

## Islamism and Gender Activism: Muslim Women's Quest for Autonomy

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### Introduction

This paper surveys the emergence of feminist ideas and ideology amongst Muslim women in recent years. Recognizing that minority Muslim communities and Muslims in majority countries are inextricably linked in today's increasingly interconnected world, an examination of current literature reveals that there are many new forms of women's activism among Muslim women in majority and minority communities that can be denoted 'feminist' within the religious framework. Furthermore, there is evidence within the Islamist movements themselves that Muslim women's gender activism seeks to subvert the hegemony of the dominant Islamist discourse. Our investigation indicates wide variations in Muslim women's responses, which pose a fundamental challenge to the assumption that Muslim women constitute a homogenous group.

### Islamic Activism and Muslim Diaspora

The increasing globalization in the latter part of the twentieth century has meant a wide transfer of people and 'cultures' across the globe. Despite this globalization, cultural production has remained largely the monopoly of the West. The Western hegemony over the media which seems intent on presenting a unified irrational Islam that is a threat to world peace and democracy has in part caused a process of increasing 'Islamization' within the Muslim communities throughout the world. This Islamization presents an increasingly homogenized public Islam as well as greater adherence to the religion in private practice. Although this Islamic revival has been described somewhat derogatorily as 'fundamentalism', I propose to use the term Islamism to refer to this phenomenon of Islamic activism. An Islamist attempts to propagate and purify Islam and gets actively involved in organizations which aim to transform society along 'Islamic' lines.

The experience of migrancy has in many instances engendered a new superior identity founded upon the universal bond of Islam, a bond that transcends national and regional identities.<sup>1</sup> Several concepts have been revived and are of significance within this reorganized Muslim world. Many writers have commented on the importance of the Islamic concept of *ummah* (the global Muslim community). This concept has been instrumental in creating the global identity of Muslims as distinct from their national or regional identity. Ron Geaves writes that for young British Muslims religion provides an identity that is seen as separate and superior to ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> Diaspora is symbolic of the origins of Islam in Arabia. Muslim migrants see themselves as re-enacting the *hijrah* (migration) of the Prophet and carrying Islam to new lands. They feel it their duty to enjoin *da'wah* (invitation to Islam) amongst non-Muslims in the Western hemisphere.<sup>3</sup>

Boundary markers such as clothing and dietary restrictions have taken on an added significance in these contexts.

### **Muslim Women and Gender Activism**

One aspect of the Islamic revival among Muslim communities in diaspora is the greater active participation of women in the field of religion. A number of writers have observed that one of the emphases in religious practice in the diaspora has been a push to a more dispersed leadership popularly generated for religious observances and community representation.<sup>4</sup> Recent anthropological writings have noted that women appear to play a central role whether formally in mosque organizations or informally in the context of devotional assemblies. Women have had a relatively small role in organized religion in the Islamic world in the past.<sup>5</sup>

Today, numerous Muslim women's organizations have emerged around the world. These organizations have active women participants and deal specifically with issues of relevance to women. In Britain these include the women's sections of the *Jamaat-i-Islami* and Young Muslims, as well as specific women's organizations such as *An-Nisa*. The increasing feminization of Islam has resulted in demands for women's access to theological institutions, positions of religious leadership and prayers in mosques. Despite the emphasis on traditional gender roles in some of its manifestations, the Islamic revival has itself been of extreme importance in the growth of a 'feminist' consciousness amongst Muslim women. Moreover, notwithstanding the particular political and socio-economic settings within which the ideologies and movements have emerged, there is a unity in their ideals and arguments.

I borrow Margot Badran's term 'gender activism' to describe this religiously based feminism. Badran talks of a kind of feminism or public activist mode amongst Egyptian intellectual women today.<sup>6</sup> She writes that a decade ago there was clear demarcation and animosity between the feminist and Islamist camps. However, today one can observe a new configuration of female forces, which have blurred some of the hard-drawn lines of the previous era. Badran defines 'feminism' broadly as being an awareness of constraints placed on women because of their gender compiled with attempts to remove those constraints. Elsewhere, I have detailed the arguments of more modernist based gender activists. However, what is of increasing interest is the gender activism of Islamist women themselves. The real issue is whether they are patriarchal women, as the common assumption goes, or can we observe new kinds of 'feminist consciousness' amongst them?

Many Muslim women are critical of the ideals of equality formulated in the Western liberation paradigms. They ask whether 'sexual equality' is a good thing after all. Islamist women seem to have opted for complementarity of the sexes and strictly defined gender roles. Many non-Islamist women feel the Islamist 'return to Islam' to be regressive and backward. These non-Islamist women have internalized the popular media image of 'fundamentalism' as being fanatical, irrational, anti-modern and misogynistic. So, is Islamism always opposed to women's rights and autonomy? Does it deny women educational and employment opportunities? Have the movements succeeded in making their 'ideal Muslim woman' (the home-making, self-sacrificing mother and wife) a reality?

