Research on women's issues can be carried out in the existing framework of the School of Social Science and there is no need for an independent research center." Therefore, it appeared that opposition to our request was due to other reasons, beyond budgetary ones.

As a result, the School of Social Sciences provided us with a room and no changes in the formal approval of the university. Some of my colleagues tried to convince me to take this opportunity. They had the notion that, "once you start something it will go on." But I was afraid that starting the work informally might keep women's studies at a low priority level, by giving the impression that I had received my due share and should no longer "nag," at the same time putting me in the position of having to seek financial support for the CWS from other agencies, which was a source of income for the School of Social Sciences.

I continued to insist on creating an independent institution. I believed only in such a case it would be sustainable, that beneficiaries will decide on its activities and women would be able to actively participate in the decision-making process at the management level. Otherwise, women only serve as the ones doing the job, with no decision-making role.

To conduct research on women's problems under the jurisdiction of men could not be very successful. I was not against men and do not admire segregation, but in my research experience with male partners and through communication at work with male managers, I had become convinced that women-related issues cannot be understood correctly by men, and their influence on selection of research topics could be detrimental to the goals of the CWS. I have witnessed how discussions at meetings centered on the superiority of women at home and men's fear of their wives has served as a good tool for changing the subject of meetings and relaxing participants.

Despite all the efforts and precautionary measures taken by the new dean, and because of the university's resistance to the idea (the administrators tended to be engineers), our attempts did not bear the expected results. Nevertheless this was still one step closer to our desired results. Now, there was a file of my proposal and justifications for the Center for Women Studies at Tehran University.

THIRD PERIOD

This period, which is part of the so-called "Reform Period," started with a few simultaneous changes. Although these changes may appear very minor, they were very significant indeed. These changes are divided in two groups: 1) Structural and 2) Socio-cultural.

Structural
1) In 1994 within the President's office the Office on Women's Affairs was established to deal with women's affairs at the highest management level in the country and designated with the task of consulting the President on women's issues.
2) After five years of activities at the outset of the reform period, this office was raised to a higher level as the "Center for Women's Participation" (CWP) and the director of the Center was allowed to

participate in cabinet meetings. The deputy in charge of research at the CWP based on the evaluation of past activities developed a research program for collaboration with universities with a new agenda.

3) Government provided more funds for the CWP in the President's Office in order to cover wider activities and to deal with more contingencies.

4) The chapter on Science, Research and Technology, with the Third Development Plan (1999-2003), includes an article on the importance of research and emphasis on the establishment of research institutions as a joint venture between government agencies and universities.

5) The office in charge of applied research and cooperation between university and other organizations took on a more active role and accepted the creation of the Center for Women's Participation at the President's office.

6) Meetings between the representatives of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology with the Center for Women's Participation resulted in signing an agreement during "Women's Week" (2000) with a provision allowing for the establishment of the Center for Women's Studies at Tehran University.

With this agreement, meetings between CWP and the Office for Applied Research under the supervision of the Research Deputy at Tehran University began. However, the new management at the Office was not aware the request made by the School of Social Sciences five years ago. Therefore we were not invited to the meetings.

Since I was acquainted with the Deputy in charge of research, I took the initiative and talked to her and explained the whole story. She approved of the original idea and asked me to participate in the coming meetings. The Dean was supportive of the endeavor. Our request to handle the case and set up the Center in the School of Social Sciences was approved.

The agreement was that CWS would be a multidisciplinary organization, other Schools at Tehran University would be involved, and research would be carried out on a wide range and scope of subjects (from the humanities to health issues). The budget and financial support was to be

supplied by the President's office and the University assumed the responsibility of providing human resources, the facilities and building.

Consensus was reached very rapidly and I took the responsibility of setting up the center voluntarily without any formal decree.

Socio-cultural evolution

The policies and changes in the first decade after the revolution had an undeniable impact on society. Reforms in the Family Protection Law began. The requests to raise the age of marriage from nine,[5] to require the husband to obtain formal permission of the first wife before marrying a second wife,[6] and polygamy (which was loosing its status as a society's norm after the revolution), were increasingly being viewed from a negative standpoint by the Iranian people (opposition toward polygamy again reached 90 per cent).[7] With the increase in levels of education, new expectations for the family were emerging. Though divorce still lacks approval by the Iranian public, according to research findings, the ratio of women asking for divorce is increasing[8] and the most important reasons for the increase in the rates of divorce are women's refusal to be fully obedient to their husbands; women's dissatisfaction with their husband's second marriage; women's dissatisfaction with men's improper behavior and misconduct, etc.

Also the increase in the rate of girls' education, with more than 90 per cent school enrollment and particularly women's increasing share in higher education enrollment – more than 50 per cent for four consecutive years – represent major aspects in the evolution in women's status with distinguished socio-cultural impacts. Approval of women's work has been increasing. Young girls are more sensitive to discrimination against women in the society.[9] Also, inconsistencies between the realities of life and girls' expectations could serve as a catalytic force in facilitating more cultural changes in the future.

Another sign of cultural reforms, is the increasing number of women candidates for Islamic Councils. This trend shows that women's self confidence and their tendency to participate in the public sphere and outside of the private domain of the household is on the rise.[10] All social groups acknowledge evolution in women's socio-cultural life and the trend has received great acceptance: "The change in generation, and the change in demands, ideals and manners are a sign of a society's vibrancy. The emerg-

ing generation of reformists have their roots in their revolutionary ances-
try and this is not so much of a change but rather an evolution and proves
the vitality of the women's movement in Iranian society."[11]

    As such, one can argue that the changes in the structures of a few organ-
izations, new strategies put forth in the Third Development Plan, along with
the socio-cultural evolution of Iranian society as a whole, have prepared the
context and the grounds for establishing the Center for Women's Studies at
Tehran University. This time, the establishment of the institution had the
approval of decision-makers at the highest ministerial levels. But, still male
faculty members had different reactions to the CWS. I have categorized
them into three strata, which somehow provides a perspective of the atti-
tudes of elites in Iranian society at large. The categories are as follows:

1) Traditional Men: According to their beliefs, women should stay at
   home. Houskeeping is their most suitable role. Obedience of their
   husbands is expected. Women are needed to take care of the family
   and children. Their situation is pitiful and in any case they are needed
   for the sake of their children. This group's reaction does not necessar-
   ily relate to their religious beliefs and to them, feminism is a crime.

2) Moderate Men: This group, because of a desire to preserve the con-
   cept of family, display great affection for the concept of the family.
   They have a tendency to understand the concept of discrimination
   against women and tend to be sympathetic towards women's causes.
   They do not approve of feminism, either because of social pressures
   and beliefs apparent in society or because they tend to be truly criti-
   cal of the concept of feminism. Some of them encourage and are
   supportive of the women's movement on a moderate level, but do
   not express this viewpoint publicly.

3) Religious Intellectuals: This group is concerned about the disintegra-
   tion of the family unit within society. They emphasize the impor-
   tance of this social unit. They acknowledge discrimination against
   women and their ideal type is a society managed according to the
   rules of Islam they admit that discrepancies exist between their ideal
   of Islamic society and the society they live in. This group, in compar-
   ison to the other two groups, is younger and tends to be more enthu-
   siastic about expanding their authority. To them feminism is not a
   crime, though it does hold some negative connotations.

In the process of setting up the CWS I tried to disseminate information to the moderate group, to understand motivations and respect the values and norms of the third group and ignore the traditional group. Thus, CWS, through the employment of a combination of the planning approaches, as well as the presence of women at the highest levels of management in the country, has been established. We had a program to celebrate women researchers in December 2000 and an inauguration event in April 2001. The Center's activities started in April 2001, and we are actively seeking joint projects with universities and agencies in other countries. This is just the beginning.

ENDNOTES

1. Figures calculated based on Satistical Center of Iran's Reports, "Population Census," 1976 and 1986.

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3. ibid., pp. 31-34; 64-68.

4. Statistical Center of Iran, Population Census (1986).

5. Hamshahri (2000) (daily newspaper) "In the Parliament...." No. 2153, Tir 9 (June), Year 8, p. 12.

6. Golmohamadi, A. (1999) "Men Have to Get Permission from the Court for Second Marriage," *Zanan* Journal, Month of Mordad (July), Year 8, p. 62.

7. Mohseni, M. (2000) "Research on Knowledge, Attitudes and Socio-cultural Behaviors in Iran," *The Ministry of Ershad Islami*, p. 94.

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10. Namazi, B. (2000) "Situational Ananlysis of NGO in Iran" UNDP, pp. 121-124.

11. Mahboobeh, A. G. (2000) "Revolutionary Women, Reformist Women," *Farzaneh* (Journal of Women's Studies and Research), No. 10, Winter edition, p. 15.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN EGYPT: INITIATIVES IN LEGAL, ELECTORAL, AND NGO ACTIVISM

DIANE SINGERMAN

At the risk of being Iran-centric, yesterday's panels on women's political participation in Iran were so provocative and compelling, that my discussion of Egypt on this second day of the conference will use Iran occasionally as a comparative backdrop. Unlike most of the speakers in this conference, I am not active in the women's movement in Egypt, but an analyst of it. The comparative lens I will use to examine this heterogeneous and complicated movement in this brief discussion is informed by my research on gender, collective action and social movements, informal politics, and the everyday politics of excluded constituencies. I hope that through comparison to Iran's experience, I can highlight interesting similarities and raise questions about the particular challenges that many societies and nations face while pursuing women's rights.[1]

I want to start with a comment that Valentine Moghadam made at a conference that we both attended last year in Cairo. I remembered it as we heard about the struggles that Iranian women have waged under very difficult circumstances. At one point during the conference Val said that she had not visited Egypt for some time but by comparison to the situation in Iran where women and men were continually confronting the state at great cost, she was surprised by the lack of similar activism in Egypt. What were the constraints on political life for Egyptians and why were there few obvious, visible, public challenges to the government, despite legal opposition parties, a supposedly open press, well-established women's organizations, and parliamentary elections? In the Islamic Republic of Iran, by contrast, women and other activists were amazingly inventive and determined in challenging the government. What had happened to Egyptian political activism?

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the creation of the Islamic Republic had a demonstration effect throughout the region as the

Egyptian government, among others, used all of its resources to ensure that there would be no repeat performance. There has been a mobilization of the national security state, domestic forces, and international allies *against* the threat of Islamists. To forestall the Islamic revolutionary path and co-opt religious empathy, the Egyptian state has wrapped itself in renewed public piety that communicates to its people that it will protect moral, cultural, and religious heritage of Islam. Yet, the source of the regime's legitimacy is not, and has never been Islam, but nationalism, development, and more recently, economic growth.

In Egypt, there has been no real social revolution. The Free Officers came to power in 1952 and engineered many important changes in Egyptian political and economic life – but it is hard to claim that the *coup d'etat* was a revolution along the scale of Iran's social revolution. Despite Anwar Sadat's and Husni Mubarak's departure from Nasserist ideals, military officers are still at the heart of power in Egypt. Many of the *ancien regime* of pre-1952 Egypt have returned to economic and political prominence since Anwar Sadat's rule. The military has been in power for fifty years now, and its chief executive Husni Mubarak is only getting more *ancien* at 74 and in his fourth six-year unelected term as president.

