

# **The position of women in Islamic countries: possibilities, constraints and strategies for change**

Report prepared for the Special Programme WID,  
Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS)

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**September 1992**

*The authors gratefully acknowledge support for the preparation of this report from the Special Programme WID, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS). However, the views expressed and any errors or omissions are those of the authors and not of DGIS.*

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ISBN: 1 85864 139 X  
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## SUMMARY

This report discusses the position of women in Islamic countries and their strategies for survival and change, with particular focus on Egypt, Yemen, Mali, Bangladesh and Sudan. As far as possible recent (1987-92) evidence and developments are presented, with some historical background where necessary. Whilst noting the danger of giving a reductionist analysis of women and Islam, an overview is provided with examples from a variety of contexts and perspectives, to highlight the heterogeneity of women's position and attitudes in the countries concerned.

Following an introductory section, the section II looks at the religious texts of Islam (the **Quran** and the **Sunna**) and Islamic (Shariah) law, and their implications for women. The problem of interpretation of the religious texts is emphasised as well as controversies over the authenticity of certain **hadith** pertaining to the role of women. Shariah law continues to dominate the area of marriage and family life in most Muslim countries, through personal status laws. The resistance of these laws to change can be seen in part as a reaction to perceived western economic political and cultural imperialism. Personal status laws based on Islamic principles to some extent define the wider social roles which women are able to pursue, even where civil or constitutional codes accord women equality in many areas. Whilst women are accorded legal rights under Shariah law (or personal status laws based on Islamic principles) economic, social and cultural pressure may prevent women from claiming these rights. The access of women to legal institutions varies by class and location, **inter alia**. The four juridical schools of orthodox Islam have differing approaches to questions of marriage, divorce and family life, and a closer knowledge of local legal institutions and practices is needed. Moreover, minority Islamic movements and modernists challenge orthodox interpretations in some respects.

In Section III, an account is given of the relationship between Islam and various pre-Islamic practices, i.e: polygyny, brideprice and dowry; seclusion and veiling; and female genital mutilation. All of these practices pre-date Islam and/or are prevalent in non-Muslim as well as Muslim countries and communities. Polygyny and brideprice are widely accepted as part of the Islamic marriage institution and have a basis (albeit a disputed one) in the religious and legal texts of Islam. Dowry - as practised in present day Bangladesh - has no Islamic basis and may be a response to economic and social changes which afford men greater freedom to dictate the terms of marriage. Seclusion and veiling are claimed by some to have a basis in the texts of Islam, but have also been strongly associated with class status. The contemporary phenomenon of veiling is complex and cannot be assumed to stem simply from a return to conservative religious values or traditional roles for women. Female genital mutilation is practised in different forms in various Muslim countries and communities (though by no means all) and in some non-Muslim countries and communities. Its origins are unknown but it is often, erroneously, thought to have a religious basis in Islam.

Section IV briefly examines links and tensions between modernist, Islamist and feminist movements in Islamic countries. Women's political activity has been closely associated with modernist and nationalist movements. Differential outcomes of modernisation for different groups of women have led to divergent interests and opinions as expressed in present day feminist and Islamist movements. Some women, including prominent public or media figures, are actively involved in the Islamist movement. Some Muslim feminists, as well as Islamists, prefer to engage with the Islamic discourse rather than articulating their demands from a secular viewpoint, whilst some groups of Muslim women have resisted entering into the religious discourse. Others feel that an authentic Muslim feminism, not shaped by external influences, has yet to emerge.

Section V looks at economic dimensions of women's position in Islamic countries. 'Islam' is not valid as a simple explanatory factor for the relatively low participation rate of women in economic activity in Muslim countries, since this is variable between countries and highly dependent on methodological approach taken. A reluctance on the part of both men and women to identify women's activities as work appears to be a key factor in the relatively low reported rates of female economic activity. The pattern of gender representation between and within sectors (formal, informal, agriculture) is also highly variable. Women's access to land and credit is weak in most of these countries, with the former often undermined by women's inability or reluctance to assert their (limited) inheritance rights, as well as by development projects which fail to take account of their potential impact on women's control over resources. Patchy attempts to increase women's access to credit have met with only partial success. Most women can only get access to credit through informal mechanisms - if at all - which rarely provide sufficient credit for capital investment. Control over household income and resources is identified as a key issue. There is limited data on this, but the strategies of women to defend or maximise their control over resources are very varied. Attempts by some women to reassert Islamic norms can be interpreted as a strategy for maximising their control over, or claim on, household resources. Elsewhere, migration, informal sector work and various forms of solidarity and exchange are strategies which women adopt. Male migration may temporarily increase the control of some women over household resources. Although there is little systematic information, female headed households, particularly widows, are probably a growing and highly vulnerable group, in many Islamic countries.

In section VI, political and socio-cultural dimensions of women's position in Islamic countries are briefly reviewed. Although women have gained formal political rights in nearly all Muslim countries, in most cases this has not led to significant levels of female representation. Opinions are divided on the usefulness of quota systems adopted in some of the countries here, as a way of addressing the gender imbalance in formal political institutions. Moreover, the exercise of political rights is constrained in many places by the lack of democratic institutions or processes. Official women's organisations (and sometimes women's sections of opposition political parties) are active in a number of spheres but tend to have a welfare orientation and to subsume gender demands to the requirements of broader political projects and interests. Women are active in informal politics of all kinds and women's organisations have often had an antagonistic relationship with governments. Both elite women and radical women's organisations have attempted to influence the political process, particularly in order to modify personal status laws or to protect previous gains in this sphere. Campaigns based on legal reforms may have had limited impact on uneducated and rural women, however, who tend to focus on economic and social, rather than legal demands. In Bangladesh, radical development NGOs and legal literacy campaigns have had some success in reaching less privileged women. In other countries, women's organisations are involved in adult education, legal education, income generation and rural development projects. There is little precise information about the ways in which the numerous and growing Islamic organisations and associations active in political, economic and social welfare work involve or benefit women.

In education, in spite of some progress in recent years, there is still a persistent gender gap, although again the picture is highly variable, and Egypt in particular has a relatively good record of educating women. Women's activities in the media are circumscribed by government controls. Spokespersons of the Islamist movement appear to have increasing influence over and access to the official media, especially television. Egypt has a particularly active women's press and also has a number of prominent Islamist women whose writings are widely published. There appears to be little information about the role of women in religious practice, although some Muslim women are actively researching this area. The Islamist movement has given

women a more active role in religious life than previously, and provided them with separate and permissible spheres of activity outside the home. The feminist movement has become more active and organised in recent years, partly as a response to the perceived threat of growing Islamisation. Muslim feminists are increasingly turning their attention to the interpretation of religious texts and to analysis of the role of women in Islamic history.

## I INTRODUCTION

This report discusses the position of women in Islamic societies (with particular focus on Egypt, Yemen, Mali, Bangladesh and Sudan<sup>1</sup>) and women's strategies for change, as well as factors which circumscribe these strategies or create new opportunities for women. The intended emphasis is on the last five years (1987-92) but this is somewhat restricted by the limited availability of literature and data which relate to this period. Also, it is necessary to give some historical background in order to explain contemporary trends.

Different approaches have been taken to addressing women's status in Islamic countries by writers of varying ideological persuasions. It is a highly controversial area, with a history of tensions between eurocentric views and anti-western or anti-imperialist stances. The 'woman question' has in many ways been central to attempts to resist western political, economic and cultural dominance in Islamic countries.

The exegetical approach which focuses on religious texts and harks back to early Islam is shared by Islamists and some Muslim feminists<sup>2</sup> (Kandiyoti, 1991b). Whilst the influence of Orientalism in classical western scholarship on the Middle East has been widely criticised, some writers perceive its continued presence even in the writings of other feminists<sup>3</sup>. Another whole area of scholarship is the developmentalist literature on Islamic countries which focuses on processes of social and economic transformation, and on development indicators, but with little or no attention paid to ideology or Islam as an analytical category (Kandiyoti, 1991b; Keddie, 1991).

In attempting to break with essentialism, whilst not ignoring the role of ideology, other writers focus on the state, its relationship with and response to political movements, including both political Islam and feminism, and on the international political and economic context (see introduction and chapters in Kandiyoti, 1991a, for example). Recent historical studies, partly conceived as a response to the increasing influence of Islamist<sup>4</sup> arguments, have shed considerable light on the evolution of discourses on women within Islam and on women's private and public roles and struggles through modern history (Ahmed, L., 1992; Keddie and Baron, 1991).

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<sup>1</sup> These countries are referred to as 'Islamic' in that a majority of the population are Muslim, although all have non-Muslim minority populations of varying sizes. Sudan has a non-Muslim population of 40 percent, predominantly in the south of the country, although civil war and famine have caused the displacement of large numbers of southern Sudanese to the north, especially Khartoum. In Bangladesh there are small Hindu and Christian minorities (10 percent of population); in Mali there are Animist and Christian minorities (30 percent); in Egypt there are important Christian (Coptic) and Jewish minorities. Most of the population in Yemen is Muslim, although there are both Sunni Muslims and a large minority (40 percent) of Zaydi Shi'is. (NB the figures given here are only approximate.)

<sup>2</sup> Mernissi (1991) is an example of this type of approach.

<sup>3</sup> See Hammami and Rieker's 1988 critique of Ghoussoub.

<sup>4</sup> 'Islamist' is preferred to 'fundamentalist,' because many adherents of Islam object to the latter term. The widespread use of the word 'fundamentalist' to qualify Islamic movements, by western politicians, media and some academics means that it is closely associated with the western imperialist discourse on the Islamic world.

Whilst there is a large literature on women and Islam in the Middle East in general and Egypt in particular, there is less readily available material on women in Sudan, and especially on Mali and Yemen. The very large literature on women in Bangladesh is of a broadly developmentalist thrust, focusing mainly on rural women. These disparities in the literature partly account for the emphases in the report. (See the Bibliographic Note at the end of this report for more details on the literature surveyed.)

The report can in no way claim to give a comprehensive account of the complex interactions between religious ideology and practice, political movements and state policies, and the processes of economic and social change within which women individually and collectively attempt to shape their lives. Moreover, in dealing with such different national contexts, generalisation is highly suspect. Not only are the national contexts very different, but the history of Islamic movements in these contexts, their relationship with the state and their interplay with other political and social movements also differs widely. Whilst in Sudan Islamist forces appear to have considerable control over the state apparatus, the other countries remain secular states, although increasing accommodations are being made with Islamist movements (e.g. in Egypt and Bangladesh). The shifting political ground (democratisation in Mali and Bangladesh, reunification in Yemen, and the military takeover in Sudan for example), coupled with deepening economic crises in all of these countries, further complicate any analysis.

Even to attempt such a presentation tends towards an essentialist view of women and Islam, much criticised in the writings of scholars in the field (e.g. Kandiyoti, 1991b; Hammami and Rieker, 1988; Keddie, 1991). Nevertheless, an overview is given which attempts to draw out underlying themes and issues, using examples from particular contexts where appropriate, rather than to give a full descriptive and comparative account of the position and strategies of women in all the countries mentioned above. It is hoped that the heterogeneity of experiences will be evident from the examples used.