The growing strength and popular appeal of Islamism amongst Muslim women can be seen in the increasing presence of *hijab*-clad women on the streets of numerous cities throughout the world. The *hijab* acts as a powerful visual symbol. Islamists feel that

Muslims should be immediately identifiable by their appearance. This identification of religious identity is felt to be most important for women since they are assumed to be the most vulnerable to 'westoxication'. The issue of the *hijab* is intimately connected to questions of women's sexuality and their roles in society. In Iran prior to the Islamic revolution the issue of the veil became a major arena of conflict between the forces of modernity and Islamic authenticity. Debates continue throughout the world on women's public behaviour, their rights to education and employment and their legal subordination to their husband's authority.

### ***Hijab: The Islamist Uniform***

The *hijab* or veil is today the hallmark of Islamist women worldwide. It has become the symbol of returning to an 'original' Islam and to an authentic indigenous culture. Seen as a symbol of oppression and backwardness in the discourse of colonial domination, the veil was given up by most upper-class and middle-class Muslim women in the early part of the twentieth century. However, it has recently made a global comeback with the Islamic revival. The *hijab* and its associated qualities of religious modesty are emphasized by Islamists partly as a rejection of the 'immorality' of the West and the Western woman.<sup>7</sup> In a reversal of Orientalism (or, as it is sometimes referred to as, Occidentalism) Islamists project the Western 'Other' as sexually perverse, immoral and corrupt.

It was the earlier discourse of colonial domination that initially determined the meaning of the veil in geopolitical discourse and thereby set the terms for its emergence as a symbol of resistance.<sup>8</sup> From a global historical perspective change in style of dress and notions of 'appropriate female attire' are driven as much by the market as by changing social mores and political climate.<sup>9</sup> The West has had a tremendous impact on the style of dress and fashion in the non-Western world in the past. Thus it is possible to see the new veiling as part of the resistance to and reversal of this process. Although male attire has undergone a similar 'de-Westernization'—with the tie, shirts and trousers being shunned as symbols of Western dress—greater emphasis has been placed on women's appearance.

There continues to be a multiplicity of arguments about the meaning and significance of the veil in present day societies. The institution of veiling is complex and differentiated. There are a wide range of styles of veil, ranging from the uniform black cloaks worn by women in post-revolution Iran to the exclusive designer scarves of women of the new elite in Egypt. What is called the 'veil' in English does not correspond to any single term in Arabic. Veiling has traditionally been required of Muslim women when they appear in public and it has taken diverse forms according to the cultural setting: the tent-like Afghan *burqa*; the Iranian *chador*; the face mask of the Gulf region; and the kerchief covering the lower part of the face in North Africa. The *hijab* is only one element in the contemporary urban Islamist uniform, or *al-ziyy al-Islami*<sup>10</sup> as it is sometimes known. This dress adopts what is essentially quite a new style but which is intended to conform to the 'Islamic' requirements of modest dress: that which is not sexually enticing. Whilst Western attire encourages women to be seductive, sexy and sexual, the Islamic dress encourages them to be prudish, conservative and asexual.

So should the phenomenon of veiling be considered regression into traditional systems of patriarchy? In the case of Iran, commentators saw a contradiction between the political and social behaviour of Muslim women who, on the one hand, actively participated in revolutionary politics and yet, on the other hand, socially clothed themselves in traditional ways with *hijab* and *chador*. 'To Western and non-Islamist

minds such traditional clothes still represented an imprisoned existence and a subordinate female status.<sup>11</sup> The Muslim woman thus continues to be seen as trapped, oppressed and subjugated. However, recent research reveals that the actual situation differs largely from this stereotype.

There is general Islamic consensus that there are certain parts of the body that must be concealed in order to avoid shame and preserve modesty. Although both Islamist and non-Islamist Muslim women agree on the importance of the Qur'anic concept of 'modesty', they disagree on the definition of this 'modesty'. Thus, one aspect of the debate is whether or not the wearing of the veil is demanded as an absolute religious obligation. Islamists, in agreement with the majority orthodox conservative interpretation, believe that the hair and the entire female form must be covered. For example, Jamal Badawi in his instructions on *The Muslim Woman's Dress* stresses that the dress must cover the whole body except for the areas specifically exempted.<sup>12</sup> Those areas which are exempted are the face and the hands alone.<sup>13</sup> To be a true Muslim, one has to wear the 'Islamic dress' and not to do so would mean that her faith had been shattered. Non-Islamists, however, generally support the modernist contention that whilst modesty is encouraged in Islam, seclusion and the *hijab* were enjoined on the Prophet's wives alone. The modernist gender activist discourse explains veiling as being a non-Arab elite custom adopted by Muslims to symbolize their growing power and status.