Even before the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, but certainly right after it, President Mubarak mobilized national and international resources *against* the threat of Islamist radicals and the possibility of another Islamic Republic in Egypt. In an indirect manner, I would argue that the "women's movement" has been part of the state-controlled mobilization against the Islamists. Many of the organizations and activists that have fought for legal reforms for women, greater political participation, and inclusion in economic development plans have feared the rise of religious militancy in Egypt and have understood that their interests would not be furthered by the Muslim Brothers and far more radical Islamist groups. Thus, they have largely worked within the limited political space in Egypt, using their connections and positions with the government, their professional expertise, and their organizational bases to promote their agenda.

At the same time, even though many disagree that "Islam is the Solution" as a Muslim Brothers' campaign slogan argues, activists from a range of ideological positions and class and occupational backgrounds are using a religious discourse to achieve goals which had been previously defined as "secular." Some of the secular activists in the movement have

joined forces, or certainly tried to work together with their allies in the official religious establishment to achieve their goals. The women's movement itself has just constructed a winning parliamentary campaign to reform Personal Status Law, by adopting the language and strategies of Islamists in an inventive, if not brilliant way.

Throughout the twentieth century, as Margot Badran and others have argued, women's organizations have had minor successes in improving women's legal position in marriage and divorce (1995). Personal Status Law regulates marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance in Egypt, and this realm of law, unlike civil or criminal legal codes, remains closely linked to Islamic law. The most significant improvements in Personal Status Law were won by the hard work of many Egyptian organizations and activists in league with Jihan Sadat, the late President Sadat's wife. In 1979, the president forced significant reforms through Parliament, yet the new amendments to the law were later found unconstitutional in 1985 several years after Sadat's assassination, despite the best efforts of its supporters.

Never detoured, lawyers and activists appropriated an obscure version of divorce that is specifically referenced in the *hadith* and more generally in the Quran which allows a woman to initiate a divorce, if she renounces her financial rights to compensation for divorce. The Prophet Mohammed had been approached by a woman seeking a divorce because she detested her husband even though he was an honorable man. She asked for the divorce, according to the *hadith*, because she did not want to commit any wrongs. The Prophet heard her plea and asked her husband to divorce her if she returned the dowry of a garden that he had given her and renounced her right to that part of the dowry that is stipulated in the case of divorce (*mu'akhar saddaq*). The supporters of this reform effort solicited the approval of the Sheikh of Al-Azhar and other religious institutions in contemporary Egypt before presenting the bill for approval in the Egyptian Parliament.

This same reform bill also simplified the procedure for divorce in a common-law ('*urfi*) marriage and for proving paternity. Similarly, a new standard form of the marriage contract that obligates newlyweds to put their fingerprints on the contract and attach photographs to it (to counteract proxy and underage marriages) was issued in June 2000 by the Ministry of Justice. The couple must declare that they have no "serious

diseases," the divorce history of the couple must be declared and any previous wife's address and name provided. In addition, a new check-off option on the marriage contract allows a woman to stipulate at the time of the marriage that she maintains the right to divorce (known as keeping the right to divorce "in the bride's hand"). This new marriage contract and the new *khulla* divorce are examples of how the women's movement has been using a religious discourse and tradition to [re]claim women's rights within Islamic law and tradition. These reforms, thus legitimated by the religious orthodoxy and the state, are much less vulnerable to charges that they are inspired and promoted by Westernized secular feminists.

Since the revolution, some women in Iran have been using their knowledge and understanding of Islam to promote women's rights and status, within the confines of the current political order. It is interesting that in Egypt the strategy of women's activism to use a religious discourse to gain their objectives resembles their Iranian counterpart's struggles, despite vast differences in the appearance of both regimes: one, revolutionary and legitimated by religious law and dominated by clerics; the other, a nationalist, secular authoritarian regime with deep ties to the military. The interpretive project of women activists in Egypt, however, sometimes conflicts with the official religious establishment, and often conflicts with the platforms of Islamist intellectuals and religious leaders.

The second comparison to the Iranian case I would like to discuss briefly is the unintentional alliance between the women's movement and the state that has occurred in Egypt since 1952 and in Pahlavi Iran. Mervat Hatem's discussion of state feminism in Egypt (1996) and Parvin Paidar's (1996) discussion about the Shah of Iran's symbolic utilization of women in his modernist campaign is a theme that resonates in many countries in the Middle East.[2] This argument suggests a certain type of "path dependence" that is generated by these alliances. Once the women's movement relies upon the state to gain female suffrage or public education, there are certain consequences that follow in that the aims and interests of the women's movement become entangled with the state. Thus, a popular perception emerges that links the agenda of the women's movement to the state. Those who oppose the state and its regime are likely to oppose the women's movement due to this alliance. Even beyond the routine deep problems that patriarchy poses for women everywhere, while state feminism produced some notable achievements for women it also made

the entire agenda of the women's movement vulnerable to charges of complicity with unrepresentative and unpopular regimes.

In Iran, political debates about the position of women, her dress, right to work, to education, marry and divorce became intensely politicized as the Revolution unfolded. As Deniz Kandiyoti has argued, Islam is written on the body of a woman, and the honor and dignity of nations are contested on the bodies of women.[3] Women's rights were negatively associated with the Pahlavi monarchy and once Khomeini's regime rose to power, "feminism" became associated with all that was wrong with the old regime.

In Egypt, as well, Islamists have attacked the women's movement and its goals through a constant media discourse on the "proper" role of women as mothers and moral guardians. They have attacked attempts to reform Personal Status Law; the right of women to work as unemployment increases, co-education, and a host of other issues that are politicized and gendered.

Islamists reject secularism and see feminism and women's rights as one and the same. According to them, it is not only that feminism is "secular" but feminists are upper or middle class, educated, and often, foreign-educated. At the same time, attacking secularism and/or feminism signals the subtext of class for the Islamists, who see this agenda supported by the largely middle and upper classes, as opposed to their own populist, more provincial, lower middle class or lower class constituency. While many of the first women's organizations were founded by elite women, over the decades new generations have started their own organizations such as the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW) which are increasingly supported by the middle class, and which are making inroads in lower middle class and working class neighborhoods.

The social and economic bases of women activists and their organizations raises an important question about the constituency of the women's movement and its capacity and ability to mobilize large numbers of men and women. If its constituency is limited to largely female, middle class, educated professionals, and those influenced by feminism and international activism, does this group have the resources and the capabilities to challenge the status quo? How can this same constituency build bridges with lower class groups, their counterparts in rural and provincial areas, and with men from across the political and social spectrum?

Recently, as Nadje Al-Ali suggests, a younger generation of activists have joined the movement and built single-issue "professional" NGOs to target a range of issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic violence, education, public health, and legal activism.[4] Many of these organizations, like some before them, go far beyond the symbols of elite power and connections that older organizations had become. This new generation has begun to build a wider cross-section of "practical" out-reach services, including legal and health advocacy, domestic violence, credit and literacy initiatives. As economic hardship across society grows and poverty increases, there seems to be a new commitment among many organizations to work across class lines and reach out to women in lower class/more marginalized communities. This is clearly seen by the initia-tives of organizations who ascribe to the "Women in Development" framework which seeks to pay attention to the differential ways in which women are entangled in national and international development initia-tives (a commitment to the lower classes has always been the case for activists from a Marxist and left perspective).

This switch from a secular rights discourse to an "Islamicized" dis-course suggests that there are several competing "frames" which the movement has utilized to further its purposes and which conveys some of the heterogeneity of the movement. Social movements, in general, frame issues in specific ways to communicate their agenda to the public and engage in debates on political discourse. A frame or "schemata of inter-pretation" enables individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large."[5] Frames reduce complex phenomenon to specific terms that people can understand and relate to their immediate concerns and environment such as in the case of the women's movement: liberation, development, education, employ-ment opportunities, or equity. The Egyptian women's movement utilizes four main frames: a "rights" frame, a "development" frame, a "feminist" frame, and an "Islamist" frame.

A RIGHTS FRAME

The most common type of frame in the women's movement is a "rights" frame. Its approach is legalistic and stresses both individual equality, indi-vidual rights, and citizenship. Many of the activists in this perspective are

lawyers and professional women who have been engaged in long-term strategies of legal reform around Personal Status issues, equality, and citizenship rights for women and children. This type of activism has been successful at changing laws and policies within a framework of "rightful resistance" that is legitimate in the eyes of the law and the elite. In this type of resistance influential advocates utilize recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to their own laws or professed ideals.[6]

NGOs and organizations that take up a "rights" discourse at times, however, are vulnerable to critiques because of their individualist, liberal perspective (read: foreign/Western) that supposedly devalue the communitarian norms and structures (read: indigenous, Muslim) in Egyptian society. A nationalist discourse that is never far removed from Egyptian political discourse further erodes the legitimacy of the women's movement as its "foreign" links are traitorous at worst and "other" at best.

A "rights" discourse is further limited by the ambivalence of the government's commitment to enforce the law. Although the judiciary has been one of the most autonomous actors in Egyptian society and used its authority to challenge government policies and the constitutionality of the law, legal ambiguity and competing bureaucratic bodies and regulations can render hard fought legal changes meaningless, if the government does not bother to enforce the law.

A DEVELOPMENT FRAME

Changes in social norms typically lag far behind legal reforms and thus there has always been debate about putting legal reform before public education campaigns, larger policy changes and cultural movements. Those organizations that articulate a "development" frame understand the importance of legal activism and legal knowledge but their efforts target improving women's human capital: her health, economic well-being, education, skills, knowledge, and confidence. Sparked by the "women in development" perspective, and led by development practitioners, professional women, and some businesswomen, these organizations and activists emphasize pragmatic and material aid to women and their families and children by enhancing their employment and earnings capabilities, their health, their access to resources and services, legal information and bureaucratic knowledge. They

speak the language of empowerment and marginality: female genital muti-
lation and domestic violence, female illiteracy, legal aid, family planning
and childcare, and small credit schemes. They are funded by a range of
international, national, and domestic institutions, individuals, and agencies
and work within the interstices of international development agencies,
consulting firms, national bureaucracies, and small NGOs. Their multi-
faceted agendas and pragmatic skills enhancement approach necessarily
brings them into contact with state bureaucracies, and government institu-
tions such as the National Council of Women, founded in 2000. As a poli-
cy advocate for largely poor and marginalized women, these organizations
must negotiate the complicated dance between maintaining their mission,
their funding and their bureaucratic existence in a civil society that is high-
ly regulated and constrained by government fears of autonomous actors.
Nevertheless, they strive for partners and build coalitions to maximize their
limited resources and reach further into society.

A FEMINIST FRAME

A feminist frame is maintained by largely secular activists that are heavily
influenced, though often critical of the international feminist movement,
international conferences on women, and international institutions.
Plagued by critiques of its "Western" orientation and problems of devel-
oping domestic funding sources, some of these organizations refuse for-
eign funding as a means to enhance their own autonomy and domestic
legitimacy. Some of these groups have an explicitly Marxist agenda while
others are more liberal. Like the women's movement in the United States,
Ma'an (Together) grew out of the student movement in the 1970s and
women activists realization that leftist movements and leftist activists were
quite blind and dismissive to gender concerns.[7] Some of these groups take
on the very controversial issue of FGM as well as domestic violence and
thus their reliance on indigenous activists and financing takes on greater
importance as they try to influence these extremely sensitive issues.