The report is structured into six main sections. The next section, Women and Islam, looks at the relationship between women's position and the religious texts of Islam, and at how Shariah law affects the position of women. Section III discusses the relationship between pre-Islamic practices and Islam. The fourth section focuses on the relationship between contemporary feminist and women's movements and the broader movements within Islamic countries, here rather crudely labelled modernism and Islamism. Section V provides some empirical detail, as well as analysis, on the economic dimensions of the position of women in the relevant countries. In the final section, political and socio-cultural aspects of women's position and struggles are discussed, with some details on the activities and demands of different women's organisations.

Wherever possible, and particularly in the final section, the views of women from Muslim countries or communities are presented. This is not taken to mean only women who actively practise or profess Islamic belief, but includes all women whose lived experience is shaped by Islamic ideology and practice; the lives of women from non-Muslim minorities in these countries are to a greater or lesser degree affected by Islam. As underlined by the following statement of women activists of the international network, **Women Living Under Muslim Laws**, there is a paradox between ideological attempts to present Islam as a homogenous belief system and way of life, and the heterogeneity of their lived experience:

It is often presumed that there is one homogenous Muslim world. Interaction and discussion between women from different Muslim societies have shown us that while similarities exist, the notion of a uniform Muslim world is a misconception imposed on us. We have been erroneously led to believe that the only possible way of 'being' is the one we currently live in each of our contexts. Depriving us of even dreaming of a different reality is one of the most debilitating forms of oppression we suffer.

Our different realities range from being strictly closeted, isolated and voiceless within four walls, subjected to floggings and condemned to death for presumed adultery (which is considered to be a crime against the state), and forcibly given into marriage as a child, to situations where women have a far greater degree of freedom of movement and interaction, the right to work, to participate in public affairs and also exercise a far greater control over their own lives.

(Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Plan of Action, 1986, quoted in ISIS-WICCE, **Women's World**, 1989: 7.)

## II Women and Islam

### 1 Women in the Quran and the Sunna

Extrapolating conclusions about the position of women in Islamic societies from an examination of the religious texts of Islam is a simplistic and ahistorical approach. This said, the importance accorded to these texts in Islam, particularly by contemporary Islamist movements, means that much debate still revolves around interpretations of their statements on women's spiritual and, more particularly, social role. Moreover, questions of sexual morality, marriage and family life, divorce, custody, inheritance and so on have a prominent place in the main texts of Islam. Muslim feminists have played a significant role in these debates, often attempting to give an egalitarian interpretation of the texts, as well as showing the prominent role of women in early Islam, particularly figures such as Khadija, Aisha and Sukanya<sup>5</sup>. (Mernissi (1991) is an example of this approach.)

#### **The Quran**

Numerous passages can be found in the Quran which underline the spiritual equality of men and women, and the duty of both men and women to meet the religious obligations of Islam (see al-Faruqi, 1988, for examples). However, the Quran ascribes different social roles to men and women, as a consequence of their different natures (Glasse, 1989). Within marriage, women's role in the domestic sphere is emphasised, and other activities are permissible only in as much as they do not conflict with family obligations. Men are cast as providers for and protectors of the family, including children and wives but also female relatives: 'Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other and because they support them from their means.' (**The Meaning of the Glorious Quran**, quoted in Howard-Merriam, 1990: 18.)

Unlike in Christian doctrine (where celibacy is seen as a virtue), in Islam, sexuality is viewed as a necessary but potentially destructive force, which must therefore be controlled and channelled by social institutions to prevent social breakdown (**fitna**). From this follow Quranic injunctions encouraging universal marriage, prohibiting adultery (**zina**)<sup>6</sup> for both men and women, on the obligation of the wife to meet the sexual needs of her husband, and on the requirements for restraint and modesty in general social interaction between the sexes, particularly after puberty. (Mernissi, 1987; Rozario, 1992.)

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<sup>5</sup> Khadija was Muhammad's first wife, fifteen years his senior and well known as a merchant. Aisha was also a wife of the Prophet (said to be his favourite) and played a prominent role politically and militarily in the struggles following his death. She is also thought to have challenged many of the **hadith** which diminish the role of women. Sukanya was one of the great-granddaughters of the Prophet, through Fatima, and the wife of Ali (the ill-fated fourth orthodox caliph) who challenged many of the assumptions about Muslim marriage - she never pledged **ta'a** or obedience to any of her five (or six) husbands and refused to acknowledge their right to polygyny. She was also prominent in political and cultural life. (Mernissi, 1991.)

<sup>6</sup> 'Adulterers of both sexes are to be punished by lashing when there is either a confession or four witnesses to the act. Islamic law and tradition changed this to the far more severe punishment of stoning to death, but in practice women were often killed by their brothers and many escaped punishment.' (Keddie, 1991: 5.)

The Quranic view of men's and women's respective roles and the need to regulate sexuality extends into different rights and obligations in marriage, divorce and inheritance, *inter alia*. Marriage is a contract between two consenting partners, made in the presence of an official (**qadi**). Women as well as men can stipulate specific conditions in the marriage contract (although this varies with different schools - see section II:1 on marriage). The **mehr** (or brideprice) is meant to be paid to the woman following marriage, and is intended to give her some degree of economic security (especially in the advent of widowhood or divorce), although this is not always followed. (al-Faruqi, 1988.)

Men's greater inheritance rights (a woman generally gets half the amount of the man in the same relationship with the deceased) are justified on the grounds of men's obligation to support women before and during marriage and upon divorce. The Quran gives women rights to independent ownership of property and independent incomes. (al-Faruqi, 1988.) In Islamic marriage, however, women owe obedience (**ta'a**) to their husband, and beatings for disobedience are justified (Keddie, 1991). This means that many rights, especially rights to economic, political and social participation, become conditional on male approval in most interpretations of Islam.

A common view is that, in its time, the rights accorded to women by early Islam as expressed in the Quran were progressive in comparison to the pre-existing social norms and practices. In particular, controls on divorce, polygyny and child marriage, the prohibition of infanticide and concubinage, the establishment of women's rights to maintenance both during marriage and following divorce, and inheritance and independent property and economic rights, are thought by many to have improved the position of women (al-Faruqi, 1988). This view is not universally subscribed to, however, and some sources claim that matrilineal and matrilocal systems may have been features of pre-Islamic societies, and that women may have had greater freedom to divorce and a degree of economic independence and social prominence, prior to the advent of Islam (Keddie, 1991).

Early Islam is perceived by some as an attempt to reorient tribal Arab societies - where matrilineal systems were common - away from tribal affiliation, to a broader political allegiance legitimated by Islamic belief and organised around the patriarchal extended family. With the waning of matrilineal systems, ensuring inheritance through the male line and establishing the paternity of children became increasingly important, as did control of women's sexuality. (Keddie, 1991; Mernissi, 1991; Kandiyoti, 1991c; Rozario, 1992.)

Two practices which are the subject of much controversy in Islam, i.e. polygyny and veiling<sup>7</sup>, are thought by some to be recommended by the Quran, whilst others challenge this interpretation. Islamists tend to interpret the verses on dress in the Quran as justifying veiling whereas others have read them as simpler injunctions for modesty for both men and women. (Keddie, 1991; Mernissi, 1991.) With regard to polygyny, whilst the Quran permits men to take up to four wives, it adds that a man should not practice polygyny unless he can be sure of treating his wives fairly. In most Islamic societies the law permits polygyny on this basis, although in Tunisia and Yemen<sup>8</sup>, it is prohibited or severely restricted, in the former case, at least, on an Islamic basis, i.e. that it is not possible to treat wives fairly.

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<sup>7</sup> Moreover there are divergences on the type of veiling required, ranging from full veiling including the face and in some cases the hands and feet, to a simple covering of the head with no facial veil (Ahmed, L., 1992).

<sup>8</sup> The restrictions on polygyny in Yemen may be weakening following the introduction of a decree which contradicts many of the provisions of the 1974 family law: see section VI:2 for views on this.



## The Sunna

The **hadith** (collectively known as the **Sunna** or tradition) are writings which record the spoken and acted example of the Prophet in his lifetime, and give much more detailed information on how to perform the duties and obligations of Islam, sometimes contradicting the more vague injunctions of the Quran (Glasse, 1989). The **hadith** are based on the accounts of followers of Muhammad and members of his immediate entourage, but often these oral accounts have been transmitted through many later figures, before being written down. According to Mernissi (1991), the **hadith** were used as political weapons in the crisis following the Prophet's death, and many false **hadith** came into circulation in order to justify the views or claims of different factions.

Muslim feminists in particular have raised many questions about the authenticity of the **hadith** on both theological and social issues relating to women. A prominent Muslim theologian, Riffat Hassan, compares the Quranic version of the creation story and the version presented in the **hadith**. In the Quran, Adam is not presented as the first human being; moreover both Adam and the 'mate' (**zauj**) (Eve - or Hawwa - does not feature in the Quran) are ambiguous in terms of gender. She hypothesises that it is the influence of the Old Testament through the **hadith** which has degraded the conception of women in popular Islam, as being derivative of man and responsible for the fall from grace. For her and others (e.g. Nawal el-Saadawi) the interpretation of the creation story is crucial to the whole Muslim view of women (Hassan, 1989).

Mernissi also questions the authenticity of some of the **hadith**, focusing on two in particular: one which is often used to justify the exclusion of women from political life; and another which holds that women should not come between a man in prayer and his **qibla** (orientation in prayer), which presumably has implications for women's role in religious life.<sup>9</sup> She argues that a scientific method for establishing the authenticity of hadith was established in early Islam, but is rarely employed today, leading to unquestioning acceptance of the **hadith**. On the basis of this method, involving an examination not only of the original source or sources, but also of the authenticity of the **isnad** (or transmission chain from Muhammad) she discredits these particular **hadith** and implies that other 'misogynist' **hadith** are also of doubtful authenticity. (Mernissi, 1991.)

## 2 Shariah Law and Women<sup>10</sup>

In looking at the implications of legal systems for women, it is important not just to look at the substantive content of laws but also the structure and culture of the legal system. In many Muslim countries there are dual or multiple systems of law, which may present contradictions as regards the status of women and their rights. (Freedman, 1991.)

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<sup>9</sup> The two **hadith** in question are: 'Those who entrust their affairs to women will never know prosperity,' and 'The prophet said that the dog, the ass and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer interposing themselves between him and the **qibla**.' (Mernissi, 1991: 49,64.)

<sup>10</sup> 'Shariah' literally means to enact, or prescribe. Shariah is 'the canonical law of Islam as put forth in the Koran and the Sunna and elaborated by the analytical principles of the four orthodox schools.' (Glasse, 1989: 361.)

## The Islamic basis of Shariah Law

In jurisprudential theory, Islamic law is derived from four sources: the Quran, the Sunna (the model behaviour of the Prophet as related in collections of sayings or **ahadith**), analogic reasoning (**qiyas**) and the consensus of the community (**ijma**). The fluidity of the latter sources meant that, especially in the early years before codification in detailed legal manuals, Islamic law was a flexible and adaptive system

... Schisms in the Islamic community in the first few centuries after the Prophet's death in 632 AD (most prominently the split between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims) and the subsequent growth of multiple schools of jurisprudence, has made Islamic law, as it is espoused throughout the world today, a richly varied tradition. With no central church or divinely ordained clergy that can declare doctrine (as for example, in Roman Catholicism), there is simply no such thing as **the** Islamic law. (Freedman, 1991: 20.)