The concept of modesty is clearly associated with sexuality in Islamic thought.<sup>14</sup> The Qur'anic injunctions to men and women to guard their modesty and cover their nakedness provides the basis for the regulation of behaviour, the segregation of the sexes and proper dress. According to orthodox interpretations and traditional practice in considerable parts of the Muslim world, the interaction of men and women not related by blood or marriage is permissible only in carefully controlled circumstances. The Qur'anic concept of modesty and its implication for licit and illicit sexual relations applies equally to both men and women. However, interpretation has tended to give primary focus to the dangers that women's sexuality pose to the social order.<sup>15</sup> Mernissi has pointed out that far from being seen as passive, women's sexuality is actually seen as strong, active and dangerous to the Islamic social order.<sup>16</sup> Similar to Orientalist projection of uncontrolled sexuality onto the Arab/Muslim 'Other', the orthodox Islamic discourse projects a similar uncontrolled sexuality onto females. Segregation and *pardah* are also supported in the Arab-Islamic discourse through the notion that the male gaze automatically defiles and dishonours.<sup>17</sup>

### **Segregation or Free Intermingling**

In conjunction with the *hijab*, segregation of the sexes is also an important issue for Islamists in their endeavour to practice a pure Islam unadulterated by 'corrupt' Western customs. They argue that the mixing of unrelated men and women is religiously unlawful. The *Hadith* and the Qur'an in their conservative interpretation both teach that the Muslim woman is forbidden to mingle with strange men and that she may not work outside of her home. With reference to the West, Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi argued that 'The free intermingling of the sexes has brought in its wake an ever-growing tendency towards showing off nakedness and sex perversion'.<sup>18</sup> The conservative discourse differs radically from the modernist one on the issue of women's participation in public life and her right to work. The dominant Islamist position echoes the conservative viewpoint that men and women are created with natural instincts of sexual

attraction and, thus, free mixing would lead to the inciting of fornication and adultery. They stress that the *shari'ah* sets out rules for male and female interaction that pre-empt the possibility of sexual attraction. Islamist gender activists, however, promote the more liberal view that work outside the home which involves the mixing of the sexes is acceptable, although not obligatory, providing the woman is suitably attired. The *hijab* or Islamic dress has, ironically, actually made it possible for women to venture out into mixed sex environments. Nevertheless, since segregation is the ideal, Islamists in many parts of the world are campaigning for sexually segregated educational institutions, businesses, and hospitals.

It is necessary to identify what Islamist women themselves feel about the *hijab* and the issue of gender within Islam. What are Islamist women's own views on the veil and its significance? Interviews of young Islamist women in diaspora countries such as Britain as well as in countries with Muslim majority populations such as Egypt reveal a wide diversity of responses towards veiling.<sup>19</sup> Islamist women point out the inner ease and resolution that is described as a feeling of peace or contentment, which is brought about by the formal or public aligning of oneself with Islam.<sup>20</sup> The range of views represented in the women's accounts suggests that there is no single 'Islamic' attitude towards the *hijab*. Although social pressure may be an important factor in revealing, it is explained by many young Muslim women throughout the world as a matter of personal choice, a way of making a statement about one's social position and, at the same time, a way of conforming to a religious duty.<sup>21</sup>

The Islamic dress (*al-ziyy al-Islami*) can be said to be potentially liberating in that it often offers a new mobility to young women from traditional backgrounds within the Muslim diaspora and in Muslim countries.<sup>22</sup> Wearers of the *hijab* see it as relieving them from the heavy burden of sexuality. At a more practical level the Islamic dress is also said to protect women from male harassment. Furthermore, wearing the dress signals the wearer's adherence to an Islamic moral and sexual code, thus allowing women to interact with men without fear of being dubbed immoral. As in other Muslim countries, in Iran the current orthodox form of *hijab* is largely an urban phenomenon and an issue for educated, working women. Evidently there are clear advantages for women who venture daily into co-educational campuses and sexually integrated work places. Therefore despite the fears of many non-Islamist as well as Western women, the Islamic *hijab* has proven to be liberating and empowering to women in many ways.

### **Muslim Women's Support for Islamism**

There are a number of common factors in the composition of people affiliating with the Islamic trend throughout the world. Typically from the middle and lower-middle classes, most of these women are educated and professionally upwardly mobile although often frustrated in achieving their aspirations. They are usually confronting cosmopolitan city life for the first time and are generally the first generation of women in their family to emerge socially into a sexually desegregated world.<sup>23</sup> Similarly for young Muslim women in Britain, joining Islamic groups often brings comfort by providing a sense of community.<sup>24</sup> Religious movements provide space for them to legitimately study, work and be politically and publicly active with virtue and modesty. The oppositionist status of Islamists has made female activism more necessary and therefore acceptable. The range of activities of these women covers regular meetings, study group attendance and participation in public prayers. These activities are socially

and politically important because they represent an identification with a set of goals and an authority outside of the family, government or state institutions.

Much of the discourse and polemic of Islamist men against professional non-Islamist women is internalized and reiterated by Islamist women themselves. Thus, Islamist women and their organizations attack Western style feminism and feminist activists using the religious idiom; and they condemn non-Islamist women as being Westernized and alienated from their own culture. Although Islamist women attack non-Islamist Muslims on the question of the veiling, throughout Islamic history it was only a part of the upper-class urban women who were veiled and secluded, whilst rural and nomadic women—who made up the majority of the population—were not.