AN ISLAMIST FRAME

Finally, the Islamist frame promotes indigenous values, tradition, and
authenticity as its weapons and attempts to "re-claim" women's rights in

Islam by re-interpreting sacred texts, religious practice, and law. These activists and organizations construct religious arguments about the equality of women and proper role of women, often by critiquing the liberal, secular, and leftist frames of the women's movement, described above. Some of these activists are linked to Ikhwani and other Islamist NGOs, academics, intellectuals, media, and salons and they are often engaged in a transnational Islamist feminist/womanist network. Although avowedly eschewing a feminist label, and articulating their agendas from the standpoint of their understanding of Islam, these activists and networks work within a religious discourse to enhance the position and capabilities of women—as Iranian women have done so notably under the Islamic Republic.

Within the four frames of the women's movement noted above, it is striking that its heterogeneous dimensions are layered with personal and professional networks. One could (with more time) trace the generational, educational, associational, class, religious, party, ideological, professional associations that bind women's activism together, while separating it as well. Coalition-building has become more common in the age of international women's and development conferences which national governments host and to which governments have to sponsor and send delegations. Despite a surge in NGOs following the 1994 U.N. Population and Development Conference held in Cairo, civil society remains quite constrained and regulations emasculate organizations' efforts to raise funds, gain members, build leaderships, and offer services. In this climate, informal professional, political, bureaucratic, class, educational, religious networks allow for coalition building and new initiatives, if political opportunities arise, that transcend particular interests and constituencies. These types of networks are found particularly in societies where information and rules are not accessible, open, and transparent.

The networks of the women's movement have an increasingly transnational dimension to them in the age of globalization as international conferences, travel, migration, and electronic media become more accessible to greater numbers of supporters. While one should not underestimate the importance of local context and opportunities for the movement's trajectory, whatever frame an organization articulates it will have – either directly or indirectly – transnational financial support, transnational alliances, transnational intellectual and ideological influences, and a transnational media presence, as activists themselves move back and forth

across borders for work, education, marriage, and activism. This transnational dimension can be both a strength and a liability, depending on the context. The most important problem with the transnational nature of the movement is its vulnerability to xenophobic and nationalist discourses about "tainted" money from abroad – whether from Europe/America from one side, or Saudi Arabia or the Gulf from another. Transnational support can, at the same time, provide a range of services, advice, and protection for local activists if they are harassed or imprisoned.

Yet, one should not overestimate the importance of the transnational dimension of the women's movement since it is mediated by the political context within Egypt and the state's "impressive" ability to control and co-opt civil society, the media, associational life, public servants, political parties, and intellectuals. For example, many in Egypt have been heartened by the creation of the National Council for Women (NCW) by Presidential Decree No. 90 in February 2000. This decree initiated the Council "to act as an autonomous entity," yet it is presided over by Egypt's First Lady, Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak. Mrs. Mubarak states that the Council should be seen as " an umbrella organization for all women in Egypt" and while Mrs. Mubarak clearly plays a role in the Council, Dr. Farkhonda Mohamed Hassan serves as its Secretary-General, along with 30 public figures and experts on women's issues.[8]

Again, despite its close association with "technical expertise" and the government which appoints its members, NCW has also become an Egyptian "Emily's List" that has funded newspaper advertisements for female candidates in the November 2001 Parliamentary elections, recruited college students to help with female candidate's campaigns, and organized a "register to vote" campaign for women in Egypt. The NCW tried, but failed, to put sufficient pressure on political parties, including the government-dominated National Democratic Party, to run female candidates on its party lists.[9] The NCW is clearly an example of state feminism—but it has also been a vehicle for the elite to further a feminist agenda "from within."

To summarize, the women's movement has been quite opportunistic and creative in furthering its aims, within the context of the authoritarian climate in Egypt. It has had some success by building coalitions with government elites and bureaucratic actors and framing its goals and priorities in politically acceptable terms such as "development," "health,"

"rights" and most recently "Islam." Legalistic strategies eschew radicalism; and public policy challenges are left to prominent lawyers and professionals whose expertise can't be challenged, and who, as pillars of the establishment, are not seen as marginal or threatening.

Since 1985, the women's movement has adopted a strategy that combines legal activism, religious legitimacy, coalition building among NGOs and activists, and support from within the elite and its professional class. Activists have moved away from relying entirely on the regime, since they were burned in 1985 by that approach and its failure to protect Personal Status Law reforms of 1979 from a legal challenge. Complete dependency on the regime can "taint" the women's movement and make it vulnerable for attack, but without some support from within the regime for reform, little change will occur.

The electoral route to women's activism in Egypt has been disappointing – as have electoral politics in general. There have yet to be competitive elections in Egypt for the head of state, and political parties are constrained at many levels from building a following, campaigning, raising funds, thus weakening the validity of parliamentary elections. Yet, there have been some inroads to competition at the parliamentary level, which were enhanced through the ruling of the Supreme Constitutional Court in Egypt in July 2000 restoring the right of the judiciary, rather than the executive branch, to regulate polling stations.

The NDP continues to dominate electoral politics and even when candidates run as "independents" because they were not nominated by the NDP, they largely join the NDP party once elected. In effect, the NDP runs against the NDP and then absorbs the winners. While about 65% of the previous Parliament lost their seats in the last election, the NDP still controls 85% of parliament – a reduction of ten percent.

"Opposition parties," one observer put it, are "parties without followers for people without parties."[10] The Ikhwan, or Muslim Brothers, which gained the largest bloc of opposition seats in the new Parliament still is banned from running as a political party and thus candidates run as independents. Interestingly, Jihan El-Halafawi, the wife of a jailed Muslim Brother in Alexandria did run for election after obtaining a *fatwa* from the prominent Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi stating that it is permissible for women to nominate themselves for parliament. She did not win a seat in Parliament, however.

There have traditionally only been a handful of women elected to par-
liament, 64 since women gained right to vote in 1956; five in 1995; and
seven in the 2000 elections. This number is augmented by the few
appointments the president can make (10) to Parliament.

These low numbers are maintained because political parties, including
the opposition, don't "waste" their chances by nominating women; they
think they will not win.[11] The ruling NDP had only 11 women on its
official list – a laughably meager fraction of the total 444 NDP candidates.
The liberal Wafd party had eight women on its list, the leftist Taga'mmu
had only four, and the Nasserist party had none. And yet pre-election
campaigning had witnessed an increase in the number of women candi-
dates – 109 in all – with the majority running as independents and not on
party lists.[12]

In the November 2000 elections, some women won by large margins
and most of these female candidates came from outside the metropolis
(Suhag, Fayoum, Damietta, Beni Suef, and Minya) and won due to
strong local followings. "The star of the elections" was a woman from
Upper Egypt, Nariman El-Dramalli, who managed to win with a com-
fortable majority, defying the stereotype of the conservative region of
Upper Egypt (Suhag).[13] The backgrounds of the winners suggest that the
determining factor in voting is the candidate's ability to provide services
to their constituency, rather than political affiliation or gender. Women
are beginning to run in "tough" constituencies where village and other
loyalties held far firmer than party ties.

For women to become more of a force in electoral politics they will
need to get in on the name of the game – the NDP – but the women's
movement has always had a larger presence in civil society and NGOs
than in political parties.

CONCLUSION

Despite the diversity of the women's movement and its distinctive frames,
activists seem less attuned to the material dimensions of women's every-
day life, with the possible exception of the development frame. Building
support that can sustain collective action is tremendously difficult for any
movement, but is complicated by the fact that women lack the financial
resources, the political experience, the education, the skills that Egyptian

men and malestream institutions enjoy, by contrast. Furthermore, movements do not gain momentum unless they speak in the idiom and to the concerns of the vast majority, or at least a sizable minority of women. For example, while a "legalistic" front has been challenging Personal Status Laws for decades now, few have looked at the economic aspects of marriage, and ways in which the financial "burden" of marriage might be lessened through public policy initiatives. Marriage costs are quite significant for women and men, across the economic spectrum and throughout the nation, but there is little public dialogue over why these costs are so high and why the financial burdens only seem to be increasing. According to a recent survey, total marriage costs were four and a half times higher than GNP per capita of US$1,290 in 1998[14] and young men and women are marrying at later ages, increasing social anxiety in a sexually conservative society.[15] Between the 1986 and 1996 censuses there was a four-fold increase in the proportion of couples "caught" between being engaged to marry and actually marrying and women, in general, are sharing and bearing more of the marriage costs than in the past.

While it is impossible for a small movement to fund development projects, credit schemes, or health clinics, it is not impossible for a movement to engage in a broader public policy initiative about issues which touch so many women's lives such as the material demands of marriage, childcare, illiteracy, or healthcare, for example. Clearly, the new generation of activists and organizations have begun to tackle some of these very tough issues but there are many other material issues which could be the subject of far more research, activism, protest and policy initiatives. The "breakout" slogan of the international women's movement was "the personal is political." The Egyptian women's movement seems to be returning to the type of issues which have the most impact on the daily, intimate lives of a wide cross-section of Egyptian women.

ENDNOTES

1. I would like to thank Nida Al-Ahmad, for her prodigious research assistance and suggestions for this paper.

2. See also Gole's discussion of Turkey. Nilufer Gole (1996) *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

3. Deniz Kandiyoti (1991) *Women, Islam and the State*, Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.) Philadelphia: Temple University Press. pp. 1–21.

4. Nadje Al-Ali (2000) *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5. Irving Goffman (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. p. 24.

6. Kevin J. O'Brien (1996) "Rightful Resistance." *World Politics* 49: 31–55.

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8. http://www.ncwegypt.org/background.htm

9. Leila Reem, "New Support for Women" *Al-Ahram Weekly* (7-13 September 2000). http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2000/498/eg2.htm

10. Omayma Abdel-Latif, "Dreaming of Better Times." *Al-Ahram Weekly* (23-29 November 2000) http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2000/509/eg2.htm

11. Amina Elbendary, "A Voice of Their Own." *Al-Ahram Weekly*. (19-25 October 2000) http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2000/504/el2.htm

12. Ibid.

13. Amina Elbendary, "The Meaning of Success." *Al-Ahram Weekly* (23-29 November 2000). http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2000/509/eg4.htm

14. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank. World Bank World Development Indicators (Washington, D.C., 2000), 12

15. Diane Singerman and Barbara Ibrahim. "The Cost of Marriage in Egypt: A Hidden Variable in the New Arab Demography." *Cairo Papers in the Social Sciences* (Spring 2003, forthcoming).

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WOMEN AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN PALESTINE

PHILIPPA STRUM

The women of the Palestinian women's movement have been working since 1978 to create not only gender equality in the West Bank and Gaza but a democratic form of civil society. In doing so, they have had to fight both patriarchal ideas and the limitations imposed by partisan ideologies. This can best be understood by a necessarily summary examination of the various stages of the movement.[1]

The earliest stage began in 1978, when the first women's committee was formed. The genesis of the committee can in turn be traced to various moments in Palestinian history, whether it was the late 1880s and early 1900s when Palestinian women as well as men demonstrated against Jewish settlements in Palestine and the Balfour Declaration, or the 1929 protests by the Arab Women's Congress of Palestine against the British suppression of a Palestinian uprising, or the women's charitable societies that came into existence between 1947 and the late 1970s. Women's organizations were not new. Organizations aimed at gender equality rather than either national liberation or merely alleviating the economic plight of women, however, had not been seen in Palestine before 1978.[2]

Some young middle-class people, particularly those in West Bank universities, had been organizing voluntary work committees since 1971. The volunteers worked with their hands during the days and held endless discussions in the evenings. The women among them began talking about the tension between the role many of them wished to play in the national liberation movement and the traditional, limiting status of women.[3] Some of the largely urban, university-educated women volunteers, led by a teacher named Zahira Kemal, formed the Women's Work Committee. It soon developed the goal of mobilizing women throughout the West Bank and Gaza for both the national liberation effort and an attempt to rethink the role of women.