There are four different juridical schools in orthodox (Sunni) Islam: the Hanafi, the Shafi'i, the Hanbali and the Maliki. Shi'i Islam has its own juridical schools which add the teaching of the Imams to orthodox legal principles. It is often said that the various schools only differ in insignificant details, but these details may effect the rights of women quite dramatically, as illustrated by some examples in the following sections. (Ahmed, 1991.) Whilst some schools are dominant in particular countries (e.g. Hanafi in Bangladesh; Shafi'i in Yemen) more than one school may be represented, as in Egypt. A more detailed knowledge of the importance of individual schools in particular regions would be necessary to inform a comprehensive discussion of women and Shariah law.

The Islamic texts themselves provide a very vague basis for a legal system, consisting largely of broad ethical propositions rather than legal formulations. The history of how Shariah actually developed is very complex, as explained by Ahmed (1991). Her view is that the periods in which most of the elaboration of Shariah law was carried out - the **Umayyad** and **Abbasid** dynasties (661-750 AD and 750-1250 AD respectively) - were unfavourable to women, so that the features of the patriarchal marriage institution as practiced in that period, rather than the ethical egalitarianism of Muhammad's teachings, predominated in the formation of Shariah law. Also, the form taken by Shariah law was heavily influenced by local laws and traditions, so that there was considerable regional variation. (Ahmed, 1991.)

Most of the legal constraints of orthodox Islam were elaborated between the seventh and early tenth centuries. Following this, the principle of **ijma** (or consensus) coupled with the authority vested in the writings of the orthodox legal schools meant that it became heretical to challenge the existing legal consensus, such that Shariah law became increasingly rigid in its application. This is not true of many minority Islamic movements, however. For example, Shi'ism<sup>11</sup> allows for ongoing **ijtihad**

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<sup>11</sup> Shi'ism originates from the political upheavals over the succession to the caliphate following the death of Muhammad and also as a broad political opposition to the Arab ruling dynasties from the seventh century onwards. Shi'is constitute about 15 percent of the Muslim population and are concentrated in (non-Arab) Iran where they are the majority as well as being sizeable minorities in other countries such as Iraq and Yemen (where 40 percent of the population are Zaydi Shi'is - a minority branch of Shi'ism) and small minorities in other countries. See Glasse (1989: 364-70) for more details.

(re-interpretation) by religious authorities. Some degree of **ijtihad** is in any case unavoidable given changes in society. Moreover, others such as Sufis<sup>12</sup> and modernists (see section IV) believe that the social practices inscribed in Islamic texts are not meant to have universal application. Rather, it is the spiritual egalitarianism of Islam which is its universal message.

### **Shariah law, customary law and secular law**

Shariah law has always coexisted with, and to some extent absorbed, pre-existing customary law and practice (see section III on pre-Islamic practices). Other forms of legislation emanating from the political authority have long played a complementary role to Islam (e.g. in criminal law; see Glasse, 1989: 361-2). More recently, civil and constitutional codes developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries during periods of modernist reformism, colonial domination, and independent statehood, have to varying degrees curtailed or modified the influence of Shariah.

As civil codes were elaborated to regulate economic and political life, often influenced by outside forces and secular ideologies, Shariah became increasingly confined to the domain of marriage, the family, inheritance and so on. In most Muslim countries, there are personal status codes which embody Islamic principles and have been remarkably resistant to change:

... in Islamic countries, personal status laws have played a pivotal role in the management of confrontation with the West, as these countries struggle to consolidate their place in the world order. In the process, these laws have been vested with a profound symbolic importance that deeply complicates any effort to promote social change through law. (Freedman, 1991: 4.)

Islamic law is dominant in only a few countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan and Sudan, to a lesser degree) but increasing demands for greater implementation of Shariah, and the adoption of elements of this into broader legal systems, are a focus for the Islamist movements in many countries (e.g. Egypt - Shukrullah, personal communication; Bangladesh - see country study in ISIS-WICCE, **Women's World**, 1989; Freedman, 1991).

Women's organisations have been involved in attempting to reform aspects of personal status law since the early feminist movement in Egypt, but with limited success. Latterly, their energies have focused more on protecting earlier gains from reversal in the current climate of Islamisation. (See section VI:2 for more details on this.)

### **Marriage**

Under Islamic law, the Muslim woman can have only one husband. The Muslim man may, however, take up to four wives. The husband is obliged to maintain his wife during marriage; in exchange she owes him obedience and sexual fidelity. This is hardly an equal exchange,

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<sup>12</sup> Sufism is a spiritual and mystical form of Islam, which has formed the basis of opposition and populist movements throughout Islamic history. It emphasises the spiritual egalitarianism of Islam and its call for social justice, rather than its detailed material prescriptions for daily life. Women have featured quite prominently as mystics and poets within the Sufi tradition. (Keddie, 1991.)

however, since the law puts numerous means at the husband's disposal to ensure his wife's obedience and fidelity (including the right to physically beat her) but it makes it extremely difficult for the wife to enforce her husband's obligations of support. (Freedman, 1991: 24.)

In Muslim marriage, a brideprice (**mehr**)<sup>13</sup> is stipulated within the marriage contract and may be paid before or during marriage, or on divorce (Hoodfar, 1990).

... [I]n the marriage contract, the husband's family agrees to pay a bride price (**mehr**) which, under Islamic law, technically belongs to the woman herself; in practice however, the part of the **mehr** due upon marriage is often paid to the bride's father and brothers ... Although by law the wife is entitled to collect the balance of the bride price upon divorce, this too often proves impossible. (Freedman, 1991: 25.)

Because marriage is seen very much as a contract, women can in some cases stipulate terms for the agreement:

... Hanafi law differs radically from the other three [schools] in its view of marriage contracts, and of women's right to stipulate such terms as that the husband may not take a second wife. The three other schools consider men's rights to unilateral divorce and their right to marry as many as four wives to be of the essence of marriage, and therefore elements that may not be altered by the specific contractual agreements entered on by man and wife. The Hanafi school, however, considered that the Quranic utterances on polygyny ... were permissive, not mandatory, and that for a man to have only one wife is therefore not contrary to the essence of marriage; the spouse's agreement to this (or other matters) in the contract is consequently valid and enforceable. (Ahmed, 1991: 61-2.)

Hoodfar, in her account of the situation of urban working women in Cairo, cites a case where the place of residence of the couple was included in the marriage contract at the request of the wife, in order to ensure her proximity to the natal home (Hoodfar, 1992). In Mali, though, the law gives the man authority to decide where to live and the wife is obliged by law to follow him, except in specific circumstances (UNICEF, 1989). Other issues which are sometimes considered legitimate to include in marriage contracts are the right of the wife to work, (Hoodfar, 1992) or restrictions on the right of the man to polygyny. In Mali, women can request that their husband opt for monogamy, at least in the civil marriage ceremony, which is obligatory by law but often not followed. However, this can be reversed later, with the wife's consent. (UNICEF, 1989.) In Sudan, the woman can include her own stipulations in the marriage contract, including her own right to divorce (**isma**), although this is not widely used. Moreover, men can veto these, including the woman's **isma** (Badri, 1989: 22-5).

In some countries, the law allows men to force a wife to return to the conjugal home, where she has deserted the marital home and returned to her natal home. In Mali, for example, the 1962 Family Code contains provisions for women to be fined or even imprisoned for desertion (UNICEF, 1989).

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<sup>13</sup> In Bangladesh, however, the practice of paying **mehr** has effectively been replaced by the dowry system (see section III:1 for more details). In some countries, also, whilst **mehr** is paid, women have to provide a trousseau consisting of all the items for the household (e.g. in Mali: see Vaa et al, 1989).

One important difference between Shi'i and Sunni legal schools is that temporary marriage (**mut'a**)<sup>14</sup> - a contract entered into by both parties for a definite period - is permitted under the former. As in all marriages there is payment to the woman and children are legitimate. This practice is widespread in Iran (see article on Iran in ISIS-WICCE, **Women's World**, 1989) and flourishes in pilgrimage centres. 'It is wrong to consider it prostitution, and it has uses besides satisfying male desires.' (Keddie, 1991: 8).<sup>15</sup>

In many Muslim countries, there is a minimum age of marriage, as well as other conditions mentioned above. However, it is economic pressures rather than the effectiveness of legislation which have resulted in later marriages and falling incidence of polygyny. (These are very variable across different countries however.)

## **Divorce**

... Islamic law gives the husband the unilateral right to divorce his wife for any reason (or for no reason) simply by declaring his repudiation of her three times (**talaq**) and his maintenance obligations after divorce are then extremely minimal. The wife, on the other hand, is generally entitled to divorce her husband only in a court of law and only upon proof of the particular grounds specified by statute. During marriage, the wife can, theoretically, sue for payment of maintenance, but in some schools of Islamic law, the husband's failure ultimately to provide that support (no matter what his reason) is not sufficient grounds for divorce and thus she is left with no avenue for escape. (Freedman, 1991: 24.)

Whereas all schools agree that marriage may be unilaterally terminated extrajudicially by the male, Maliki law differs from the other three schools as to women's right to obtain judicial divorce. Hanafi law, for example, permits it only on the grounds of sexual impotence, but Maliki law allows a woman to petition on the grounds of desertion, failure to maintain her, cruelty, sexual impotence (even after the consummation of marriage), and if the husband is afflicted with a chronic or incurable disease detrimental to her. (Ahmed, 1991: 61-2).

The above accounts suggest that there may be some trade off, in different legal systems, between more (less) freedom for the woman in stipulating conditions of marriage, and more (less) restricted possibilities for divorce.

In Sudan, Shariah law gives women (as well as men) the right to consent in marriage and rights to alimony, but in practice these individual rights may be subsumed by wider family interests:

The Sudanese family has the right to intervene in each step of selecting a spouse and makes the final decision of acceptance. ... This creates a situation whereby the families feel they have the right to intervene and mediate in cases of marital disputes ... Thus, divorce is generally gained by mediation, alimony is avoided if the family can support the children of their daughter ... If the spouses are relatives, legal rights are often ignored for the sake of kinship cohesion. Courts are generally

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<sup>14</sup> This practice was abolished in Iran under the Shah but re-established under the Khomeini regime

<sup>15</sup> Some outsiders do, however, view this institution as a way of legitimising prostitution (Anne-Marie Goetz, personal communication).

not approached except as a last resort, and by those women who do not have supportive families. (Badri, 1989: 23)

Divorce by repudiation is controlled or prohibited in some countries. In theory, if not in practice, men, like women, have to divorce through the courts in Mali (UNICEF, 1989). The Quran recommends **iddah** (a 'waiting period') in cases of **talaq** divorce, to promote reconciliation and - where the wife is pregnant - to prevent confusion about paternity, although this may not be followed in many cases, even where it is a feature of Shariah law (al-Faruqi, 1988).

Following divorce, there is usually some legal provision for alimony, but it is often quite minimal: e.g. in the Sudan it lasts for four months and in Egypt three months<sup>16</sup> (Badri, 1989; Hoodfar, 1990).

In Islamic law, men are favoured in the custody of children, after a certain age (usually around seven to nine years for a boy and approaching puberty for a girl) emphasising again the importance of paternity and of controlling female sexuality. This can create situations which are both materially and psychologically devastating for women, where a great deal of emphasis and social importance is placed on the reproductive role, and where sons provide the main security for women approaching old age. However, particularly among poorer families, this may not be adhered to: children may stay with the mother, thus reducing her claims on alimony (Hoodfar, 1990).