Does being Islamist mean compliance with patriarchy and male dominance? Deniz Kandiyoti argues that many Islamist women consciously choose to accommodate 'patriarchy' in order to gain certain benefits.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Ayatullah Khomeini's exhortations to keep women at home found enthusiastic support amongst many Iranian women, despite the obvious elements of repression in it, because the implicit promise of increased male responsibility was attractive to women faced with the uncertainties of survival in the modern world. By contrast, the Sudan provides an interesting example of women's responses to social change and the rise of Islamist movements. In the Sudan, Islamization began in 1983 with the attempt to enforce the *shari'ah*. Here, Islamic law gained precedence over civil and customary law, leaving women in a contradictory position. Similar to the situation in Iran, several discriminatory measures were taken against women in the Sudan. However, such action by the state notwithstanding, Sondra Hale found that there is enthusiastic mass support by women for the very Islamist organization, National Islamic Front (NIF).<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the women activists were amongst the most visible and active supporters. In her interviews with several leading activists, Hale found that these women believed that the *shari'ah* gave them rights equal to those of men. Whilst one could argue that such views are simply the result of an internalization of patriarchal thinking and false consciousness, an alternative interpretation would be that these women are trying to formulate a type of Islamist feminism. Hale found, much to her surprise, that the activist women all agreed that men oppressed women, that Arabs had a low opinion of women and that Arab men tried to give a false idea to women about their rights under the *shari'ah*.<sup>27</sup> These women are actively pursuing change in the status of women, but within their own perception of an Islamist framework.

### **The Islamist Gender Activist Discourse**

The gender activism of Islamist women is promoting a discourse that has some important common strands with the types of feminism of modernists as well as the more secular based feminists. The Islamist gender activists aim to reclaim religion and find a liberation theory for women from within Islam. The pioneers amongst these are struggling against the patriarchal dictates of the dominant Islamist discourse. All over the Muslim world Islamist women are speaking out.

A more radical and critical approach to gender is now evident in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Educated and employed Islamist women are involved in generating this discourse. Important leaders of this movement in Iran include women such as Azam Taleqani and Zahra Rahnavaard.<sup>28</sup> In Egypt today veteran Islamist Zeinab Al-Ghazali is continuing her earlier activism after six years in prison, inspiring and mobilizing young women who gather at her home.

Islamist gender activist women argue that the West and the Western secular feminism have failed them. They dismiss Western feminism for being one of the main instruments of colonialism and causing family breakdown. In reference to the drastic influence of feminism in the West, Islamist author Sarah Sherrif writes:

Western families and Western society are in crisis because women have been forced to live a life devoid of personality and individuality. Alienation is increasing, suicides are increasing, loneliness and depression are up, divorce and separation are rising, women are being exploited like never before for commercial and other less savoury purposes ...<sup>29</sup>

Islamist women believe that by concentrating on labour market analysis and offering the experiences of a minority of white and affluent middle-class women as the norm, Western feminists have developed an analysis, which is all but irrelevant to the majority of women in the Third World. They expound the view that Western style feminist struggles have only liberated women to the extent that they are prepared to become sex objects and market their sexuality to benefit patriarchal capitalism.<sup>30</sup> Islamists thus argue that a stricter adherence to Islam and a return to the roots of the faith will yield true enlightenment and liberation for women.

One of the main exponents of the Islamist discourse, Zahra Rahnavard, argues that Western feminism and capitalism marginalize and denigrate motherhood, femininity and familial responsibilities.<sup>31</sup> She argues that Western feminists have failed to alter the labour market to accommodate women's needs and at the same time women have lost the benefits they once obtained in matrimony. The failure of Western feminism to carve an honoured and recognized space for marriage and motherhood in women's lives and in society and its denigration of domestic work is one of the biggest grievances of Islamist women.

Islamist discourse portrays a contradictory attitude towards gender. This discourse combines traditional conservative ideas about the role of women whilst, at the same time, accepting the needs of the modern economy. On the one hand, the dominant discourse within Islamism emphasizes motherhood as a religious duty and a special privilege of women. Thus Islamists argue that women have been made for domesticity and motherhood and should adopt this role willingly. For some Islamist scholars such as Shari'ati, Muttahari and Mawdudi women can only achieve success in terms of their men-folk through daughter-hood, marriage or motherhood. Afshar argues that in many ways fundamentalism is a ratification of motherhood as a respectable role for women to be performed within the domestic sphere and part of its appeal is rooted in its validation of this role.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in contrast to the modernist discourse, Islamist activists generally view women primarily as mothers and wives. While women Islamists such as Al-Ghazali and Rahnavard also support this division of labour and women placed within the sphere of domesticity, the example of their own lives has been to deny women's relegation to pure domesticity.

On the other hand, many Islamist movements now exhibit a degree of flexibility in their position on women. They encourage education for women. Nevertheless, this encouragement is often rationalized as addressing the need to have informed mothers, women teachers and doctors in a segregated society. Whilst extolling the virtues of home-making, Islamist women, however, continue to go out and pursue higher education and the professions.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it is evident that, although the voice of overt feminism (in Western terms) is absent in many Muslim communities, the entry of women into the universities, the professions and public life in unprecedented numbers

and the availability of education and professional occupations to women from a broad segment of the population is indicative of 'pro-feminist' ideals and aspirations.<sup>34</sup>