They decided that their first need was for greater information about the situation of Palestinian women. The survey that they therefore under-

took of every household in the West Bank led them to the realization that most non-urban women were illiterate, overworked, poor, economically dependent on men, unaware of their legal rights, and focused almost entirely on the private domain of home, cooking, cleaning, and children.[4] Political mobilization would have to come second; first, the women's immediate needs had to be addressed.

The Women's Work Committee did this by establishing literacy projects, for which it wrote materials about health care, women's rights, and national liberation. Vocational training classes and complementary income-producing projects drawing largely upon the women's traditional cooking and sewing skills were started. The women who attended the literacy and vocational sessions needed child care, but there were no communal child care facilities. The Committee began the process of establishing them, and by 1988, there were at least 80 throughout the West Bank.[5]

In the highly politicized atmosphere of Palestine, women who were affiliated with other major political parties soon either experienced their own discomfort at working closely with a group popularly associated with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine or were chastised by male political actors for doing so. Between 1980 and 1983 the women's committee split into four, each allied with a party, with three of the four avowedly socialist. They adopted a democratic grassroots structure overall and a cooperative approach to both governance and the vocational enterprises they sponsored.[6]

The best estimate of the number of women who were formal members of the committees was 2-3 per cent, and they were largely but not entirely elite women. For the most part, they concentrated on achieving visible gains such as a degree of economic independence for the women in the vocational projects, rather than on altering traditional gender values, and eschewed both the label "feminist" and potentially divisive social issues such as family planning.

The second stage began in late 1987, along with the first intifada. As the fighting between young men and the Israeli army escalated, women began rushing out of their homes to interpose their bodies between the rock-throwing youth and the soldiers who would beat and arrest them. The women went on to establish "popular committees" that stockpiled and smuggled food during the frequent army-imposed curfews, blood-typed entire neighborhoods, provided emergency medical care, and edu-

cated the children during the 18-month period in 1988 and 1989 when all schools on the West Bank were shut down by the Israeli authorities.[7]

However important their function, the women in the popular committees were marginalized by both the male Palestinian leadership and the Israelis. The latter outlawed all the popular committees but apparently considered the women's committees too unimportant to criminalize. The leadership, writing in the pamphlets (*bayanat)* that became a major organizing and ideological tool of the intifada, relegated women to the role of "mother of the martyr" and referred only to men in speaking about "brother workers," "brother businessmen and grocers," "brother members of the popular committees and the men of the uprising," etc. The November 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence spoke of "the brave Palestinian woman" only as the "guardian of sustenance and life, keeper of our people's perennial flame" rather than a revolutionary or a citizen.[8]

And yet something was changing. Women prisoners who were known to have suffered sexual abuse in Israeli prisons, for example, were treated with respect rather than considered to have been shamed, as victims of sexual abuse had been in the past. Both members of the women's committees and formally "independent" non-partisan women (primarily scholars) were able to create new women's research institutes and centers: the Nablus-based Women's Research Center (1989), which taught young women research methods and the marketable computer skills with which to design and record their research; the Jerusalem-based Women's Resource Center (1989), established to do research about women's needs and devise programs to meet those needs; the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (1991), which promoted legal literacy, served as women's legal advocates, and eventually made domestic violence a public issue.[9]

These relatively limited changes were too great for some Palestinians. While the fundamentalist reaction took a number of forms, perhaps the most dramatic and threatening was the increasing number and ferocity of attacks on women – particularly in, but by no means confined to, the Gaza Strip – who went outside without head coverings.[10] Fundamentalist men began organizing anti-Israeli demonstrations that excluded women. In a Hegelian manner, the fundamentalist reaction seemed to impel the women's committees to re-examine their agenda and begin emphasizing

the hitherto-suppressed issues of personal status laws and domestic violence. The clash over gender roles had entered a new phase.

A third period began in late 1992 and lasted throughout the formal Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations in the United States and the secret ones in Oslo. The Palestinian leadership geared up for the negotiations by establishing a number of subject matter committees: land, water use, etc. There were almost no women on the committees and none was charged with addressing gender issues. This striking dismissal of the condition of women and their concerns gave the final push to what had become the increasing willingness of women leaders to ignore partisan boundaries as ideologically and pragmatically irrelevant. Women from three of the parties coalesced with independent (non-aligned) women to create the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, which would grow in the late 1990s to encompass women from six political parties, independents, women's study centers, and human rights organizations. As of 2001 its headquarters were in Ramallah, a branch office in Gaza, and there were regional coordinators throughout the West Bank and Gaza.[11]

The fourth period came into existence with the Oslo accords and the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), led by men who had been living in exile and who had therefore not experienced either the intifada or the growth of democratic values and organizations that accompanied it. There has been no indication that PNA leaders are sympathetic to a re-examination of traditional gender roles or to the growth of the kind of democratic civil society exemplified by the women's committees.

This has in no way prevented Palestinian women from continuing to organize and pursue what can only be described as a feminist agenda. In 1994, Birzeit University, the West Bank's most prestigious institution of higher education, inaugurated a Women's Studies Program (it now coordinates an MA program in Gender, Law and Development). In November 1997 the Birzeit student council's cultural committee organized the country's first seminar on sexual harassment. Birzeit also began a research projected entitled "Palestinian Women in Society," devoted to the publication of studies designed to influence public policy-making. The new climate among part of the population about possibilities for women was perhaps reflected in the fact that 50 per cent of the students at Bethlehem University's business school were women – something that would have been unthinkable in the 1980s. Other women created legal

aid and counseling centers in all the major cities. The Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling, in Jerusalem, initiated a project to reinterpret religious law *(shari'a)* so as to make it more friendly toward gender equality.[12]

The Center, in fact, emerged – along with the Birzeit program – as a major force in activism for gender equality. It produced a 20-minute-long radio program called, "With Women," that was aired by the Palestine Broadcasting Service three mornings a week. In 1996 the newspaper *Al-Ayyam* began distributing the Center's "Voice of Women," a biweekly eight-page supplement also handed out by various women's groups and by volunteers in the villages. The supplement contains interviews with women, reports on women's activities, and commentaries on social issues. The Center's third major media effort is "Frankly" *("Bisaraha")*, a weekly 55-minute television program about women's concerns that is co-produced with Palestine National Television.[13]

Another effort of the Center and other women leaders demonstrated both the insistence of Palestinian women on their place in the public sphere and the strength of the reaction against it. In March 1996, angry at the PNA's insistent ignoring of women's issues, women leaders began organizing a Women's Model Parliament. They held forums throughout the country as a mechanism for consciousness-raising and for setting the parliament's agenda. The parliament itself, consisting of 44 women and 44 men (there are 88 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, or parliament), addressed issues of personal status rather than economic or political concerns: no marriage for women under 18, restrictions on polygamy, equal division of assets among divorced couples, and equal rights to custody and inheritance. The parliament, roundly denounced as the work of devil worshippers by some fundamentalist clerics, produced model laws on those issues to transmit to the PNA.[14] These model laws had no discernible effect on the governing bodies.

A new phase began in September 2000, along with the second intifada. One aspect of the Israeli reaction was to make travel within the West Bank and Gaza, and between those areas and Israel, even more difficult than it had been in preceding months. The result was the virtual destruction of what was left of the Palestinian economy, as workers could no longer reach jobs in other Palestinian localities or inside Israel, fisherman in Gaza were prohibited from casting their nets, more olive orchards and

agricultural lands were uprooted by the Israeli army, and the nascent tourist industry dried up. Under the current circumstances, with the majority of Palestinian workers effectively unemployed, matters such as gender equality and the economic empowerment of women have been superseded by the struggle to survive. The women's movement cannot go forward until the occupation is ended and some form of peace is achieved.

What will become of the movement then is unclear. The first priority necessarily will be the rebuilding of the economy, and for that both internal policies and outside aid will be imperative. Whether they will merely exacerbate gender inequality is an open question.

In 1997, the Social Entitlements Working Group of Birzeit University's Women's Studies Program issued an analysis of the Palestine Liberation Organization's *General Program for National Economic Development, 1994-2000*, a document of over 1,000 pages.[15] The paltry forty pages of the *General Program* devoted to "Social Welfare and Recreation" began with the premise, "Ensuring social equity to all and the welfare of the individual and society is impossible in the prevailing conditions" and limits the state's responsibility for the moment to protect the poor. Gender equality is tacitly waved off as irrelevant to more important and more basic concerns. Equity is defined as the division of services between "political and geographic" entities, without reference to class and gender.

The report embodies a conception of women as contributing little to the general welfare and therefore not entitled to make the demands on society or state that are legitimate only when presented by *real* citizens, implicitly defined as men. It takes a two-track approach to welfare and rights, with the welfare of men dependent on their eligibility for the paid work force and the welfare of women dependent upon their family ties. The document is premised on the assumption that a woman will venture outside her home only in the absence of a male wage-earner, and refers to women's organizations as either the providers of services for unfortunate women or the proprietors of the kind of small scale, traditional crafts-based enterprises that are not economically feasible in a global economy. The crucial role that women's organizations have played in developing society's understanding of democracy and the need for on-going citizen involvement in public affairs is ignored.

The typification of women as limited citizens has been accepted by the international organizations most crucial to Palestinian economic development, whether because of a desire to undertake plans that conform to perceived local norms or because of their writers' own views. Critiquing the World Bank's 1994 *Emergency Assistance to the Occupied Territories*, the Economy Working Group of the Birzeit Women's Studies Program noted that the document referred to women as if they were invisible.[16] The Bank's report stated, "As Palestinians resume a more normal life, women are likely to return to more traditional roles and responsibilities." The premise, which paralleled that of the PNA, was that women were uncomfortable in the public sphere. Women were referred to as having been "forced" by the intifada into "greater responsibility and more public roles," which created "new service opportunities" for them. To the extent that they continued to play a visible role, the report predicted, it would be one of "female service and leadership" – meaning leadership of and for women. The implication was that women would do no more than perform communal charitable acts in organizations whose functions were described as providing for "the more vulnerable, often neglected groups."

The PNA's view of women was thereby validated by the major international organization involved in Palestinian development.[17] The assumption of both was that while the men of Palestine would engage in economic and political activities appropriate to the age of globalization and electronic communications, Palestinian women would retain their traditional roles. Men were positioned in the twenty-first century; women, in the nineteenth.

The uphill battle faced by Palestinian women, and Palestinian women's organizations, may be seen as part of a larger war being fought by Palestinian non-governmental organizations, which are attempting to create a role for themselves that combines policy making with what has been their provision of needed services to the citizenry. The struggle is particularly important to women. It takes place in the context of a quasi-governmental system that to a great extent reflects the characteristics of traditional Palestinian political culture in its emphasis on claims and favors rather than standardized and articulated norms of behavior and law.