### **Inheritance, economic and property rights**

The general rule for women's inheritance rights in Muslim countries, according to Islamic doctrine, is that women inherit half of their male counterpart. The justification for this is normally presented in terms of men's obligations to support women within and outside marriage. (al-Faruqi, 1988.)

There is some scope for flexibility, however, through the institution of **waqf** (inalienable religious endowment) which is mainly used to endow descendants in the male line, but has sometimes benefited women both as recipients and guardians of **waqf**. Also, unlike in Sunni law, where daughters generally get no more than half of an inheritance, in Shi'i law, daughters without brothers may inherit everything. (Keddie, 1991: 8.)

Inheritance rules are, however, not strictly adhered to in practice. According to Keddie:

in general, rural and tribal women do not inherit as the Quran and Muslim law says they should, though, "in return" they generally get permanent protection from their natal family, and in some cases their sons may get all or part of their share. Court records past and present suggest that urban women, however, usually do inherit and are willing and able to go to Islamic courts to protect their property rights, generally successfully. (Keddie, 1991: 6.)

An even less favourable view is taken by Freedman:

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<sup>16</sup> According to el Din Bibars (1987), however, women in Egypt are entitled to one year's alimony providing they have not been disobedient to the husband, deserted the marital home without good reason, or worked outside the home without the husband's permission, **inter alia**.

... [A]lthough Islamic law of inheritance grants women certain shares in the estate ... this property is also regularly usurped by the men in the family who claim it as compensation for supporting a girl until she can be married off; or it is relinquished by the woman in hopes of securing the future protection of her brothers and male relatives in the event that she is divorced or abandoned by her husband.' (Freedman, 1991: 24-5.)

In Bangladesh, for example, 'it is generally known that a rural woman does not claim her inheritance from her father's estate but exchanges it for the continued right to visit the parental home (commonly referred to as **naior**)'. (World Bank, 1990: 21.)

In theory, under Islamic law, women have rights to independent ownership and control of property, and the right to engage in activity outside the home. However, in practice, these rights are highly circumscribed by domestic obligations, the injunctions on obedience in marriage, and social practices such as **pardah** (see section III:3 below). The degree to which women can engage in economic activity outside the home, and control their own income, is very variable, as will be discussed in section V.

### **Personal status of women under Shariah law**

In many Islamic countries, women have a **de jure** or **de facto** minority status, being under the guardianship of fathers or elder brothers before marriage, and under the protection of their husbands following marriage, although many countries have civil constitutions which enshrine the principle of equality of the sexes (e.g. Egypt, Bangladesh).

In Mali, for example, the guardianship and obedience interpretations of Shariah appear to be quite strong with implications for women's ability to act independently. The Malian Family Code of 1962 states: 'Le mari doit protection a la femme; la femme obeissance a l'epoux.'(UNICEF, 1989:128).

In countries where the Islamic law is widely applied, for example Sudan, the formal protection or guardianship rights of particular men over women may take on a broader dimension of giving all men some degree of informal control over women's activities in public. Women's freedom to travel or move about independently has been curtailed in the Sudan recently, by the requirement for **muharram** (a close male blood relative who acts as a guardian), and by a **de facto** curfew on women in the evenings. (Africa Watch, 1990; Wheelright, 1991.)

The existence of legal rights for women under Shariah law does not necessarily guarantee that they are able to use the legal system to uphold them, whether due to lack of awareness, to the inaccessibility of the courts to women or to unsympathetic legal officials. Attention is needed to the kinds of issues that different groups of women are able to bring to the courts and with what outcomes.

Shariah law, gives lesser (half) weight to the evidence of women in legal hearings. In Pakistan, women's evidence is not permissible in cases of adultery, so that cases are known to occur of women who have been raped, being accused of, and punished for, the crime of adultery. (Moghadam, 1992.)

Khondker (1990) documents a number of cases of violence and sexual abuse against women in Bangladesh, many connected in some way with the growing practice of dowry. Although laws exist prohibiting this practice, associated cruelty and other crimes which 'dishonour' women - especially rape - and in theory severe punishments can be given (under The Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 and The Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Act 1983), according to this account, they are rarely implemented.

A general problem undermining women's ability to uphold their rights under (Shariah) law is their lack of knowledge of the rights which do exist and of procedures for enforcing them (Badri, 1989: 25; Freeman, 1991). This underlines the importance of legal education campaigns, which will be further discussed in section VI: 2.

### III ISLAM AND PRE-ISLAMIC PRACTICES

Many 'Islamic' practices go back to the pre-Islamic Near East and were adopted by early Muslim peoples from conquered populations. Moreover, particularly in rural areas, syncretic systems have evolved which incorporate both Islamic and various folk beliefs and customs, as noted by Kabeer in the case of village Islam in Bengal and later Bangladesh, by Gruenbaum in relation to central areas of Sudan, where **zar** spirit possession is practised, and by Abaza-Stauth in relation to rural Egypt. Women are often prominent in the practice of folk traditions. (Kabeer, 1991b; Gruenbaum, 1991; Abaza-Stauth, 1985.)

#### 1 Polygyny, brideprice and dowry

Prior to the advent of Islam, polygyny was widely practised and uncontrolled in pre-Islamic Arabia and elsewhere. Most interpretations of Islamic law permit the practice, on the basis of Quranic verses which indicate that men may marry up to four wives - as long as they are each treated fairly. Only in two Muslim countries is polygyny heavily controlled or effectively prohibited, i.e. Tunisia and Yemen. Hanafi law, at least in theory, gives women the right to stipulate clauses in the marriage contract that restrict a man's right to practice polygyny.

Polygyny is less widespread than often thought, although its incidence is variable between countries, and within countries by location, and according to level of education and occupation, **inter alia**. (See Zenie-Ziegler, 1988, for details of a 1970 Egyptian survey on this.) In Egypt, the overall rate in 1970 was 9 percent, but the rural rate was double the urban percentage and uneducated small farmers had the highest rate of polygyny. In Mali, and possibly Sudan, overall rates are probably much higher. In Vaa et al's 1989 study of a low income neighbourhood in Bamako, approximately half of marriages were polygynous, although this was based on a very small sample. In rural areas, polygyny may act as a mechanism for expanding the labour resources able to family farms. In central Sudan, Gruenbaum (1991) notes the increased incidence of polygyny following the development of an cotton scheme where men are paid shares of profits in lump sums, and where women are quite heavily involved in agricultural work.

In spite of the relatively low proportion of polygynous marriages, women are always conscious of the threat of a second marriage. This may be a factor undermining overall household welfare, as women fear that if the household becomes too wealthy, the husband may take a second wife, and thus may use various strategies to subvert this. Gruenbaum (1991), in the context noted above, observes women's strategy of having as many children as possible, in order to discourage husbands from looking for an additional wife.

Brideprice (**mehr**) also predates Islam and is practised in many non-Muslim countries (e.g. in southern Africa). The payment of mehr is an integral part of the Muslim marriage contract. Islam improved the situation prevailing in pre-Islamic Arabia, by requiring the **mehr** to be paid to the woman rather than her family, although this does not always happen as noted above. In this way, **mehr** functions as a form of economic security for the woman. Often, part of the **mehr** is held back to be paid on divorce or death of the husband. (al-Faruqi, 1988.) In some countries, e.g. Mali and Yemen, the level of the **mehr** is controlled by legislation but this is of doubtful effectiveness, particularly in the case of Mali. (UNICEF, 1989; Wright, 1992.) Gruenbaum (1991) also notes informal community attempts to limit the level of brideprice, in central Sudan.

Dowry - where payment, goods or a job for the man is demanded from the woman's family as part of the marriage agreement - is practised widely among Muslims in

Bangladesh, although this is a relatively recent development. Since the early seventies, the **mehr** system has been supplanted by the dowry system, although this has no Islamic basis. It is well known that men not only demand payments and other items on marriage but may also continue to make new demands at intervals after marriage, and, in some cases, mistreat (or even kill) the wife if further payments are not forthcoming. After considerable pressure from women's organisations, legislation to prohibit the practice was introduced in 1980 but this has had limited effectiveness (see section II:3 above and section VI:2 below).

Various explanations have been offered for the shift to the dowry system in Bangladesh. The social construction of surplus women of marriageable age is one aspect, where the gap between male and female ages of marriage is widening. Also education, migration and urbanisation have attached new desirable characteristics to men, whereas women's characteristics tend to be perceived in the traditional way. The origins of the practice among the urban middle classes and its subsequent spread to rural upper and middle classes is also a factor; dowry facilitates the reproduction of status and social hierarchies. (Rozario, 1992.)

## 2 Seclusion and veiling

The concept and practice of *purdah* (or **parda**) refers to female seclusion and also incorporates veiling, and by extension, to the separation of men's and women's tasks in society and to restrictions on women's participation in the extra-domestic sphere (Rozario, 1992).

In the strictest sense **parda** involves keeping women confined within the home and covering them in veils whenever they venture outside of the home. In a wider context, **parda** refers to women's modesty and restrictions in their interactions with men who do not fall in the specific categories with whom contact is permitted. (Rozario, 1992: 88.)

Whilst seclusion and veiling are practised to varying degrees in Muslim countries, they are neither Islamic in origin nor uniquely associated with Islam. Veiling and seclusion were known in the Greco-Roman world, pre-Islamic Iran and the Byzantine empire (Keddie, 1992). Early Muslims adopted veiling from conquered peoples and both non-Muslims in Muslim societies and Mediterranean women in Christian societies were subject to many of the same forms of control and isolation from men. Mediterranean societies, Muslim and Christian, also had the same idea of the centrality of a man's honour, which lay chiefly in the purity of the women of his natal family. (Keddie, 1991: 3.)

Although the institution of *parda* has been essentially associated with Islam, there is evidence that other religious groups, such as high caste Hindus in North India, also practised **parda**. [Nawal] El-Saadawi ... argues that the veil was also a product of Judaism long before Islam came into being. (Rozario, 1992: 88.)

Rozario also notes that Hindu women in predominantly Muslim Bangladesh practice **parda**, although to a lesser extent than Muslim women, and that in Tuareg society it is men, not women who are veiled. (Rozario, 1992: 91-2.)

The centrality of ideas of sexuality to the practice of *purdah* and veiling in Islam is discussed by Mernissi (1987) and reviewed by Rozario (1992). The allocation of space between the sexes and men's unequal power over women is strongly associated with Islamic views about the potentially destructive power of (particularly women's) sexuality.

Keddie, Rozario and others emphasis the class dimension of veiling and seclusion in early and contemporary times. In the Quran, seclusion is suggested for Muhammad's wives and these stricter rules later spread from the elite, encouraged by the example of conquered peoples, to the urban upper and middle classes. Centralisation and class differentiation in Muslim societies enhanced the role of seclusion and veiling as markers of status. 'Full veiling has been both a class phenomenon and an urban one.' (Keddie, 1991: 3). Whereas upper class women wore facial veils, working, rural and tribal women did not. (Keddie, 1991.)

Observance of purdah and veiling in the countries under discussion here continues to be variable, in terms of class, location, and ethnicity. Gruenbaum's research in central Sudan illustrates this:

The Kenana women ... had not practised strict seclusion of women, to the extent that they did not bother fencing courtyards for privacy. Although the women of both villages did wear the traditional Sudanese veil ... the Kenana women were otherwise quite visible, visiting neighbouring villages, working in agricultural fields, and migrating with their husbands to pick cotton on agricultural schemes. (Gruenbaum, 1991: 639).