Since women are the guardians of the home it follows, according to the dominant Islamist discourse, that they have to be dependent on men for their livelihood. Women's economic dependency on men is of paramount importance to the Islamist argument. Due to their violation of the strict segregation codes, working women are seen as threatening the morality and productivity of society. It is mainly for this reason that formal employment is not encouraged for women. The common basis for the conservative viewpoint of women's economic dependency is the Qur'anic verse 34: 4.<sup>35</sup> The gender activist discourse challenges the notion of permanent economic dependency of wives on husbands. Pakistani woman-theologist Riffat Hassan has argued that the interpreters of this verse have chosen the wrong meaning. She argues that what is in fact implied here is merely a permission granted to men to spend their wealth on women for the short period of child bearing. The authority to spend is not one that is given to men absolutely and for all times, but only for a specific purpose and for a limited period.<sup>36</sup> Rahnavard also points out that the word 'authority' is itself a misinterpretation and that what is meant by the Qur'an is a specific allocation of responsibilities for a particular period of time. Men have not been appointed to rule over women but are given the heavy responsibility of securing a livelihood whilst women get on with the important task of motherhood.

According to the Islamist gender activist discourse, however, Muslim women do not lose their identity or wealth on marriage and they do have the choice to enter into paid employment outside the home.<sup>37</sup> Thus it is argued that 'if a woman wanted to work, however, any profession permissible for men would be equally permissible for the woman so long as it does not compromise her femininity ...'<sup>38</sup> Rahnavard argues that in Qur'anic terms marriage is a flexible arrangement where, even though women are expected to be obedient, they can nevertheless expect to be kept in the style to which they had been accustomed before their marriage. Furthermore, women had the right to include a right of divorce for themselves in their marriage contract. Within the marriage not only are men expected to maintain their wives, but they must also treat them with kindness. Husbands must pay an additional fee to wives who agree to suckle their babies.<sup>39</sup> Islamist gender activists argue that marriage is a domain of mutual intimacy and comfort. Despite the actual traditional practice, Islamist scholars have argued, Islam does not shackle women within marriage, does not bind them to domesticity and, by allowing them a separate property entitlement, in fact makes them independent of their husbands and thus able to fend for themselves.

There are still Islamically condoned practices and institutions which gender activists find difficult to explain and reinterpret. For example, even the most committed gender activists have difficulties in explaining the issue of polygamy. Modernist apologists have long argued that the relevant verse permitting polygamy commands absolute and complete equal treatment for all wives and that this is a near impossibility for all humans except for the Prophet; hence, polygamy was not permitted. The dominant Islamist position, however, sees polygamy as a man's God-given right valid for all places and times. Murtada Muttahari explains it as being a necessity due to a man's naturally greater sexual appetite.<sup>40</sup> Legal scholar, Abdul Rehman Doi argues that a wife may not legally object to the husband's right to take another wife.<sup>41</sup> However, the attitude of Islamist women to how men should approach the situation is quite different from those of men. Women argue that polygamy is permitted only in exceptional circumstances and that the husband must ask for the first wife's permission before doing so. It is also



possible for a woman to insert a clause in her marriage contract prohibiting her husband from contracting a polygamous union. According to Rahnavard, polygamy was only allowed in early Islam due to that particular moment of history in order to protect orphans and widows: a large number of men had been killed due to wars and women and children were thus left unprotected.<sup>42</sup>

### Islamist and Non-Islamist Discourses: Possibility for Reconciliation?

Despite their fundamentally different premises both groups of Islamists and non-Islamist gender activists do show a striking degree of similarity in their pro-feminist stances. Badran has written of the convergence of the positions of feminists and Islamist women.<sup>43</sup> I would argue that this is a global phenomenon. Be it in the Middle East or in Muslim communities of the West, there is pursuit of the goals of female autonomy and subjectivity either under the idiom of 'feminism' and 'Western dress' or that of 'Islam' and 'the veil'.

Unlike many Islamist and conservative men who emphasize the natural intellectual inferiority and irrationality of women, gender activist women see men and women to be of equal mental capacity. Interviews of veiled and unveiled women in Egypt revealed that veiled women were consistently more conservative and less feminist than their unveiled sisters.<sup>44</sup> Regarding women's education and professional achievements, unveiled women argued for more gender egalitarian positions. However, what was even more striking was the number of similarities between the two groups: in both cases the overwhelming majority of veiled and non-veiled women supported women's rights to education, work, and equality in public life and political rights.<sup>45</sup> The contrast to the dominant Islamist male point of view is thus evident and it is also apparent that many women's views do not conform to the conventional notion that a woman's place is at home, without political rights, and without rights to paid employment outside the home. However, both groups of women gave importance to women's reproductive roles and felt that society should give greater attention to the family and to the domestic roles.

Non-Islamist women throughout the diaspora agree with the general Islamic idea that male and female sexuality should be controlled to some degree through the socialization process and individual self-control. They also believe that sex must be confined to marriage and they reiterate the Islamist argument that Western crime, drug abuse and psychological problems are due in part to relaxed sexual standards. However, non-Islamist women tend to emphasize the importance of self-control rather than strictly imposed *hijab* and sexual segregation. Middle-class women in Iran reject the idea of women's intellectual inferiority. According to Gerami's findings, men's unilateral power is questioned and woman's right in decision making at the family level is recognized.<sup>46</sup> However, despite their articulation of certain feminist positions these women also believe that ultimately men are the better decision makers.