Nonetheless, from the perspective of the women's movement, the definition of citizenship and the meaning of civil society has been altered. The goal of the national liberation movement before 1978 was, implicit-

ly, male citizenship in a Palestinian state dominated by a leadership elite. With the help of the women's movement, "citizenship" is coming to connote the right to participate in the public sphere – to be an active member of civil society – and to make one's own decisions about life.

The ultimate success or failure of the Palestinian women's movement will not be clear until the occupation is ended and Palestinians can undertake a greater exploration of the meaning of both citizenship and justice. The activities of the women's movement, as all other aspects of civil society, have been severely and negatively affected by the current phase of the occupation, and women are once again hearing an admonition against raising divisive issues at a name of national stress. But, as a women's and workers' activist commented in 1989, during the first intifada, "The struggle for our rights as workers and as women should start now or we'll end up with another bourgeois state and another kind of regime that will oppress women and the working class. It all has to go side by side."[18]

ENDNOTES

1. Additional information can be found in works cited in these footnotes, and in Augustin, A. (ed.) (1993) *Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience.* Zed Books; Dajani, S. (1994) "Between National and Social Liberation: The Palestinian Women's Movement in the Israeli Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip," in Mayer, T. (ed.) *Women and the Israeli Occupation: The Politics of Change.* London: Routledge.; Giacaman, R. "Searching for Strategies: The Palestinian Women's Movement in the New Era," 186 *Middle East Report* (Jan.-Feb. 1994); Sabbagh, S. (ed.) (1998) *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.; Sharoni, S. (1995) *Gender and the Israeli Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

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5. Strum, P. (1992) *The Women Are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution*. Lawrence Hill. pp. 54–57.

6. The other committees were the Working Women's Committee, later renamed the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees, associated with the Communist party; the Palestine Women's Committee, later the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees in the West Bank and Gaza, associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; and the Women's Social Work Committee, later the Union of Women's Committee for Social Work (UWCSW), associated with Fatah. The original Women's Work Committee became the Palestine Union of Women's Work Committee and then the Palestinian Federation of Women's Action Committees. Only the UWCSW was not socialist.

7. Women did not form all of the popular committees nor were they the only members. They were, however, disproportionately represented in them, in part because of the organizational experience they had gained in the women's committees. Strum, op. cit., pp. 88–90; Abdul Jawwad, "The Evolution of the Political Role," p. 71.

8. Lockman and Beinen, op. cit., pp. 327–394; Strum, op. cit., pp. 138–139.

9. Strum, op. cit., pp. 202–203, 209–212; Hindiyeh-Mani, S.; Ghazawneh, A.; and Idris, S. (1994) "Women Street Peddlers: The Phenomenon of *Bastat* in the Palestinian Informal Economy" in Mayer, T. (ed.) *Women and the Israeli Occupation: The Politics of Change*. London: Routledge. Web site of the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling, http://www.nisaa.org/wclac/

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17. Also see Taraki, L. "Society and Gender in Palestine: A Critique of International Agency Policy Documents" in the same issue of *Gender and Public Policy.*

18. Amal Wahdan, author's interview, July 18, 1989.

WOMEN'S NGOS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE IN IRAN

SUSSAN TAHMASEBI

BACKGROUND

The non-governmental organization (NGO) sector in Iran is at a critical and exciting stage in its development. President Khatami has consistently stressed the importance of strengthening civil society institutions in order to achieve a more democratic Iran, responsive to the needs of its citizens. Despite setbacks in reform efforts, his government has taken steps to allow for broader participation of civil society in general and NGOs in particular. As a result, there is greater focus on the role that NGOs can play in development efforts. NGOs are becoming increasingly active in advocacy efforts designed to impact policy, especially policy pertaining to the rights of vulnerable populations. Unfortunately, the Iranian NGO sector has not benefited sufficiently from international knowledge and information on development issues. In fact, since the revolution of 1979, international cooperation with Iran was limited at best and the absence of the international development community is still quite noticeable. Because of Iran's isolation from the international community since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the development of the NGO sector in Iran can be largely classified as "homegrown." While this sector continues to have much to learn from the international experience, it offers many lessons for NGO counterparts, especially those working in Muslim societies.

THE IRANIAN NGO SECTOR

Iranian NGOs can be classified into two groups: a) Modern NGOs and b) Traditional Community-Based Organizations (CBOs).

Modern NGOs
Modern NGOs in Iran have been formed as a response to global trends, as well as growing national interest. Iran's increasingly active participation in

global events sponsored by the UN in which Iran's government has had an active role, has significantly contributed to the development of the modern NGO sector. Some modern NGOs predate the Islamic revolution and are still active in a variety of fields. But, these NGOs are limited in number and though they tend to employ modern methods and address root causes, they have been criticized for lacking a constructive relationship with the communities they serve and in which they work, and have been characterized as being, for the most part, in the infancy stages of their development as organizations. Nevertheless, there exist outstanding examples of modern NGOs in Iran that have been successful in addressing social needs, conducting advocacy efforts, raising public awareness and conducting educational activities and tackling tough social issues, with extensive community participation.

Many of the modern NGOs have also been criticized for being too closely associated with government officials, and for getting too much support from the government. While the close affiliation of some of these organizations with the government leaves room for scrutiny and concern, the nature of these close relations must be better understood within the context of Iran. NGOs characterized as government-initiated or controlled in Iran have been formed by persons with government affiliations, sometimes of high ranking, and/or by persons seeking to advocate the state's Islamic and, at times, hard-line ideology. However, these NGOs, while reaping certain benefits because of the elite status enjoyed by their founding members, were not created by direct order of government agencies and they do maintain a level of independence from government. Indeed because of the elite status their founding members enjoy within Iranian society, these NGOs have enjoyed some level of success in pushing forth their agendas. It is also critical here to distinguish what is exactly meant by use of the term "state" or "government" in the Iranian context. Some government officials who have started up NGOs have been greatly influenced by their participation in international conferences, mainly UN conferences in the early 1990's, when they came to realize that they were limited in their capacity as government officials to address critical social issues facing Iranian society. In fact, many chose to set up NGOs because they felt it provided them with a more open forum to discuss sensitive social issues and push for more progressive policies. Many of the early modern NGOs spearheaded by government officials were criti-

cal forces in establishing and beginning the dialogue on the need for a viable civil society in general and the specific role that NGOs could play in development efforts in particular. These NGOs and their directors often played key roles in pushing forth progressive agendas through the third sector, and at times pushed the envelope on sensitive social issues, such as family planning, women's rights, women's access to education, human rights, drug treatment strategies, etc. In fact, one could go so far as to claim that because of their contacts in government, the NGOs and their directors have served as catalysts in engaging the government in a dialogue with the NGO sector on sensitive issues. As the NGO sector has begun to strengthen and take on a more active role within Iran, the debate on the legitimacy of government-affiliated NGOs and their level of independence has become a heated issue. While, many of these NGOs may be limited in their ability to oppose government on sensitive issues, they remain much more flexible in doing so than the truly independent modern NGOs and they can still play a vital role in pushing the envelope on sensitive social issues, as they would come under less scrutiny than independent NGOs. In fact, it would be a mistake to dismiss the catalytic role that some of these NGOs have played in bringing recognition to the NGO sector within Iran and bringing much needed attention to issues for which there did not previously exist a forum for discussion.[1]

Traditional Community Based Organizations (CBOs)

The traditional community based organizations of Iran, with their strong roots in the community and long history of activities, can be characterized as Iran's true NGOs. The past twenty years have provided a fertile ground for the growth and development of these organizations and they have taken on an active role in administering relief and charity efforts. The ideological basis for the existence of these organizations is rooted in the Iranian and Islamic tradition of charity work. These organizations hold great promise as potential partners in development efforts.

The spontaneous development of these organizations, in the absence of the international development community in Iran, and the expansive safety net they provide for vulnerable populations is noteworthy. In other Islamic countries within the region and in Iran, traditional community-based organizations have been criticized for their tendency toward relief and charity work, which create dependence. These organizations have

also been criticized for the religious orientation of their work, which is viewed by many, especially women's rights activists, as less than progressive. However in Iran, some of these CBOs have started a spontaneous move toward addressing root causes by adopting innovative strategies and preventive methods of service delivery[2]. In addition, these organizations have begun, in part because of the changing nature of Iranian society and the changing demand for social services, to provide services and programs, which would be labeled as progressive and in line with an agenda that promotes women's rights.

These organizations have been key in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations and almost single-handedly, with minimal support from government programs, have provided a major social safety net for vulnerable populations. For example, these organizations have played a key role in filling the gap in services to female-headed households. Official estimates place the number of female-headed households at 1.3 million[3] (with unofficial estimates as high as 3 million). CBOs are actively involved in providing services to these populations as well as refugee populations. Increasingly CBOs are providing legal counseling for women in situations of experiencing domestic violence, seeking divorce, seeking custody of their children, and seeking to cope with spouses who are drug addicted or incarcerated. These CBOs are increasingly exhibiting frustration with the legal system and the inadequacy of laws and protections pertaining to vulnerable groups. CBOs, because of their religious orientation and strong roots in the community, are in a good position to act as catalysts in creating change in areas which have traditionally been deemed as sensitive, such as family law, women's rights, and children's rights. Other examples of innovation demonstrated by these organizations include some of the following:

- An interest in adopting modern management techniques;
- A move toward addressing critical social issues and conducting analysis for better impact;
- A thirst for knowledge and an increasing tendency to link with their counterparts in the West and other Islamic countries to share information and to adopt innovative practice standards;
- A tendency toward including women in their ranks as decision makers (in fact, women-led CBOs are on the rise);
- A move toward organizing in the form of coalitions.

Innovative strategies for addressing critical social issues have been adopted by both CBOs and NGOs in Iran. Some examples include:

- Providing shelters for women and girls;
- Addressing the needs of female-headed households;
- Providing prevention services (health and drug use);
- Providing micro-credit programs;
- Promoting education access;
- Conducting advocacy efforts;
- Forming unions and networks of CBOs and NGOs;
- Creating mechanisms for information sharing, like NGO newsletters;
- Increasing collaboration between CBOs and NGOs; and
- Increasing collaboration between NGOs and CBOs and government and international bodies, such as the UN agencies in Iran.

CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR NGOS

A noteworthy component of discussions on reform centers on reducing the size and role of the government in Iran. One of the main proposals set forth by government planners includes creating viable mechanisms for the private sector and NGO sector to take on some of the functions previously administered by government in the areas of social services delivery. The trend has brought attention for the need to include NGOs in policy development efforts. The Third Five-Year Development Plan includes many proposals for actively engaging the NGO sector and supporting its growth and development. For the first time, funding has been allocated for NGO activities.[4] The Office for Women's Participation (OWP), for example, has supported many NGO activities, including the sponsoring of conferences and research, while the State Welfare Organization has been recruiting NGOs and private sector organizations as contractors to deliver social services to disadvantaged populations, and the Department of the Environment provides funding to NGOs for educational and environmentally related activities as well as capacity development efforts designed to strengthen environmental NGOs.