By contrast, in the same area, '[t]he Zabarwa women were careful to avoid encountering men when moving outside the extended family's fenced compound ... and they specialised in work that could be done inside of courtyards.' (Gruenbaum, 1991: 639.) Veiling continues to be used by women as a marker of class and ethnic superiority or difference, in increasingly mixed communities. (Gruenbaum, 1991; Hoodfar, 1992.)

Rozario notes that strict **parda** is followed by a minority of mainly wealthy women in Bangladesh, where it indicates that the family can do without the income of the woman. The definitions of **parda** are also adapting - into a form of internalised responsibility and external modesty - as more and more poor women are compelled to work in unsecluded surroundings. (Rozario, 1992.) In parts of the Middle East, women's increased participation in the labour force, in recent years at least, has been accompanied by a resurgence in veiling, but, as many commentators have pointed out, this should not be viewed either as a return to tradition, or as an imposition by male Islamists (Ahmed, L., 1992; Hoodfar, 1992). The 'new veiling' will be discussed in more detail in section VI:4.

### 3 Female Genital Mutilation<sup>17</sup>

Female genital mutilation is practised in 20 countries in Africa (including Egypt, Mali and Sudan) as well as in (south) Yemen and a number of other countries and Muslim communities outside Africa. Within countries, some ethnic groups practise female genital mutilation whilst others do not, or practise different forms.

There are various forms of female genital mutilation. The milder form of circumcision (known as **Sunna** or tradition by Muslims) involves removing the hood of the clitoris. Excision involves removal of the clitoris and all or part of the labia minora. Infibulation, the most severe form which can induce many severe health

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<sup>17</sup> 'Female genital mutilation' is preferred to the misleading term 'female circumcision', because the latter practice refers to the mildest form of operation which affects only a small percentage of the millions of women operated on. Most of this section is based on Minority Rights Group, 1992, 'Female genital mutilation: proposals for change.'

complications, involves the cutting of the clitoris and most or all of the labia majora. The two side of the vulva are then pinned together. There are also various intermediate forms of female genital mutilation.

In northern Sudan, 90 percent of girls are infibulated. In Mali, also, 90 percent of girls are operated on, but infibulation is less common and excision and circumcision predominate. In Egypt, some 50 percent of girls are operated on, and mainly excision or circumcision is performed, except in the south where infibulation also occurs. No data are available for Yemen. (Minority Rights Group, 1992.)

Female genital mutilation is traditionally performed by older women of the village, by traditional birth attendants (called **daya** in Egypt and Sudan), by village barbers and in Mali, by women of the blacksmith caste. It is performed at various ages up to puberty, but increasingly at younger ages, so that the function of the operation as a form of initiation into adulthood is being lost. The celebrations which in some places follow female circumcision - and may have given girls a sense of importance as well as material benefits such as new clothes and food - are also tending to die out. In recent years, cases of female genital mutilation being performed by health personnel or in urban hospitals have been reported. There is also some evidence that the more severe forms are giving way to **Sunna** circumcision.

The origins of female genital mutilation are unknown although they have been attributed to African puberty rites and to Ancient Egypt. 'Certainly the practise was widespread in the pre-Islamic era, in Egypt, Arabia and on the Red Sea Coasts' (Minority Rights Group, 1992:12).

The religious basis of female genital mutilation in Islam is very tenuous. Some say it is validated in the **hadith** (Gruenbaum, 1991). Nevertheless, 'in the absence of any clear reference in the Holy Koran and in confirmed traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, leading Islamic theologians ... refute the argument based on religious doctrine for the practise of female circumcision.' (Dr Taha Basher, quoted in Minority Rights Group, 1992: 13).

Moreover, female genital mutilation is practised by not only Muslims but also Catholics, Protestants, Copts and Animists. The practise is also not found in many leading Arab and Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia. However, '[t]he custom has ... frequently been carried out in the genuine but erroneous belief that it was demanded by the Islamic faith or perpetrated as a required Islamic custom.' (Minority Rights Group, 1992: 13)

Psychosexual, sociological, hygiene and aesthetic reasons as well as (erroneous) religious ones, have been advanced to explain the continued persistence of female genital mutilation in the face of increasing knowledge the potential health, psychological and sexual complications induced by the practice. In particular, the function of female genital mutilation as a way of marking female sexual purity is important, where concepts of male honour are closely associated with control over female sexuality (see previous section on seclusion and veiling). In practical terms, female genital mutilation is important to ensure women's marriageability and the payment of the brideprice. Female genital mutilation is also a source of revenue for operators, mainly older women.

Whilst in urban and to a lesser extent rural areas, there is some evidence that younger women and men are turning against the practice (particularly its more extreme form), it is still widely supported for the reasons mentioned, amongst others, even among some health professionals. Western missionary and colonial attempts to control the practice have contributed to entrenched attitudes. Legislation against infibulation exists in Sudan (since 1946) and various resolutions or recommendations have been

made in a number of other countries. However, legislation is now thought to be an ineffective and potentially counterproductive way of tackling the problem.

Various international, inter-African and national level committees and initiatives have been launched in the last decade or so, many by African women. Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi has written widely about the harmful medical and psychological consequences of the practice (e.g. **Hidden Face of Eve**, 1980), as has west African feminist Awa Thiam (**La Parole aux Negresses**, 1978). Research, education and related projects (aimed at both practising populations and health workers) have been established in some countries, with variable impact, though typically greater in urban areas.

Gruenbaums's study of women and health practices in central Sudan reports that the shift to **Sunna** forms of female genital mutilation is associated with people most influenced by the Islamist movement (which operates numerous health facilities), or those who had been exposed to other Arab cultures where female genital mutilation is not practised, such as Saudi Arabia, through migration. She also notes, however, the tendency for certain groups to perpetuate infibulation as a marker of cultural or ethnic superiority. (Gruenbaum, 1991.)

## IV MODERNISM, ISLAMISM AND FEMINISM

### 1 Early modernist reforms and feminism

Although feminist ideas had currency in the Middle East and elsewhere prior to colonialism and nationalism, they first gained widespread expression in Egypt through prominent male reformers such as Qasim Amin<sup>18</sup> in the context of modernist movements and state building projects. In the early part of the nineteenth century in Egypt, Muhammad Ali<sup>19</sup> began to draw women into processes of economic and technological transformation through new employment and educational opportunities. By the late nineteenth century, upper class women had begun to organise themselves into debating groups. Demands by and on behalf of women were very much grounded in the modernist framework, with a largely instrumental discourse.

The modernist discourse in Egypt stressed women's right to education and the need to reinterpret and reform Islam to limit or prohibit practices such as polygyny, seclusion and the **hijab**<sup>20</sup> (veil), in the name of a more civilised nation and family form. A return to the earliest texts of Islam and a rejection of later interpretations allow modernists to give their own interpretations, often stressing the egalitarian spirit of Islam rather than its literal meaning, which is seen as being valid only for its time. The reinterpretation of key verses, for example on polygyny and **ta'a** (obedience in marriage) validates modernist demands for change. (Badran, 1991; Keddie, 1991.)

### 2 Modernism, nationalism and socialism

Secular ideologies and movements have also played a role in modernism in Muslim countries, in particular socialism (in the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and to a lesser extent Bangladesh), nationalism and anti-imperialism. In Turkey, a secular approach to state modernisation was taken, and a comprehensive civil code established. In Yemen, legal reforms by the socialist state were used as a vehicle for changing the position of women, and state sponsored women's organisations have been prominent. In Bangladesh, women played a prominent role in the nationalist movement, particularly in cultural resistance to domination by Pakistan, and the independence constitution included commitments to socialism and sexual equality **inter alia**. Kabeer (1991b) argues that the inherent contradictions in a state formed on the basis of both an Islamic and a Bengali identity have created a political space for women which is not available in some other Muslim countries. In Egypt, women were actively involved in the nationalist movement from 1919 to 1922 when the new constitution was established. Nationalism was also briefly able to unite both feminist and Islamist women in the Women's Committee for Popular Resistance in the early 1950s. (Badran, 1991; Kabeer, 1991b; Kandiyoti, 1991b; Molyneux, 1991.)

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<sup>18</sup> Qasim Amin (1865-1908) was a prominent judge and reformer, who published the seminal text **The Liberation of Women** in 1899.

<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Ali was an Egyptian monarch from 1805 to 1848.

<sup>20</sup> Women activists have always seen the question of the veil as a personal decision, however, and have resisted male attempts to legislate on this issue.

### 3 Modernisation and differentiation

Modernisation has had differing outcomes for different classes, including women. Most benefits from increased work and educational opportunities, and piecemeal legal reforms, have accrued to elite women, but the experience of rural women and lower class urban women has been less favourable.

[W]hereas some women's positions have changed for the better, some poorer women have suffered from modernisation's economic effects, becoming more, rather than less restricted; having to work in unhealthy and poorly paid positions; and often removed from the countryside security of rural life. Veiling and seclusion spread in the countryside as they declined among Westernized city dwellers, and women's roles were sometimes limited by the economic effects of Western contacts. (Keddie, 1991: 14.)

Thus women have highly contradictory positions as expressed in present day feminist and Islamist movements.

Since the 1970s (particularly following the 1967 defeat by Israel) there has been growing disillusionment with modernist reformism, particularly in the Arab world, and with the failure of modernising states to bring about lasting economic and political gains. Also, increased penetration of western capital and consumer goods has heightened the sense of alienation between westernised elites and the popular classes. In many Muslim countries, there are popular, pejorative terms to describe people perceived to be influenced by western ideologies and lifestyles. As several commentators have pointed out, these terms have been used more consistently to attack women (particularly feminists) than men. Social dislocation caused by migration and urbanisation, particularly since the 1973 oil price rise has further fuelled this disillusionment and the search for new cultural identities. (Keddie, 1991; Kandiyoti, 1991b; Moghadam, 1992.)

### 4 The Islamist movement

'Modern Islamic revivalism has roots in the Egyptian Muslim Brethren founded in 1928 and in the work of Abu al-Ala Maududi for Islamic government in Muslim India.' (Keddie, 1991: 17.) It has a populist appeal and stresses the socially egalitarian nature of the Quran, although women and men are accorded distinct roles and separate activities. Women are encouraged to join discussion groups, propaganda campaigns and other activities. Islamists (including many women) are found among students in secondary and higher education, and among young workers often from migrant backgrounds. Islamists also engage in many practical activities some of which are of direct benefit to women, for example: the provision of minibuses for women students; the provision of subsidised texts; sewing classes etc. Parents and husbands are usually quite willing to allow girls and wives to attend such activities, even where they would normally restrict their movements outside the home.

Present day Islamism does not represent a return to traditional values and ideology (although some feminists claim this) but is in many ways an innovating force, especially in its demand for a centralised, modern, theocratic state. Islamism has a significant cadre of intellectual advocates of varying degrees of conservatism. For example, Islamists disagree on whether women should be allowed to work (providing, of course, there are no harmful effects on children). (Keddie, 1991: 19.) In Egypt at least, Islamism has a number of prominent women advocates, such as journalist Safinas Kazim, who describes herself as a 'committed Muslim' and Zainab al-Ghazali, a veteran Islamist and founder of the Muslim Sisters. (Badran, 1991.)