The views amongst Islamist and non-Islamist women, about the role of women in society, do not conform totally to the views identified with traditional Islam and encoded in the *shari'ah*. It would seem that the majority of young Islamist women have only a vague idea of the technicalities enshrined in establishment Islam. Leila Ahmed is of the view that the young women and men affiliating with Islam are listening to its ethical voice reiterating the equal humanity of all, instead of the gender hierarchy ingrained in the technical, legal and doctrinal Islam.<sup>47</sup> Some Islamist women, especially those of the older generation, have internalized patriarchal thinking even though at

times they act in contrary ways. On the other hand, gender activist women who are aware of the discriminatory laws are contesting the traditional interpretations. Younger Islamist women are beginning to question male dominance and to see it as transgressing the bounds of 'correct' Islamic thinking. They are creating a radical gender activist strand within Islamism

### **Radical Islamist Gender Activism**

The new generation of intellectual Islamist women are in the process of producing a gender reconfiguration from within the Islamist movement.<sup>48</sup> Islamist women are becoming more political and more demanding of the men within their own movements.

Some Islamist activist women are demonstrating a greater degree of openness to change and an eagerness for dialogue. Islamist progressive discourse on gender is being moved in a new direction by Heba Rauf Ezzat,<sup>49</sup> a young Islamist graduate student of political science at Cairo University.<sup>50</sup> Active within the Islamist movement, she is known for her academic research on women's political role from the perspective of political Islam and its theory. Ezzat is evoking a new discourse on women, politics and political sociology that is seen as rather liberal and radical within the Islamist movement. Such liberal attitudes on gender that are also espoused by scholars such as Hassan Al-Turabi and Zeinab Al-Ghazali are currently causing much uproar within the Islamist movement.<sup>51</sup> Al-Turabi argues for an enlarged social role for Muslim women, including her right to fully participate in the political process as well as to stand for any public office except that of Khalifa.<sup>52</sup> He asserts the permissibility of the intermingling of the two sexes in places of worship, in education and in family gatherings.

Similar to various other gender activists, Ezzat examines the early sources of religion and Islamic history in order to evolve a theory of women's liberation.<sup>53</sup> She disagrees with the dominant discourse of Islamists that relegates women to a domestic role. Ezzat does not accuse the whole of the *fiqh* of being patriarchal.<sup>54</sup> Like the theologian Riffat Hassan, Ezzat uses the orthodox methodology to interpret the Qur'an and Sunnah and they both reach quite different conclusions to the orthodox view. Both Hassan and Ezzat challenge hierarchical power relations within the family. Ezzat stresses the Islamic concept of *shura* (consultation) as opposed to 'a totalitarian patriarchal system'.<sup>55</sup> She wishes to see a 'democratization of the man-woman relationship inside a family structure'.

Despite the shared concerns, Ezzat's political orientation is fundamentally different from secular feminists and modernist gender activists such as Riffat Hassan. Hassan wishes for the feminist movement to be religiously rooted in Islam. She argues that it is necessary to present the positive content of the Qur'an that has been lost due to centuries of misogynistic interpretation. Ezzat defines herself as an Islamist and rejects the label 'Islamic feminist'. Ezzat argues that women's liberation in society should rely on Islam alone.<sup>56</sup> This, she argues, necessitates a revival of Islamic thought and a renewal within Islamic jurisprudence. Although she rejects the term 'feminism' Ezzat is, in essence, looking for a way to express much of what feminism at its base level in fact connotes.

Ezzat is of the view that the New Right has more to offer Muslim feminists than radical or leftist feminism.<sup>57</sup> The New Right in America is a conservative movement that emerged as a counter reaction to feminism and the civil rights movement. Women

are an important visible presence throughout the movement. Similar to the Islamist mission, the New Right activists believe their special mission is to restore America to health, to regenerate religious belief and to renew faith, morality and decency. This identification by Ezzat of herself with the New Right seemingly puts her into a very conservative position on the gender question. In many ways the gender activism of Islamist women and the New Right reminds us of the very early stirrings of 'feminist consciousness' in the West and the Middle East. At the beginning of the twentieth century, women such as Margaret Mead argued for women's access to education and public spheres whilst ascribing to the vision of women as feminine and supportive, home-making mothers and wives.

However, Ezzat's position on women's education and work can be seen as quite 'progressive' sharing much in common with modernist gender activists and secular feminists. For example, whilst most conservative religious activists call for the return of working women to the home, Ezzat does not. Although Ezzat stresses the importance of the family, she feels that women should have the freedom of choice between different roles such as pursuing careers or being primarily wives and mothers.<sup>58</sup> In her view, the respect of society should focus on women's active participation within and outside their homes. Ezzat contests any separation between the public and private spheres and argues that rules that apply in the political arena should also be valid for the family.<sup>59</sup> She wishes to deconstruct the public-private dichotomy that is dominant in Western and Islamic thought. This dichotomy gives priority either to family life or to public life. She argues that private is political, not in the feminist aggressive sense, but in the sense of 'Islamic solidarity' and the importance of social infrastructure.<sup>60</sup>

The magazine *Zanan*, which basically holds very similar viewpoints to Ezzat, is leading a parallel radical Islamist discourse in Iran. Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues that the post-fundamentalist discourse of the magazine is changing the very terms of not only the *shari'ah* discourse on women but that of the Islamic Republic as well in arguing for a type of demarcation between state and religion.<sup>61</sup> Similar to the discourse of Hassan and Ezzat, *Zanan* takes for granted gender equality on all fronts including the rights accorded by the *shari'ah*. It advocates a brand of feminism that is primarily based on Islam, and not the West, as its source of legitimacy. The authors do not shrink away from tackling very difficult issues and defending them using religious arguments. They have thus brought about a radical shift in the very premises of the debate on 'women and Islam'.