Under Khatami, the government has thus taken on an active role in creating an enabling environment for NGOs. The Ministry of the Interior last year partnered with NGOs and several other key government agencies

to reform the laws that govern the registration and operation of Iranian NGOs. Currently, there is no single law that governs the operation of NGOs and registration is quite burdensome, with NGOs required to get security clearances before registering. Spearheaded by the Ministry of the Interior, a new bill addressing the legal framework for NGOs was developed for presentation to the parliament through the cooperation of the NGO sector and government agencies. Unfortunately, this bill was never presented to parliament. As it turned out, the Council of Ministers, during committee meetings on the bill, reached the conclusion that a specific law on NGOs would be in conflict with an existing article in the Third Five-Year Development Plan, Article 182, which addresses capacity development activities of the government as they relate to NGOs and NGO registration. Since then, steps have been taken to expedite the registration process of NGOs, which now may take from three to six months, but still require security clearances of the founding members and the board of directors or trustees of such organizations. Should problems occur during the security clearance, the registration process may take a considerable amount of time longer than the anticipated three to six months. The process of registration of NGOs and CBOs can begin at the provincial level, but the final approval must come from the capital and national level offices. NGOs and CBOs can register with as many as nine government agencies. It is anticipated that attempts to reform the legal environment of NGOs continues, despite this temporary setback.

As the legal environment for NGOs improves, NGOs will be able to work with government to create policies which better meet the needs of Iranian society – a traditional society in transition towards modernity. Despite the current legal barriers, NGOs are increasingly advocating for the needs of vulnerable populations, including the poor, children and women, and are beginning to address environmental and health issues and even the more sensitive human rights issues. This trend has particularly paved the way for NGOs working on women's issues to take on a more active role in advocating for the needs of women. In fact, many social and political activists alike are examining the role of NGOs as mechanisms for raising awareness among masses of women, in the hopes of creating pressure on the system designed to change policies and laws affecting the lives of women and women's status in Iranian society. In the absence of a viable and well-functioning political party system, this trend is a logical one

because NGOs are the only legal organizational structures which operate largely independent of government. However, NGOs are still viewed with a level of suspicion by some conservative factions in the government and this new role may bring greater scrutiny to NGOs in general and women's NGOs in particular. Of course, in order to play their advocacy role appropriately, the women's NGO sector needs to be strengthened considerably. The modern and traditional NGOs (community-based charity organizations) alike suffer from many structural constraints and are faced with many organizational challenges. The increased attention given to NGOs by policymakers on the other hand, while positive in many respects, can indeed also be seen as a detrimental force in the development and effectiveness of the NGO sector, because government policy with respect to NGOs has for the most part focused on increasing the number of NGOs, especially women's NGOs, without sufficiently addressing issues of quality and organizational capacity.

TYPES OF WOMEN'S NGOS

The Center for Women's Participation estimates that there are approximately 250 women's NGOs.[5] These figures count only NGOs that are created and administered by women. Secondary NGOs, as described by the Center for Women's Participation, are those NGOs that seek to meet the needs of women, but are not necessarily included in the figures of NGOs spearheaded by women. There are no precise figures for these institutions, as they include a broad range of organizations, including possibly over five thousand community-based organizations, which provide a variety of services to women, either exclusively or as part of their larger constituency. The types of NGOs that are classified by the Center for Women's Participation as women's NGOs in Iran include the following:

- Charity Organizations: These traditional organizations provide relief and charity services to their constituencies, including cash and housing assistance, educational assistance, health assistance, job training, etc.
- Minority Organizations: These organizations work in similar ways to charity organizations. They too are the oldest forms of organizations in Iran and provide services to minority populations, as well as the

Iranian population at large. One of the oldest registered Iranian NGOs is the Armenian Women's Association in Isfahan, established approximately 110 years ago and the oldest registered NGO in Iran is, in fact, a charity organization established over 150 years ago.

- Health Organizations: Primarily established after the revolution, these organizations conduct research and educational activities designed to improve the health status of the population.
- Communications and Publication Organizations: These organizations tend to produce publications related to women's issues and mainly tend to address cultural issues, as well as the legal rights of women.
- Technical and Research Organizations: Members of these organizations tend to be professional women in technical fields or research institutions engaged in research on issues affecting the lives of women.
- Social and Cultural Organizations: These organizations work on a range of issues having to do with women's rights, education, refugees rights, minority issues, as well as conduct advocacy efforts. These organizations also work to educate the general public, government officials, and agencies and the international community on issues related to Iranian women.
- Environmental Organizations: These organizations work on raising awareness about the environment and promoting environmental protection agendas. Many environmental organizations address environmental and sustainable development as they relate to the specific needs of women. These organizations, while not exclusively focusing on women's issues, are noteworthy as they tend to get much of their support from women or are spearheaded by women.

STRUCTURAL AND POLICY CONSTRAINTS FACED BY WOMEN'S NGOS

There are many structural constraints faced by women's NGOs, which makes their role as advocates for women's issues difficult. These include:

1) General sensitivity toward women's issues in Iran: Women's issues tend to be highly sensitive and political issues in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Women's social demands, even simple ones, become quickly

politicized, making the work of professionals, advocates and activists more difficult.

2) Lack of research on the root causes of women's problems and lack of expertise within NGOs to conduct research: While research does not constitute a top national priority, at least in terms of the national budget allocated to it, women's research tends to be of a lower priority as compared with other research topics. Also, the sensitive nature of women's issues tends to detract from interest in conducting research on women in Iran. A general lack of expertise among NGOs in conducting research in general and research on women's issues in particular compounds this problem. Lack of effective cooperation and relations between NGOs and universities and lack of priority on research agendas pertaining to women within universities are also other factors leading to a general lack of information among NGO administrators on women's needs and appropriate programs for addressing those needs.

3) Organizational management issues: Because most NGOs in Iran are rather young they are plagued with management problems due to lack of experience. The CBOs, despite having a longer history of activity and being well-rooted in society, suffer from outdated and traditional management practices, and despite the fact that many are making a move toward adopting more modern management techniques, the transition has been slow. The most common management issues and problems facing NGOs include, lack of expertise in strategic planning, development of long term goals, program development, implementation and evaluation, conducting assessments for better impact, lack of experience in fundraising, and a general lack of transparency and accountability (mostly due to inexperience rather than a desire to be dishonest).

4) General suspicion of NGOs: Some hard line and traditional forces within the government still view NGOs with great suspicion and as a Western concept or organizations that are trying to oppose or destroy the state. This view tends to create many constraints for NGOs in general, but specifically for women's NGOs, especially those working on legal rights and human rights issues.

5) Lack of a professional NGO work force: In other countries where the third sector has been effective in taking on a full partnership role

with government and the private sector in pushing forth develop-
ment agendas and social programs, it has done so because it has relied
on the professional and technical capabilities of professional staff. In
other words, NGOs in other countries serve as employers of profes-
sionals who are well trained to take on the work of NGOs. In order
for Iranian NGOs to be fully effective in fulfilling their role as the
third sector, this sector must be developed as an alternative and new
profession, where they can draw upon the most talented experts. This
requires a strong funding base and broad-based NGO capacity devel-
opment efforts. Currently many NGOs and CBOs in Iran are admin-
istered by volunteers and while their commitment to the issues they
work on cannot be questioned, these volunteers often lack appropri-
ate training to conduct the work they are charged with in a profes-
sional manner. Capacity building efforts need to focus on training
both volunteers and professionals. Many NGO volunteers, due to
many years of work experience within their respective NGOs, are
well-situated to be recruited and trained as the new emerging NGO
professional workforce in Iran.

6) Government programs: While allocation of funds for NGO activities
by the government is a positive step in assisting NGOs in their strive
toward becoming professional organizations employing professional
staff, these efforts have been too narrowly focused on increasing the
social participation of Iranian citizens through NGO activities and on
increasing the numbers of NGOs nationally. These efforts do not
focus appropriately and sufficiently on developing the capacity of
existing NGOs, through professional training of staff and volunteers.
It seems as though this policy stems from a broader government
effort, where government officials have been engaged in a dialogue
that seeks to redefine appropriately international concepts that have
to do with people's participation, so that these concepts are broader
than indicators measuring employment and income. While this is a
worthy effort, the main indicators that measure the level of people's
participation such as employment, income, education, political par-
ticipation, etc. should not be dismissed and replaced by policy pro-
posals that seek to engage citizens' participation in activities that do
not provide an income base, especially with the unemployment rate
being so high (ranging from 14–17 per cent according to official sta-

tistics). This effort has attracted many people to the NGO movement who do not have a sufficient knowledge of the concept of NGOs and NGO activities. This policy has also contributed greatly to many conflict of interest issues within NGOs, where board members and founding members are being financially compensated for activities. The Center for Women's Participation and the National Organization for Youth in particular seem to have adopted strategies that seek to promote the social participation of women and youth through the establishment of NGOs, without a sufficient focus on capacity building of NGOs and sufficient attention to educating the population and those interested in establishing NGOs on the broader concept of NGOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Creating a strong women's NGO sector capable of advocating appropriately on behalf of women and capable of implementing programs designed to meet their needs, will require some of the following activities:

NGO capacity development efforts. International bodies are in a good position to spearhead these efforts, which should reach out across a broad range of programs and specifically target those working at the grassroots levels, because these groups tend to be excluded from these types of capacity building efforts. There are a number of NGO support organizations established in recent years, which seek to address the training needs of NGOs, and also many government agencies have begun NGO capacity building efforts. Unfortunately, both the government agencies and the NGO support organizations suffer from many of the same organizational problems and constraints that NGOs face in Iran. As such, international bodies working in Iran, such as the UN and the World Bank are in a good position to take the lead on many of these capacity building efforts, simply because they can draw upon international knowledge and experience and also because they can make the capacity development programs available to relevant government agencies working specifically with NGOs. These trainings and capacity development activities should be designed with a view toward developing and utilizing local expertise.

Advocacy training for NGOs, and particularly women's NGOs. Advocacy training designed to assist these organizations in pushing forth

women's agendas through policy should be viewed as a top priority for women's NGOs. While successful strategies of other countries can be used as a starting point for the Iranian NGO sector, advocacy strategies must be adapted to meet the particular needs and sensitivities that exist within Iranian society.

Better cooperation between NGOs and universities. Cooperation between these sectors should be promoted in an attempt to promote practice-based research agendas and to promote also the use of research findings in developing action agendas for NGOs.

Better cooperation between NGOs and the UN. The UN and other international bodies can serve as catalysts in promoting dialogue between the government and the NGO sector, especially on sensitive social issues. The international bodies can also work to promote better cooperation between government and the NGO sector in development efforts in general and policy development in particular.

Utilization of best practices and successful models. Successful models and best practices, which seek to improve women's lives or address critical issues facing women in Iran or the region, need to be identified in Iran and internationally for adaptation and replication by Iranian NGOs. Model programs need to be funded more readily by government, multilateral and bilateral organizations and by expatriate groups.

Development of a pool of technical experts and consultants. A technical group of experts needs to be identified so that NGOs can draw upon their services as consultants in their strive toward becoming more effective and in an attempt to develop a professional NGO sector in Iran. Many of these experts will undoubtedly come from the ranks of government officials with technical expertise, university professors, researchers, and quite possibly expatriates interested in working with these groups in Iran.

Information sharing and networking within the region. Greater contact with countries in the region and the West, which have had experiences similar to Iran's or do have a strong NGO sector, needs to be facilitated. These contacts and exchanges need to be broad-based and include a large array of NGOs and NGO administrators. Efforts need to focus on broad dissemination of information and sustainability of efforts.