Some Islamist movements operated from within the state (e.g. in Sudan and Pakistan) (Moghadam, 1992). However, in common with leftist and feminist movements, Islamist movements have often had an antagonistic relationship with the state, going through periods of repression and accommodation dependent on the political project of the particular state at the time or on its pragmatic interests. Islamist movements in opposition have been used as a bulwark against leftist movements (e.g. in Egypt and Bangladesh). The more moderate or 'legalist' wings of Islamist movements have also been accommodated in order to undermine the legitimacy of and support for 'radical' or militant - sometimes armed - factions. The extent to which Islamist organisations have been accommodated by the state, and have influence over it, is highly variable between the countries discussed here, although recent years have seen an increasing trend towards Islamisation.

## 5 Secular and Islamic discourses on women

Not only Islamists, but some Muslim feminists also, contest the validity of secular reformism, or perhaps feel that they can only engage with the problems facing them within the discourse of Islam: '...from the rise of feminism in Egypt to the present, its advocates across the spectrum from left to right have consistently used Islam, as well as nationalism, as legitimating discourses.' (Badran, 1991: 202). In other countries, however, secular discourse on women may still be considered a valid approach by feminists, as for example in Bangladesh. The **Naripokkho** group, during its campaign against the 8th amendment in Bangladesh (see section VI:2 for more details) declared its opposition to any attempt to mix religion and politics, claiming that this would strengthen the Islamist hand. (Kabeer, 1991b.)

Ahmed, L., (1992) regards both the modernist approach, which she feels is tainted by 'colonial feminism', and the Islamist response, as two sides of the same coin, or nesting discourses, and feels that an authentic Muslim feminism has yet to emerge.

## V ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN'S POSITION IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

### 1 Levels of economic activity

Reported female labour force participation rates in Muslim countries as a whole are lower than those in non-Muslim countries as a group. In 1975, women constituted 21.3 percent of the labour force in Muslim countries and 36.6 percent of the labour force in non-Muslim countries (Moghadam, 1990). For this reason, some have argued that 'Islam' is a factor in holding back female participation rates, using simple statistical comparisons. However, there is little systematic evidence which shows 'Islam' as a factor in either demand or supply. Also, participation rates are very variable between Muslim countries in terms of both the overall level and the distribution of women's economic activity across different sectors, belying the importance of 'Islam' as an explanatory factor. (Papps, 1992.)

Low reported levels of female participation in economic activity may relate to a reluctance to admit the actual or desired participation of women in income earning activities, by both men and women, as noted in both Egypt and Bangladesh (Papps, 1992; World Bank, 1990). Small scale sample surveys, using more flexible methods, have produced much higher levels of activity than large scale official surveys. For example, in Egypt, a recent ILO/CAMPAS survey found that 37 percent of women are engaged in monetised labour force activity and that 80 percent of women are engaged in some form of labour force activity, according to acceptable international definitions. This compares with a rate of 13 percent recorded in the 1983 official labour force survey. The use of terms such as 'work' and 'job' was found not to suit the way that women's economic activities are viewed. Another study in Syria found that when men were asked if their wives worked for them, they said no, but when asked whether they would have to hire a replacement if their wife should die, they said yes. (Papps, 1992; Chamie, 1985.)

There is a general trend towards increased labour force participation of women. However, increased labour force participation cannot be read as a straightforward progressive development for women where it is based on an increase in the supply of labour rather than an increase in demand. The large increases in female labour force participation in the 1970s (in part due to the oil boom and male labour migration) have slowed or stagnated in the 1980s. Nevertheless, female participation rates continue to rise in many countries, but these often coexist with high levels of female unemployment, and with rising male unemployment, emphasising poverty as a cause of women's entry into the labour force. Education may also be a factor in explaining increased female participation, since levels of economic activity tend to be age specific and higher activity rates are concentrated among younger women.

### 2 Gender roles and conditions of work in economic activity

Gender typing in work is very variable between Islamic countries both inter- and intra-sectorally.

#### **Formal sector activity**

In Egypt, women are concentrated in the modern services sector, and there is a relatively high proportion of women at professional level. This can probably be attributed to women's high level of participation in education, and to the influence of Nasserist state socialist policies which vastly expanded public sector employment. Hoodfar reports evidence of the unpopularity of factory work, particularly with married women, and a preference for white collar work, with its more generous

maternity benefits, flexible hours, and security, in spite of relatively low wages.<sup>21</sup> The need to accommodate childcare responsibilities as well as the desire for security in employment, given the constant threat of divorce, may explain this preference. (Hoodfar, 1990.)

Sudan also has a fairly high proportion of women in professional level jobs, but since the 1989 military takeover, thousands of public sector employees, such as doctors, lawyers, university lecturers, nurses, and so on, have been dismissed from their posts. This has affected both men and women, and seems to be largely an attempt to remove opponents of the current regime from public and professional office, but a number of prominent women have been affected. It is not clear whether the dismissals have a gender, as well as a political rationale, inspired by Islam. Military ruler El-Bashir has made public statements which indicate that his views on women's labour force participation are very conservative, and that in Sudan women's work in the formal sector may start to become restricted to particular spheres. (Africa Watch, 1990; Wheelright, 1991.)

In Bangladesh, women's employment opportunities in the formal sector are undergoing diversification, and increasing numbers of women are employed in export oriented industries and construction work, for example (World Bank, 1990). However, there is evidence of continuing wage disparities between men and women in the labour force in Bangladesh, where female wages are said to be 49 percent of male wages in urban non-agricultural work and 48 percent and 39 percent of male wages in rural agricultural and rural non-agricultural work respectively. (World Bank, 1990; data from 1984-5 labour force survey)

Prior to reunification, in south Yemen, 'unveiled women represented roughly a third of all students, teachers, medical personnel and factory workers.' (Carapico and Mynitti, 1991: 15.) In north Yemen, by contrast, women tended to leave school early and avoid public activity.

### **Informal sector activity**

Women may appear to be underrepresented in the informal sector in some Muslim countries, compared to other countries, but this may be because of underreporting and because they tend to work in family businesses. According to Hoodfar:

Even though men regard women's participation as essential in running these family businesses, and many women invest long hours, few are considered "working" women by their husbands, neighbors, or even themselves. These attitudes have made it difficult to collect information on women's unpaid family work. (Hoodfar, 1990: 29.)

In Mali, by contrast, there is little opportunity for formal sector employment, especially of women. The informal sector, for example the sale of agricultural produce and prepared foods, charcoal, beer, pottery, cloth and other craft or home produced items, is a prominent activity for women, in both rural and urban areas. Women are highly visible in markets, although they are rarely engaged in activities which involve any significant degree of capitalisation. The level of seasonal and permanent independent migration of women to urban areas comparable to that of men and all women are engaged in some form of activity, the majority in the informal sector. (Vaa et al, 1989; UNICEF, 1989)

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<sup>21</sup> However, women have a long history of work in production in Egypt, starting with the early textile and clothing industries.

In Sudan, informal sector activities of women, particularly displaced women, are also increasingly visible, especially in the environs of Khartoum, where it has been met with considerable hostility and harassment (although this is not unique to Muslim countries). After the military government came to power in June 1989, attacks on informal sector workers, many of whom are women, began as part of a more general campaign against 'blackmarket' activities. Islamic justifications have been used to back up this campaign, starting with attacks on alcohol sellers, other vendors and prostitutes who originate from peripheral regions of the Sudan, or are refugees. The principle of 'forbidden profit' (**ribih haram**) as well as arguments about the impropriety of women trading on the streets have been advanced as justifications for these attacks. (Africa Watch, 1990).

## **Agriculture**

The level and nature of women's involvement in agricultural work is very variable, between countries, between regions of countries, by class and ethnicity, and with regard to tasks.

Malian women have the most consistently high level of activity in agriculture. Little data is available, but women are said to do between 60-90 percent of all food production and processing in the region and are heavily involved in all kinds of fieldwork. Women also engage in cash crop production in some areas. (Creevey, 1991; UNICEF, 1989.)

In the Sudan, women are also heavily involved in traditional agriculture (83 percent) and to a much lesser degree in the modern agricultural sector (10 percent). There is considerable regional variation however, and women are less involved in agriculture in the more strongly Arabo-Muslim north, where the female participation rate is said to be only 1 percent, and women work on only 3.8 of land, outside of the pump schemes. Badri also notes that women farmers, by custom, are banned from contact with males from outside the family, and therefore are unable to talk to predominantly male extension officers. (Badri, 1986.)

In Yemen, women are involved in agricultural production, particularly livestock rearing. In south Yemen:

women played an important part in agriculture, and in many parts of rural Yemen are unveiled, although restrictions and segregation still operated. The division of labour was based on gender and this allocated to women activities such as gathering firewood and carrying water. In general women also tended animals and participated in certain agricultural tasks such as sowing and harvesting.' (Molyneux, 1991: 250.)

The picture in Egypt is mixed, with a tendency towards women's concentration in homestead based activities, and seasonal work, in some areas (Brink, 1991). In the Nile Delta region, however, women's involvement in field work is much greater.

Women have always worked in the agricultural sector in Bangladesh, but their contribution is heavily underestimated, because they tend to engage in activities around the homestead, because of purdah restrictions. For example, the 1984-5 official labour survey estimated that 1 percent of the female economically active population over ten was engaged in agricultural activity. An ILO study in 1970 produced a figure of 17 percent, and a more recent study reported 43 percent engaged in agriculture as their primary activity and 15 percent as their secondary activity. (World Bank, 1990.) Now, because of poverty and the breakdown of kin support

systems, women are increasingly entering into field agricultural work, as well as the more traditional homestead based husking and processing activities.

The effect of male outmigration on the division of labour in agriculture is also very variable: in some cases it may lead to an intensification of women's agricultural and other activities (as in Mali, and parts of Sudan, e.g. Darfur); in other cases, the absence of the male may lead to a waning of household, including female, involvement in agriculture, the abandonment of land, and increasing dependence of women on cash incomes from remittances as in parts of Egypt and Sudan. (UNICEF, 1989; Brink, 1991; Badri, 1986.)

### 3 Access to land

Women's access to land in most of the countries here is very limited at least in part because of Islamic inheritance norms which mean that women are entitled to less land than male relatives. This is further reinforced, particularly in Bangladesh, by the tendency of women to relinquish inheritance rights to male kin in the hope of greater security in the event of divorce or widowhood. Kabeer (1991a) cites a case where the husband used the threat of desertion to gain control of his wife's land. In Bangladesh, particularly, there is a growing problem of rural landlessness and poverty, and women are overrepresented among the landless and poor.

In Mali, women's greater role in food production has already been noted, and women have established rights of cultivation over their own fields. However, the fields are allocated by male elders and women tend to receive the poorest quality land for their own use, often land which is about to be put out to fallow. Moreover, women are also required to work on family fields (in addition to their domestic obligations) so that the amount of time and energy they have to spend on their own fields is very limited, leading to low productivity. Lack of investment in inputs, improved practices or technology for women's (especially food) production reinforces this low productivity. Where investment is likely to be made in improvements, i.e. where land comes under the auspices of rural development programmes, women's own fields tend to be absorbed into general production. (UNICEF, 1989; Creevey, 1991.)

In Sudan, women also have limited access to land. Badri reports women's land ownership, or level of tenancies on schemes, to be between 3 and 12 percent. (Badri, 1986: 18). The low level of access to land may have been to some extent created by government requirements to register land to receive credit and extension services, so that in Wadi Kutum, in Darfur, for example, whilst 46 percent percent of women when interviewed said that they owned land, 90 percent of the land was registered in men's names. '... [W]omen deferred to their husbands because they consider use of credit and extension services and participation in cooperatives to be in the public domain, which is the man's world, whereas their work was in the private domain.' (Badri, 1986: 19.)