In agreement with most Islamists, Ezzat is critical of the West and Western feminism.<sup>62</sup> However, unlike most of them she tends to critically examine phenomena attributed to the West without rejecting them wholesale. Furthermore, she is willing to accept the tremendous changes the feminist movement has made possible for women.<sup>63</sup> This notwithstanding, she defines feminists as mainly secularists who are fighting male domination. Religion, on the whole, is regarded by them as an obstacle to women's rights. According to Ezzat, 'conflict' between the sexes is the main concept of secular Western feminist theory. Like many other religiously committed women, Ezzat is wary of what she sees as the 'individualism' in Western feminism. She emphasizes the importance of the collective good over the benefit of individual liberation. Hence Islamist gender activists do not use the term 'women's liberation', nor do they see themselves as engaged in a struggle against men. Family concerns remain important to them even though they are increasingly invading public space.

### **The Feminisms of Muslim Women**

The feminism of Muslim gender activists can be placed in the broad context of 'Third World feminism' and cultural feminism. Islamist gender activists take the position that the norms and values of Western feminism do not apply to them in total. The gender activist organization Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights based in the United States argues that, as women of colour in the US have pointed out earlier, Western feminist theories tended to be unworkable for their communities because they reflected white middle-class concerns and values.<sup>64</sup> Thus, Islamist women point out that it is important to realize that feminist scholarly practices exist within relations of power. The West (usually white upper-class women) dominates the production of this feminist knowledge, which does not comprise merely of objective knowledge.

Gender activists are striving to destroy the myth perpetuated by earlier Western feminist writings on Islam. This Orientalist myth saw a universal, a historical monolithic Islam that was uncompromisingly oppressive to women. Islamist women are especially critical of Western feminist writings on the subordination of Muslim women. They take a similar position to Third World feminists and women of colour. Chandra Mohanty makes a direct attack on Western feminist scholarship and argues that Western feminist writings on women in the Third World must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship—the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas.<sup>65</sup> Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience.

A homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed in many Western feminist writings that seek to produce the image of an 'average Muslim woman'. This average Muslim woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender and is therefore sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, tradition-bound, religious and domesticated. This is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as being educated, modern and having control over their bodies and sexuality and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions.<sup>66</sup> Mohanty argues that beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism. Despite the insistence of Muslim women on the empowerment and liberation they achieve through religion, intellectual elitism often leads to the dismissal of these claims as 'false consciousness'. Institutions of veiling and sexual segregation (such as *purdah*) are thus denied any cultural and historical specificity, and contradictions and potentially subversive aspects are totally ruled out. As Islamist women point out, it is wrong to assume that the mere practice of veiling women indicates the universal oppression of women.

### **Conclusion**

The crux of the problem, which now presents a fundamental challenge to feminism itself, lies in the initial assumption of women as a homogenous group or category. Often the analysis of 'Third World difference' includes a paternalistic attitude towards women in the Third World. Feminist anthropology today attempts to address the problem of generalizing about Muslim women by looking at historical and cultural specificities. It is acknowledged that the self-representation of women is a necessary and vital corrective to the homogenizing tendency of Western feminist discourse. Muslim women bitterly resent the way they are often silenced by the very Western movements that claim to stand up for their rights. Awareness of bias on the whole and of ethnocentrism,

and Orientalism in particular, is of crucial importance to the Muslim women's quest for autonomy.

Many Muslim women ask whether feminists in the West have achieved liberation and live free from the hardships caused by patriarchal customs and institutions.<sup>67</sup> They question whether the modernized husbands of working women take on household chores. The women's questions and commentary point to the need for studies that recognize critical or divergent views of Western norms and values. The integration of other voices is necessary to avoid a polarized Western feminist representation of Muslim women under the impact of religious 'fundamentalism'. The integration of other voices is necessary to prevent the Muslim woman from taking the place of the irrational and inferior Oriental unable to represent herself.