Promotion of close cooperation between the modern NGO sector and the traditional NGO sector (CBOs) in addressing women's issues. CBOs enjoy close relations with communities and are not viewed with suspicion

by hard line forces within government. Indeed there is much common ground to be found between the modern NGOs and CBOs in addressing women's issues and advocating on their behalf. This cooperation will be a most appropriate strategy for addressing the more sensitive issues pertaining to women.

ENDNOTES

1. Personal interviews with a number of women NGO representatives and government representatives participating in the Beijing Conference 1995.

2. Reference is made only to those CBOs engaged in providing charity and relief services and not the community based organizations, which engage strictly in religious activities, such as provision of food for mourners during the Ashura mourning festivities – a yearly event marking the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, Hossein – and other similar activities.

3. Islamic Republic of Iran Census figures for 1375 (1996).

4. While some of this funding is focused on creating opportunities for NGOs to carry out programs previously administered by government, much of the funding is also geared toward improving and increasing people's social participation, through providing funds to support the development of NGOs or strengthen existing NGOs.

5. Interviews with staff at the Center for Women's Participation.

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"ISLAMIC FEMINISM": PERILS AND PROMISES

NAYEREH TOHIDI

A s a positive result of increasing modernization, in recent decades many Muslim societies, including the Middle East, have witnessed an unprecedented rise in women's literacy rates (over 65 per cent in 2000 compared to less than 50 per cent in 1980 among women population of 15 years or over).[1] The traditional gender gap in the realm of education is closing and in some societies women's enrollment in higher education is becoming equal or even surpassing men's. This development has naturally resulted in women's increasing engagement in cultural, religious, and social life outside the private realm. Not only are women influenced by modernity; as a highly educated professional group, they themselves have become significant agents of change and modernization.

But changes in the patriarchal and patrimonial structure of the legal, political, religious and economic institutions of Middle Eastern societies, especially family law, family structure, gender stereotypes and sexual mores have lagged far behind the modern changes in the levels of socialization and political awareness of the new middle class women. On the top of this conflict, and in part because of it, women have faced a surge of Islamism that has commonly entailed a retrogressive gender agenda. While Islamism has brought about many setbacks for the individual rights of modernized and privileged urban upper and upper-middle class women, it has paradoxically pushed a growing number of previously marginalized, recently urbanized middle class traditional women into social, political and religious activism. Dominance of religious politics in all aspects of social as well as private life has ironically opened new arenas of intervention for women, arenas that were earlier rendered inaccessible to women—whether they be physical spaces, such as the mosques, or intellectual arenas, such as learned theology debates.

It is in this background that during the past two decades, a reform-oriented religious feminism—known in the West as "Islamic feminism" or "Muslim feminism"—has grown among Muslim women in different

societies. This trend emerges primarily in cities among highly educated, middle-class Muslim women who, unlike many earlier pioneers of women's rights and feminism in the Middle East who were of secular liberal, socialist ("Western") orientation, are unwilling to break away from their religious orientation and hold Islam as a significant component of their ethnic, cultural, or even national identity. A growing body of literature and discussion on "Islamic feminism" has emerged in the field of the Middle East Women's Studies stimulating at times useful and at times divisive debates among scholars and activists concerned with women's issues in the Middle East and other Muslim societies.[2]

The confusion and controversy begin with the very name "Islamic feminism" and its definition. In the context of Iran, for example, two ideologically and politically opposite groups have expressed the strongest objection to this term and to any mixture of Islam and feminism. The right wing conservative Islamists (fundamentalists) inside Iran adamantly oppose Islamic feminism because of their strong anti-feminist views and feelings, and some expatriate leftist secularist feminists outside Iran who hold strong anti-Islamic views and feelings. Both groups essentialize both Islam and feminism and see the two mutually exclusive, hence the term "Islamic feminism" is an oxymoron.

Aside from these two hostile objections in the Iranian context, in other communities too some feelings of unease and concern have arisen among some Muslim women activists themselves and also among some scholars and professionals about the confusing and divisive implications that this new categorization – coined mainly by secular Western-based feminist scholars – may entail. For example, in an article in the *Middle East Women's Studies Review*,[3] Omaima Abou-Bakr has raised a number of interesting points about the notion of "Islamic feminism." While not opposing the name as such, she draws our attention to the confusion and political abuses of the term and offers some useful definitional features from the point of view of a Muslim believer. One main reservation discussed by Abou-Bakr concerns the dynamics of naming and formulating this concept that "says a lot more about the observer, the person who coins, than about the object itself." She warns us about the possible divisive nature of this categorization of Muslim women as it may imply that if one is not directly dealing with Islamic teaching, the *Quran*, *hadith*, and the like, then she is outside the circle of Islamic/Muslim feminists.

Another broader concern that I would also share is that the recent over-emphasis and fascination that some Western feminists and journalists show towards Islamic feminism may result in two unwanted negative repercussions, one of political nature and the other theoretical or conceptual. Politically, this may alarm and further threaten the anti-feminist Islamist Patriarchy causing further pressure against Muslim feminist reformers. Consequently it may result in more reluctance on the part of Muslim women activists to associate themselves with feminist discourse in general and secular feminists in particular.

Theoretically or conceptually, a potential problem is the implication of continually "foregrounding the Islamic spirit or influence as the regularly primary force in Middle Eastern societies, hence disregarding the complexities of social/political and economic transformations."[4] During an interview (1999) I had with Shirin Ebadi (a prominent feminist lawyer in Iran), she referred to the same problematic implication, saying: "If Islamic feminism means that a Muslim woman can also be a feminist and feminism and Islam does not have to be incompatible, I would agree with it. But if it means that feminism in Muslim societies is somehow peculiar and totally different from feminism in other societies so that it has to be always Islamic, I do not agree with such a concept."

To view Islamic feminism as the only or the most "authentic" path for emancipation of Muslim women may also imply a sort of orientalistic or essentialistic Islamic determinism manifested also in the views of those who see Islam either as the primary cause of women's subordination or as the only path for women's emancipation.

What I hope to accomplish here is to draw our attention to some practical and conceptual problems associated with the way we, as scholars and activists based in the West, name, categorize, and treat the struggles of Muslim women for their human rights, civil rights, and empowerment. It is in the spirit of dialogue, coalition-building, inclusiveness, pluralism and diversity that I would suggest we avoid polarizing a "faith position" and a "secular position" with regard to commitment to women's rights. To set secular and Islamic feminism in a bitter conflict can only benefit the reactionary patriarchal forces, be it of traditional or new Islamist patriarchy or secular modern patriarchy. To equate secular or modern with equality and feminism is as naïve and misinformed as equating faith and religion with anti-feminism.

DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS

But let's make it clear what we mean by Islamic feminism and how we would define it. When it is used as an identity, I personally find the term 'Muslim feminist/m' (a Muslim who is feminist) less troubling and more pertinent to current realties than the term 'Islamic feminism.' The term 'Islamic feminism,' on the other hand, seems to be more appropriate to be used and conceived as an analytical concept in feminist research and feminist theology, or as a discourse. The definition of either term, however, is difficult since a Muslim feminist (believer) would probably define it differently from a laic social scientist like myself. While Christian and Jewish feminism have a longer and more established place within feminist movements, Muslim feminism as such is a relatively new, still fluid, undefined, more contested and more politicized trend. I see Muslim feminism as one of the ways or discourses created or adopted by certain strata of women in the predominantly Muslim societies or in Muslim diaspora communities in response to three inter-related sets of domestic, national and global pressures of new realities.

Responding to traditional patriarchy sanctioned by the religious authorities:
While some women activists of the modernized educated upper- and middle-class see religion, including Islam as a pre-modern, oppressive patriarchal institution and maintain a secular or even anti-religious perspective, many others have not broken away from their faith and religious identity. They have tried to resist and fight patriarchy within a religious framework. A basic claim among various religious feminist reformers, including Muslim and Christian feminists, is that their respective religions, if understood and interpreted correctly, do not support the subordination of women. As a theological as well as political response, these reformers maintain that the norms of society and the norms of God are at odds. An egalitarian revision, therefore, is not only possible but also necessary. In reclaiming the "egalitarian past," reformist feminist scholars note that before these religions became closely associated with state power (in the first through fourth centuries of Christianity and in the early years of Islamic tradition in the eighth century), women did hold positions of leadership.

Responding to Modernity, Modernization, and Globalization:

Due to expanding impact of modernity in Muslim societies (e.g., the growing rates of urbanization, literacy and employment among women as well as men), Muslim women like women in any modern society, move forward toward egalitarian ideas and feminist re-construction of modern life, especially of the family structure and gender relations. Muslim feminism is then a negotiation with modernity, accepting modernity (which emerged first in the West) yet presenting an "alternative" that is to look distinct and different from the West, Western modernism, and Western feminism. This is an attempt to "nativize" or legitimize feminist demands in order to avoid being cast as a Western import. As Leila Ahmed argues, "reforms pursued in a native idiom and not in terms of the appropriation of the ways of other cultures" would possibly be more intelligible and persuasive to more traditional classes (and not merely to modern upper and middle classes) and possibly therefore, they may prove more durable.[5]

Successful or not, this trend is related to the legacy of Western colonialism, a post-colonial insistence on forging and asserting an independent national identity, especially in the face of growing globalization. One more aspect of globalization contributing to this trend is the growing transnational migration (which is not predominantly a male practice any longer) or the diasporaization or de-territorialization of cultural identities. This has facilitated a wider exposure to global and modern discourses of feminism, human rights, and democracy that have been directly or indirectly changing women's consciousness and expectations in countries like Iran. The impact of such factors has been intensified through an increasing access to the Internet, satellite TV, and other communication technology.

Responding to the recent surge of patriarchal Islamism:

Due to the growing Islamist environment since the 1970s, which entails imposition of a retrogressive gender project, many Muslim women feel compelled to change and improve women's roles and rights within an Islamic framework. For the educated women who want to reconcile the religious dimension of their identity with an empowered social status based on egalitarian gender relationship and freedom of choice in their personal, family, and socio-political life, Muslim feminism offers a mechanism to resist and challenge the sexist nature of the ongoing identity politics, par-

ticularly Islamism. Some scholars (religious or laic) too (e.g., Leila Ahmed, Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini) see modern liberal and gender egalitarian reformation of Islam as a requirement for the success of a broader societal and political reform toward democracy, pluralism and civil rights, including women's rights. Such an approach, therefore, would stress the urgent need for equipping women with the tools (for instance, knowledge of Arabic, the *Quran* and *fiqh* as well as feminist knowledge) that enables them to redefine, re-interpret, and reform Islam to be a more women-friendly and gender egalitarian religion. The goal is to enable women to "turn the table" on Islamist authorities, to take Islamist men to task about what they preach and practice in the name of Islam. During a seminar at Radcliff College, a Muslim feminist put it this way: "The mullahs are trying to use the *Quran* against us, but we have a surprise for them, we're going to beat them at their own game."

In short, I see Muslim feminism or "Islamic feminism" as a faith-based response of certain stratum of Muslim women in their negotiation with and struggle against the old (traditionalist patriarchy) on the one hand and the new (modern and post-modern) realities on the other. Its limits and potentials for women's empowerment, however, like those of other ideology-based feminisms have to be accounted for in its deeds and practices more so than in its theological or theoretical strengths or inconsistencies.