### 4 Access to credit

Women's access to credit in both rural and urban contexts appears to be very limited, although systematic evidence is not available.

In the rural economy, women's weak access to land (see previous section), and concentration in subsistence agriculture or unreported activity within the household, coupled with the gender bias in the delivery of rural services (see section on agriculture above), means that women lack access to rural credit. In Mali, for example, Creevey (1991) reports that the CILCA-Mali rural development programme focusing on women's (and men's) microenterprises was unusual in its provision of

credit to women. Rural credit schemes targeted at the poor and particularly at poor women are more widespread and well-known in Bangladesh. However, their success has been limited by a failure to reach a high proportion of landless women, or to create sustainable livelihoods (World Bank, 1990). Moreover, rural credit aimed specifically at women, has, in some cases, been passed directly to men, leading designers of rural credit schemes in Bangladesh to reorient their services around family plans (Martin Greeley, personal communication).

Poor integration of financial markets in developing countries means that, in rural and urban areas, informal credit systems predominate, which often have high rates of interest. Kabeer (1991a) notes that in rural Bangladesh, access to credit from retailers is often conditional on the borrower having regular employment, which effectively discriminates against female headed households whose sources of income tend to be casual and insecure employment.

In urban areas, few low income households have access to credit from banks. Here, informal savings associations, some of which are exclusively women's networks, and other forms of reciprocal exchange (e.g. 'gifts') provide credit for consumption purposes, towards savings for large items (e.g for the woman's marriage trousseau in Mali) or, occasionally, working capital for trading activities. (Hoodfar, 1990; Vaa et al, 1989.) Hoodfar (1990) stresses the role of the accumulation of consumer durables in low income Cairo households, as a form a long-term saving.

In many countries, Islamic banks are playing an increasing role in the financial sector, as in Sudan. This reflects the privatisation or collapse of state run services accompanying economic recession and adjustment, the role of foreign (especially Saudi) finance and attempts to recycle remittances from the Gulf states. The links between Islamic banks and small scale entrepreneurs may be an important factor in explaining the resurgence of visible signs of Islamism in Sudan: it may be a pragmatic approach to obtaining credit. (Jamal, 1991.) It would be of interest to know what impact - if any - the growing importance of Islamic institutions in the financial sector of these countries is having on the availability of credit for women.

## 5 Economic activity, household structure and control over resources

### **Resource allocation in the household**

Many writers on women and development have argued that it is the share of (household) income that women control, rather than economic activity rates or wage levels, which is the crucial factor determining their degree of economic autonomy. Studies of women's control of income within the household are rare, however, and moreover the data requirements for such studies are extensive. (Papps, 1992.)

Studies on intra-household allocation of nutritional resources show that (in South Asia at least) women tend to be disadvantaged, especially in time of crisis, indicating gender inequalities in control over household resources. Kabeer (1991a) notes that violence, or the threat of violence, is often used by men in poor households in rural Bangladesh to enforce greater allocation of food to them.

Brink (1991) has studied the effects of male migration on women's control over household resources in Egypt. She notes that women's power within the household is related to lifecycle:

A woman ... enters the family of her husband upon marriage and is placed under the total authority of her husband and mother-in-law. Ties to her own family are weakened by careful monitoring of her visits to them. Young wives do the heavy housework, and are often overworked and underfed. A woman's status increases somewhat after the birth of a son, but her workload does not lighten until she has daughters who are old enough to help her. In this early stage of marriage, a wife makes no economic decisions. ... A woman's status improves when her husband moves from his father's home to establish his own household ... Moving to form a nuclear family benefits the wife since she now becomes the female head of household and allocates the food money which her husband gives her ... She is also free of her mother in law's supervision and can organize her housework as she likes. However, her movements are still controlled by her husband, and his permission must be secured before she leaves home. The wife's status rises again when her sons are old enough to marry. After a son marries, the mother takes charge of her daughter-in-law. This represents the height of power available to her. (Brink, 1991:202.)

This pattern corresponds roughly to what Kandiyoti (1991c) calls 'classic patriarchy'. She contrasts this situation of women, which leads to strategies of manipulation and submission, with the position of women in sub-Saharan Africa, where less nucleated households, women's greater economic independence and - sometimes - their closer ties to the natal home, allow more scope for autonomy and struggle.

Creevey (1991) concurs with this view, in relation to women in Mali, who operate separate purses and control their own budgets, within the framework of their obligations. Hoodfar (1990) notes the attempts of women in low income Egyptian households to resist increases in recurrent household expenditure and to restrict their own spending to household items which will be seen as their property on divorce.

Many instances in the literature indicate that the traditional obligations of men in maintaining or contributing to the household are increasingly not being met. In urban Mali, where social norms dictate that men should pay all the basic household costs, they now often barely cover housing costs (Vaa et al, 1989). The same pattern has been observed in Egypt (Hoodfar, 1988). In Bangladesh, as noted above, women's economic activity has intensified and there is an increased incidence of marital breakdown, especially among the poor, in many cases attributed to the husband's failure to meet his obligations. 'Seasonal divorce' during the hungry season has become a pattern. (Kabeer, 1991a.)

Kabeer (1991a) stresses the material basis of male authority in contrast to the 'normative' basis of female entitlements. In times of stress, normative entitlements start to disintegrate or shift. The practice of dowry, now widespread in Bangladesh, is indicative of how economic crisis can shift normative obligations to the advantage of men. One view of this is that men are using dowry payments as start up capital. (Anne-Marie Goetz, personal communication).

### **Women's strategies**

Women have different strategies for attempting to reassert normative entitlements or find alternative means of support.

One pragmatic explanation advanced for the revival of interest in Islam among lower income women (as evidenced by the increase in veiling) is that women may be

reasserting Islamic norms to try to resist entry into low paid, undesirable work. Alternatively, as a consequence of being forced to enter the labour force, women are increasingly in the public sphere and are using veiling both as a means of protection and as a way of reasserting Islamic norms, and thus their claim on husbands' support. Thus, the increase in veiling, particularly in Egypt, cannot be identified as a manifestation of women's return to traditional roles. (Badran, 1991; Hoodfar, 1990; Hoodfar, 1992.) Hoodfar (1990) notes that women remain hostile to men's involvement in housework, since this also legitimates their claim on men's resources.

In Mali, women in rural areas have always had major responsibility for their own and children's upkeep. However, in recent years, a high proportion of the increasing number of migrants to Bamako have been women, some of whom migrate independently. In urban areas, work in the informal sector, and pooling of resources among female kin and friends are common survival strategies. (Vaa et al, 1989).

In Bangladesh, women are tending to relinquish control of their own income and assets in the hope of restoring normative entitlements through the family system, e.g. by giving up their inheritance to male kin in the hope of ensuring their support on abandonment, divorce or widowhood.

### **Impact of migration**

Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen (and to a lesser extent Bangladesh) are all countries with a high level of international outmigration of (usually male) workers, particularly to the Gulf states. This phenomenon increased significantly after the oil price rise in 1973. International migration also occurs in Mali, but sending populations tend to be restricted to particular regions, and internal (often seasonal) migration is much more common (Vaa et al, 1989; UNICEF, 1989).

However, economic problems in the Gulf region and the Gulf War may have - temporarily at least - disrupted this pattern of male outmigration situation. For Sudan and Yemen, the disruption is likely to be more long-term as a consequence of these countries' support for Iraq during the Gulf war. Even before this, however, men who had previously earned high wages in the Gulf were no longer able to find work and had returned home (see Carapico and Mynitti, 1991, on Yemen, for example). The return of men previously working in Gulf states may be a contributing factor to the rise in religious conservatism.

It has often been inferred that the phenomenon of large scale male outmigration leads to women having increased autonomy because of the absence of husbands for long periods, but this is now recognised as a simplistic reading of the situation (Khalidi and Tucker, 1991). Brink's (1991) study of the effect of male migration on the autonomy of women in an Egyptian village reveals complex effects. She concludes that:

[t]he emigration of the husband increases the autonomy of some women; that is, women who live in nuclear households and who would normally be controlled by their husbands. Absence of a husband would have no effect on women living in extended families or women who normally have the freedom of leaving the home even when their husbands are present. ...[T]he ability to allocate food money, the ability to allocate money for routine expenditures, and the ability of women to leave the house without permission - were affected by the husband's migration. Emigration provided the money to build a house and enabled the couple to leave the extended family. These women were able to establish nuclear families at an earlier age than most village women, freeing them from the domination of their mothers in law and gaining them the ability to allocate food money. The absence of husbands from the nuclear family further increased the status of wives by freeing them of supervision and increasing their ability to make financial decisions for routine expenditures and ongoing projects. Emigration had no effect on the ability to decide on the purchase of expensive items, as husbands made these decisions whether they were working at home or abroad. (Brink, 1991: 206-7.)

Brink also reports other problems, such as insecurity (due to lack of communication, fear of divorce or abandonment, and reliance on sometimes irregular remittances), and difficulties in disciplining children. Moreover, improvements in the woman's position are not necessarily durable, once the husband has returned. (Brink, 1991.)

### **Female headed households**

One consequence of the breakdown of normative obligations and marital ties under economic strain is the increase in the number of **de facto** or **de jure** female headed households. There is little systematic data on this, but some quantitative indicators and observed processes suggest a worrying trend, given the well-known vulnerability to poverty of female-headed households.

In Egypt 11 percent of urban households are female headed. (Shorter, 1989, cited in Humphrey et al, 1991.). In Morocco, 25 percent of households are female headed (Joeke, 1982, cited in Humphrey et al, 1991.) Elderly women and women with young children are potentially the most vulnerable of the heterogeneous group of female-headed households. Widows are particularly vulnerable group, as illustrated by Dreze's well known work on widows in India (Dreze, 1990, cited in Humphrey et al, 1991).

Comments have already been made on the large proportion of (often independent) female migrants in Bamako and their survival strategies. In Bangladesh, as well, in spite of a common view that male migration is dominant, the increasing presence of poor women in urban slum areas suggests that migration is also a survival strategy for abandoned women. (Kabeer, 1991a). In Sudan, war and famine have forced many people to move to urban centres, where many displaced households are effectively female headed (Africa Watch, 1990).

More systematic enquiry is urgently needed into the patterns of female headship, the processes resulting in this phenomenon, the extent to which such households have any continuing claim on conjugal or consanguinal family resources, and the extent to which Islamic norms of inheritance, custody etc. prevail in such circumstances.

## VI POLITICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN'S POSITION IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

### 1 Formal political rights and representation

Formal political rights have been gained by women in most Muslim countries but their importance is diminished in some cases by the lack of democratic institutions and processes. Varying degrees of democratisation are occurring in some countries (e.g. Egypt; Yemen - forthcoming elections in the autumn) which may lend greater importance to these rights in the future, however.

Even where women have exercised voting rights, this has not necessarily translated into significant female representation. In Egypt, generally thought of as a country where women are relatively politically active, women were only 4 percent of deputies in parliament in 1987 (Khalidi and Tucker, 1992: 6). Moreover, in Egypt, registration of women voters is voluntary (in contrast to the compulsory franchise for men) and women represent only 25 percent of voters (el-Nasr, 1989). In some countries (e.g. Sudan, Egypt, Bangladesh), quota systems have been introduced at various times to redress this situation but opinions are divided on whether this has led to real gains, or whether it has merely allowed ruling parties to co-opt relatively passive women into the political system (Howard-Merriam, 1990). Some individual women and women's organisations have opposed such measures.