## NOTES

1. Akbar Ahmed, *Islam, Globalization and Post-Modernity*, London: Routledge, 1994; and Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
2. Ron Geaves, *Influences within Sectarian Islam in Britain with Reference to the Concepts of Ummah and Community*, Leeds: Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds, UK, 1996.
3. See Ahmed, *op. cit.* and Kepel, *op. cit.*
4. Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Making Muslim Space: In North America and Europe*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
5. With the exception of Sufi Islam.
6. Margot Badran, 'Gender Activism, Feminists and Islamists in Egypt', in ed. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.
7. See Amina Abu Shehab, 'Women, Islam and Modernity', M. Phil. thesis, University of London, 1993; and Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1992.
8. Ahmed, 'Women and Gender in Islam', *op. cit.*
9. Helen Watson, 'Women and the Veil: Personal Responses to Global Process', in eds. Akbar Ahmed and Hastings Donnan, *Islam, Globalization and Post-modernity*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 151.
10. *The Term al-ziyy al-Islami* refers to a certain dress code: this consists of a variety of styles of headgear (and for women sometimes face coverings) and garments that are loose-fitting, ankle-length and long-sleeved. See Fadwa El-Guindi, 'Veiling *Infitah* with Muslim Ethic: Egypt's Contemporary Islamic Movement', *Social Problems*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1981, p. 474.
11. N. Ramazani, 'The Veil—Piety or Protest', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. VII, No. 2, 1983, p. 20.
12. Jamal A. Badawi, *The Muslim Woman's Dress According to the Qur'an and Sunnah*, London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1982, p. 5.
13. There is disagreement amongst conservative Islamic scholars as to whether the face should be covered.
14. See Fatma A. Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland, New York and Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1984; also Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Moderns Muslim Society*, London: Al Saqi, 1985; and Watson, 'Women and the Veil', *op. cit.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, *op. cit.*
17. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Women's Bodies, Women's Word: Gender and Discourses in Arabo Islamic Writings*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
18. Sayyid Abu A'la Mawdudi, *The Islamic Way of Life*, ed. Kurshid Ahmad, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1986.
19. Dunya Maumoon, 'Gender Activism and the Islamic Revival', M. Phil. thesis, University of London, 1996.
20. S. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992.
21. See El-Guindi, 'Veiling *Infitah* with Muslim Ethic: Egypt's Contemporary Islamic Movement', *op.*

- cit.* and Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, *op. cit.* Ahmed cites Zeinab Radwan's classical work in Arabic, *Thahirat al hijab bayn al-jamiyyat*, Cairo: Al-markaz al-qawmi lil buhuth al-ijtima'iyya wa'l-dina'iyya, 1982.
22. The Islamic dress is potentially liberating for young women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in Britain.
  23. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 223.
  24. Maumoon, 'Gender Activism and the Islamic Revival', *op. cit.*, p. 123.
  25. Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', in *Gender and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1988.
  26. Sondra Hale, 'Gender, Religious Identity and Political Mobilization in Sudan', in ed. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.
  27. *Ibid.*
  28. Taleqani is the daughter of the late Iranian leader Ayatollah Taleqani and member of the first post-revolutionary Parliament; and Rahnavard is a leading Islamic feminist and wife of a former Iranian Prime Minister.
  29. Sarah Sheriff, *Women's Rights in Islam*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1989, p. 4.
  30. Haleh Afshar, 'Why Fundamentalism? Iranian Women and their Support for Islam', York: University of York, Department of Politics, Working Paper No. 2, 1994, p. 16.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
  32. *Ibid.*
  33. Farida Shaheed has observed this phenomenon in Pakistan. Leila Ahmed has commented on a similar process in Egypt. It can also be observed amongst Britain's Muslim populations.
  34. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, *op. cit.*
  35. 'Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another and for that they have expended of their property ...' (Qur'an, 4: 34).
  36. Riffat Hassan, discussion paper at ISIS WICE meeting, Chapelle d'Abondance, 1988.
  37. Afshar, 'Why Fundamentalism', *op. cit.*, p. 10.
  38. Shenif, *Women's Rights in Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 10
  39. Islamist women cite the Qur'anic verse 2: 233.
  40. Murtada Muttahari, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (English Translation), Tehran, Iran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1991.
  41. A Rahman Doi, *Women in the Qur'an and Sunnah*, London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1993, p. 11.
  42. Afshar, 'Why Fundamentalism', *op. cit.*, p. 15.
  43. Badran, 'Gender Activism', *op. cit.*
  44. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.
  45. *Ibid.*
  46. Shahin Gerami, 'The Role and Power of Middle Class Women in the Islamic Republic', in ed. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Identity Politics and Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 345.
  47. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
  48. Badran, 'Gender Activism', *op. cit.*
  49. Ezzat edits the women's page in *al-Sba'ab*, a weekly opposition newspaper published by a coalition of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Labour Party in Egypt.
  50. K. El-Gawhary, 'An Interview with Heba Rauf Ezzat', *Middle East Report*, November-December 1994.
  51. Abu Shehab, 'Women, Islam and Modernity', *op. cit.*
  52. Zakaria Bashier, *Muslim Women in the Midst of Change*, Leciester: The Islamic Foundation, 1985, p. 13.
  53. Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and Making of Modern Egypt*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 213.
  54. El-Gawhary, 'An Interview', *op. cit.*
  55. *Ibid.*
  56. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
  57. Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, *op. cit.*, p. 214.
  58. El-Gawhary, 'An Interview', *op. cit.*, p. 27.
  59. *Ibid.*
  60. *Ibid.*, p. 28
  61. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 'Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Post-Khomeini Iran', transcript of paper, 1995.

62. Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, *op. cit.*, p. 213.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, press release, Beijing, 1995.
65. Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse', *Feminist Review*, Vol. 30, Autumn 1988, p. 64.
66. *Ibid.*; Watson, 'Women and the Veil', *op. cit.*, p. 155.