A FEW COMPARATIVE OBSERVATIONS

I would also like to suggest a few comparative and historical observations that may help us with a better feminist strategizing with regard to diversity within the global women's movement that includes Muslim feminism:

We tend to forget that Islam, like all other religious institutions, is a human or social construct, hence it is neither ahistoric nor monolithic, reified, and static. This becomes more evident when compared to the experience of women in Christian context, as elaborated in my recently co-edited volume.[6] The struggle to adjust or reconstruct religion to the new realities of modern, egalitarian and democratic gender regime has taken place from both within and without the religious institutions and it has been an ongoing process in the Christian (Protestant and Catholic) contexts. Thanks to the emergence of a stronger middle class, modernity, and vigorous bourgeois liberal fight for individual rights and humanism,

the reformation of religion, secularization and democratization of society have been achieved much more successfully in the more advanced and industrialized Christian West. In the Muslim context, however, the inter-play of geographic and geopolitical disadvantages, colonialism and under-development has hindered the progress of similar processes, hence further complicating attainment of civil rights, especially women's rights. Modernist rational and liberal attempts to reinterpret or reform Islam emerged almost a century ago by theologians and jurists such as the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). By the turn of the 20th century, some Muslim women thinkers and writers too had gradually begun fram-ing their gender conscious and women-friendly writings within the Islamic ethics (for example, Tahira Qurratulein; Bibi Khanum Astarabadi; Zeinab Fawwaz; and Ayesha Taymuriya). Yet, it is only in retrospect that one may or may not consider them to be Muslim feminists because such categorization has been formulated very recently and – for the most part—by Western or Western-based feminists and not by Muslim feminists them-selves. For instance, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her female friends wrote the *Woman's Bible* in 1895, nobody called her a Christian feminist, but today due to the currency of feminist discourse, Amina Wadud's *Quran and Women: Rereading Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*[7] is naturally seen as an example of Islamic/Muslim feminism. Such a naming in the present context can be harmless if it does not imply a deliberate or unwitting "otherizing" or essentializing of Muslim women. It can be harmless if it does not limit the diverse spectrum of women's movement in the Muslim societies to the Muslim women only and to a primarily religious feminism at the expense of ignoring, excluding or silencing women of non-Muslim religious minorities or women of secular and laic orientation.

Like other components of the modern (and arguably post-modern) reform movements within Islam, Muslim feminism too is a *Quran*-centered discourse. The *Quran*, seen as the "eternal and inimitable" text, provides for Muslims both the foundational basis and the point of convergence of many different, human interpretations in the light of specific socioeconomic and political situations.[8] Feminist Muslims like Azizah al-Hibri see flexibility and evolution as "an essential part of *Quranic* philosophy, because Islam was revealed for all people and for all times. Consequently, its jurisprudence must be capable of responding to widely diverse needs and problems. . . . Muslims rely on *ijtihad* which is the ability to analyze a *Quranic* text or a

problematic situation within the relevant cultural and historic context and then devise an appropriate interpretation or solution based on a through understanding of *Quranic* principles and the *Sunnah*."[9]

However, an important challenge for Muslim feminists, as writers such as Anne Sofie Roald [10] have argued, is that the *Quran* is seen as the "word of God" and consequently immutable. In response, Muslim modernists and feminists have pointed out that the symbolic wording of the *Quran* is not critical. Rather the interpretation of the *Quran* by men forms the basis of Islamic law, application, and practice. This male (*ulama*) monopoly of authority to interpret the *Quran* or engage in *ijtihad* is what Muslim feminists are challenging now. Friedl explains this quite clearly:

> Theoretically these texts are beyond negotiation because they are claimed to emanate from divine or divinely inspired authority. Practically, however, the Holy Writ has to be translated, taught, and made understandable to the faithful, especially to illiterate and semi-literate people who cannot read original Arabic texts. . . . This means it has to be interpreted. Interpretation is a political process: the selection of texts from among a great many that potentially give widely divergent messages, and their exegesis are unavoidably influenced, if not outrightly motivated, by the political programs and interests of those who control the formulation and dissemination of ideologies.[11]

Like other modernist reform movements within religion, Muslim feminism emphasizes individual agency and insists upon women's right to a direct relationship with God with no human (cleric) mediators. This has been a basic principle of reformation within Christianity raised in 1551 by Luther leading to the Protestant Reformation. This principle if applied seriously among Muslims can challenge the (male) clerical monopoly over religion, transforming women's understanding of religion from a male-cleric-centered authoritarian institution to a non-hierarchical spiritual process in women's daily lives.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Feminist believers from the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have a lot to learn from each other's experience

in "reclaiming" their faith and spirituality from the clergy-centered patriarchal monopoly of religious authorities. But spiritual feminism and faith-based feminists cannot be much different from religious fundamentalists if they do not respect the freedom of choice and impose their version of feminism on secular, laic and atheist feminists. What can be troubling in regard to religious feminism, be it Islamic or Christian, is the tendency toward sectarianism or totalitarianism. The real danger is when a single brand of ideological feminism, be it secular Marxist or religious Islamic (in this case it becomes Islamist) presents itself as the only legitimate or authentic voice for all women or the "true path for liberation," negating, excluding, and silencing other voices and ideas among women in any given society. Appreciation for ideological, cultural, racial, sexual, and class diversity is critical for local and global feminist movements.

For effective feminist strategizing, the importance of dialogue, conversation, and coalition building among women activists of various ideological inclinations cannot be over- emphasized. The feminist movement is not one movement but many. What unites feminists is a belief in the human dignity, human rights, freedom of choice, and further empowerment of women rather than any ideological, spiritual, or religious stance. Secularity works better for all when secularism means impartiality toward religion, not anti-religionism. Some secularist and Marxist feminists have treated Muslim or Christian feminists as rivals or foes of secular feminism and have been preoccupied with academic concerns over their philosophical and ideological inconsistency and postmodern limits (as though various brands of secular feminism are free from such limits). We may see religious and spiritual feminism, including Muslim feminism, as a welcome addition to the wide spectrum of feminist discourse, as long as these religious feminists contribute to the empowerment of women, tolerance and cultural pluralism. When their discourse and actions impose their religious strictures on all, however, or when they co-opt the meaning of feminism to fight against equal rights for women or women's empowerment, or when they cooperate with and serve as arms of repressive and anti-democratic Islamist states, Muslim feminism is not helpful. Muslim feminism has served women's cause when it complements, diversifies, and strengthens the material as well as spiritual force of the women's movements in any given Muslim society.

Observations on the recent Islamist and other religious fundamentalist movements indicate that theocratic states are not able to empower women nor are they able to provide an inclusive democracy for their citizens. Religion is important but should be separated from state power. Muslim feminists seem to be an inevitable and positive component of the ongoing change, reform, and development of Muslim societies as they face modernity. In the short run, Muslim feminists may serve as a sort of Islamization of feminism for some. In the long run, in a society that allows for and protects open debate and discussion, Muslim feminism (as did Christian feminism) can facilitate the modernization and secularization of Islamic societies and states. Negotiating modernity takes many forms. Although feminism and women's movement has become more global than ever before, as a Jewish feminist colleague (Simona Sharoni) once noted, sisterhood is not global nor is it local; women's solidarity has to be negotiated within each specific context.

ENDNOTES

1. Rough estimates based on three regions in Asia as reported in *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics* (2000) New York: United Nations Publications. p. 89, chart 4.5.

2. See Paidar 1982; Paidar, P. (2001) "Gender of Democracy: The Encounter between Feminism and Reformism in Contemporary Iran." *Democracy, Governance and Human Rights Programme* Paper Number 6, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development; Smith, J. (1985) "Women, Religion and Social Change in Early Islam" in *Women, Religion and Social Change.* Haddad, Y.Y. and Findly, E.B. (eds.) Albany: State University of New York Press.; Mernissi, F. (1991) *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights* in *Islam.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.; al-Hibri, 1992; Ahmed, L. (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.; Hassan, 1995; Hoodfar, H. (1996) "Bargaining with Fundamentalism: Women and the Politics of Population Control in Iran." *Reproductive Health Matters* 8: 30-40; Mir-Hosseini, Z. (1996) "Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of Shari`a in Iran Today." *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives.* M. Yamani (ed.) London: Ithaca Press. Mir-Hosseini, Z. (1999) *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.; Kian-Thiebaut, A. (1997) "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24: 75-96; Tohidi, 1996,

Tohidi, N. (1998) "Guardians of the Nation: Women, Islam, and the Soviet Modernization in Azerbaijan" in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*. Herbert B. and Nayereh T. (eds) Boulder: Lynne Rienner.; Tohidi 2001; Fernea, E. (1998) *In Search of Islamic Feminism*. New York: Doubleday.; Roald, A.S. (1998) "Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition of Feminist Thought" in *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations*. Ask, K. and Tjomsland, M. Oxford (eds). Berg Press.; Najmabadi, A. (1998) "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth" in *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*. Haddad, Y.Y. and Esposito, J.L. (eds.) London: Oxford University Press.; Najmabadi 2000; Nakanishi, H. (1998) "Power, Ideology, and Women's Consciousness in Postrevolutionary Iran" in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity*. Bodman, H. and Tohidi, N. (eds.) Boulder: Lynne Rienner.; Afshar, H. (1998) *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case Study*. London: Macmillan.; Moghissi, 1998; Abu-Lughod, L. (ed.) (1998) *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.; Badran, M. (1999) "Toward Islamic Feminisms: A Look at the Middle East" in *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female Public Space in Islamicate Societies*. Afsaruddin, A. (ed.) Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 159-88; Wadud, A. (1999) *Quran and Woman: Rereading Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.; Keddie, N. (2000) "Women in Iran since 1979." *Social Research* 67: 407-38; Webb & Saleh, 2000; Moghadam, V. (2000) "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Notes on a Debate." *Iran Bulletin* (www.iran-bulletin.org/islamic_feminism.htm).; Cooke, 2001; Rostami-Povey, 2001; and Barlas, A. (2002) *'Believing Women' in Islam: Understanding Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran*. Austin: Texas University Press.

3. Winter/Spring, 2001

4. Quoted from Hoda El-Sadda by Abou-Bakr.

5. Ahmed, L. (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. p. 168.

6. Bayes, J. and Tohidi, N. (eds.) (2001) *Globalization, Gender, and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*. New York: Palgrave.

7. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999).

8. Stowasser, B. (1998) "Gender Issues nd Contemporary Quran Interpretation" in *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, Haddad, Y.Y. and Esposito, J. (eds.) New York: Oxford University Press.

9. al–Hibri, A. (1997) "Islam, Law, and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women's Rights" in *American University Journal of International Law and Policy*, 12: 1-44, p. 2.

10. "Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminist Theology in the Light of the Christian Tradition of Feminist Thought" in *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions on Gender Relations*. Ask, K. and Marit Tjomsland, M. (eds.) Oxford: Berg, 1998, 41

11. Friedl, E. (1997) "Ideal Womanhood in Post-Revolutionary Iran" in *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Religious Fundamentalism Cross-Culturally*. Brink, J. and Mencher, J. (eds.) New York: Routledge. p. 146.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES OF PRESENTERS

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