Both ruling and opposition parties have women's wings, or allied women's organisations, which are engaged in varying levels and kinds of activity, but often lack an independent political voice. Official women's organisations tend to be involved in various kinds of welfare issues and women's projects: e.g. the Union Nationale des Femmes Maliennes (UNFM) is involved in promoting rural development and income generating activities for women (Creevey, 1991). Official organisations or women's wings may also act as pressure groups on government to reform family and personal status laws (Kabeer, 1991b).

Organisations linked to the worker's movement or leftist parties have been active in fighting for rights for women workers, e.g. **Mahila Parishad** - linked to the Bangladeshi Communist Party - (Kabeer, 1991b), and the Sudanese Women's Union (Hamour, 1990). However, leftist organisations have generally also subsumed gender-based demands to broader political concerns or interests (Kabeer, 1991b).

### 2 Informal political activity and participation

Given the limited involvement in women in formal political activity, their participation in non-governmental and informal organisations and activities is of considerable importance. Women's organisations have had antagonistic relationships with the state in some periods, and been tolerated or even promoted at other times, depending on the overall project of the government at the time and its pragmatic interests. For example: '[t]he Sudanese Women's Union, founded in the 1950s and active throughout the 1960s, was forced underground in the early 1970s. Emerging again in the years 1985-89, it has been obliged to return to clandestinity since the Bashir coup.' (Peteet and Harlow, 1991: 6.)

The recent dissolution of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) in Egypt,

a radical women's organisation led by Nawal el-Saadawi, also illustrates the limits to official tolerance of independent women's activities.<sup>22</sup>

Elite women have been able to exert some influence over the political system through their privileged access to powerful individuals and structures. For example, the revised (and shortlived) Personal Status Law passed in Egypt in 1979 was very much the personal project of Jihan Sadat, the then President's wife. (Howard-Merriam, 1990.)

Women's activist groups have spearheaded attempts to bring about legal reforms, or, more recently, resist retrogressive revisions of laws. In Bangladesh, **Naripokkho** was instrumental in organising the opposition to the 8th Amendment in 1988, which made Islam the state religion of the country. In Egypt in 1985, when the 1979 Personal Status Law came under attack, a broad coalition of women's groups and individuals was formed under the umbrella of the **Committee for the Defence of Women and the Family**, to try to push for the retention of some of its progressive features. In the latter case, participants were divided on the aims of the campaign and the extent of its achievements. (Kabeer, 1991b; ISIS-WICCE, **Women's World**, 1989; el Din Bibars, 1987.)

There has been vocal opposition in southern Yemen, from some women prominent in public life, to perceived Islamisation in general, and in particular, to the recent passing of a decree which negates many positive features of the 1974 Family Law, passed under the socialist regime:

The women of southern Yemen, who under Marxist rule enjoyed a degree of equality unprecedented in Arabia, are on the defensive as traditionalists in the north try to erode their old legal rights. The main target of their anger is a new marriage and divorce law passed in May [1992] by the Presidential Council, the body which has ruled the united Yemen since north and south merged in 1990. From the southern point of view, the law removes the restrictions on polygamy, deprives divorced women of their right to keep the house they were living in and lifts the legal limit which the leftist government in the south imposed on the brideprice a man could pay. "Of course its a retrograde step. There are clearly people who want to suppress freedoms by using religion as an excuse," said Ilham Salab, secretary of the Yemeni Women's Federation in Aden. Women in the old southern capital, backed by liberal lawyers and civil rights activists, marched against the law in April as part of a campaign which led to some amendments. (Wright, 1992.)

Women's activist groups often tend to be middle class and urban based. Women from such organisations recognise that attempts to promote change through legislation have had little impact on rural women (ISIS-WICCE, **Women's World**, 1989). Rural women are also organised to some degree, and include economic rights among their demands:

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<sup>22</sup> Although no official reason was given, the dissolution of AWSA is thought to be a political move related to the opposition of the organisation to recent Western intervention in the Gulf. The transfer of its assets to a 'little known and not terribly active social welfare organisation, Women of Islam,' (Peteet and Harlow, 1991: 6) further underlines the current climate of intolerance to women's organisations not organised under official or Islamic control.

Nearly 5,000 Bangladeshi women - homeless, jobless or divorced - staged a noisy rally in Dhaka on Sunday demanding government action to curb the dowry system, create jobs and ensure welfare payments. ... Many women travelled from outlying areas for the rally, organised by the Bangladesh Women's Peasant Association. (Ahmed, A., 1992.)

In Bangladesh, particularly, the government's commitment to Women in Development (WID) - said by Kabeer (1991b) to be a means of extending new kinds of patronage - is somewhat in contradiction with the broader ideological shift towards Islamisation. The WID policy has created opportunities for women to organise in rural areas around development-oriented NGOs. The more radical of these depart from the welfare orientation of official development efforts and focus directly on the issue of women's oppression. 'NGOs such as **Proshika**, **Nijera Kori** and **Saptagram** have shifted their primary objective from meeting the immediate needs of poor and landless women to that of their longer term empowerment. [They] work with a collective rather than an individual concept of empowerment' (Kabeer, 1991b: 138).

Freedman (1991) emphasises the importance of legal literacy campaigns in Asia and the Near East. Both grassroots level literacy campaigns such as those organised by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and academic research on women's rights in Islam (of the kind conducted by **Women Living Under Muslim Laws**) are needed to address the issue of women's position in Islamic countries, she suggests.<sup>23</sup> Legal literacy campaigns have been most successful where they have been aimed at a broad cross section of people and operated in tandem with standard legal services, or with campaigns on specific issues. (Freedman, 1991.)

Islamic associations in Egypt are also organising a whole range of activities, some of which are aimed at women, such as vocational training, education, day care, and health facilities. Such facilities are funded by a combination of **zakat**<sup>24</sup>, minimal charges and in some cases foreign assistance (particularly Saudi funds but western aid funds also). These services, especially medical services, are often preferred to public facilities because they are known for their high quality and are relatively inexpensive, in an economic climate where public services are deteriorating in both accessibility and quality. (Sullivan, 1989; Sadowski, n.d.)

In Bangladesh also there has been 'a remarkable expansion in the numbers and influence of community oriented "Islamic NGOs" ... all of whom draw on funds from the Middle East. The training of imams by the Islamic Foundation to carry out village administration, basic health care, including maternity courses, and agricultural extension work exemplifies the entry of religious forces into the field of community development.'(Kabeer, 1991b.)

Little precise information is readily available about the range, level and precise nature of the activities of such Islamic associations, or the extent to which women benefit from them, and are involved in their planning and delivery. Further research in this area would clearly be of great value.

### 3 Education

There has been considerable, although very variable, progress in women's access to education in the countries under discussion, with Egypt having a particularly high

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<sup>23</sup> Women Living Under Muslim Laws have recently produced 'Women in the Quran: an Information Kit.' Unfortunately there was not time to consult it for this piece.

<sup>24</sup> **Zakat** is an Islamic tax or levy used for redistributive purposes.

level of female access, due to its long-standing tradition of female education. Policies of free and open access to education have led to increases in female enrollment, but there is still a significant gender gap in access in all these countries at all levels. (el-Sanabary, 1989; Colclough, forthcoming.)

In Egypt in 1984, 94 percent of boys attended primary school compared to 76 percent of girls and the respective rates at secondary and tertiary levels were 73 percent versus 52 percent and 28.6 percent versus 14.8 percent (el-Sanabary, 1989). In Sudan and Bangladesh the picture is less favourable, with the female to male enrollment ratio at primary level being 69 percent and 71.3 percent respectively. In Mali, and particularly Yemen Arab Republic (north Yemen prior to reunification) the record is poor: the same ratio yields figures of 59 percent and 28 percent respectively. (Colclough with Lewin, forthcoming: NB these figures are for 1986.) Whilst el-Sanabary (1989) claims that Islam is not necessarily an impediment to female education, Colclough (forthcoming) notes an association between low levels of female enrollment at primary level and 'Islam', although not a very systematic one.

Supply and demand are both factors in limiting girls' participation in education. Especially where coeducation is limited, there may be a shortage of girls' schools or they may provide education of lower quality, as el-Sanabary (1989) notes for the Middle East and North Africa. The shortage of girls' schools is also known to be a problem in Pakistan and Sudan. Shortages of women teachers especially at secondary level, are a related factor undermining the quality of girls' education. Single-sex schools at secondary level are not found to exhibit major biases in the overall curriculum, but access to vocational education for women tends to be restricted to stereotyped activities. Studies of text books have also uncovered limited presentation of women's roles and personalities. (el Sanabary, 1989.)

Even where education is free, the indirect costs of schooling and also the opportunity cost of girls' contribution to household labour may act against their participation. Whilst surveys have shown a fairly high demand in Egypt for university education for daughters (although less than that for sons), it is notable that this drops considerably in the Upper Egypt region, where women are heavily involved in agricultural work. (el Sanabary, 1989.)

A variety of NGOs are involved in education and related activities, both Islamist organisations (religious and general education) and feminist organisations (mainly literacy, income generation etc.), the latter on a much smaller scale. For example, the **New Woman Group** in Egypt has had some success in developing educational materials with working class women in Cairo (Shukrullah, personal communication).

In Bangladesh, the government has committed considerable resources to the development of religious schools - **madrassas** - and other Islamic educational institutions. It seems that girls and women have not benefited significantly from these developments. (Kabeer, 1991b; World Bank, 1990.)

#### 4 Socio-cultural Expression

##### **Media**

Given the limitations on democracy in many of the countries under discussion, the media are controlled to some degree. Moreover, low educational and income levels, in some cases, as well as government control, restrict the overall development of the media.

In Sudan, the suppression of all opposition has affected women's ability to work through the media: 'Sudan has always had few women journalists because they have

only found work during brief periods of democratisation ... But following the coup, all newspapers were abolished ... Now only government papers flourish. The country's few women writers face interminable unemployment.' (Wheelright, 1991: 26.)

Television is generally kept under much tighter control than the print media, even where, as concessions to democracy are made, media restrictions are on the wane. In Yemen, Egypt, Sudan and Bangladesh, the influence of the Islamist movement is felt particularly through television. In Yemen, television carries Saudi religious programmes (Carapico and Mynitti, 1991). In Egypt, prominent intellectuals of the Islamist movement have been given prime air time on television (Sadowski, n.d.; Badran, 1991). In Bangladesh, Islamic rituals and dress now accompany official broadcasts (ISIS-WICCE, **Women's World**, 1989). Some prominent women in the media are now wearing Islamic dress, or espouse Islamist views, for example Safinas Kazim in Egypt (Badran, 1991).

Nawal el-Saadawi comments on the juxtaposition of conservative Islamic messages on women with advertisements for western consumer goods: '[i]t has become quite common to see the dignified religious scholar on television talking about the importance of veiling women, to be followed immediately by a half naked dancer singing a commercial advertisement for American shampoo.' (el-Saadawi, in Toubia (ed) 1988: 13.)

Particularly in Egypt, there is a very active women's press, although the relationship between radical women's magazines and the government is an uneasy one. Islamist organisations have also been active publishers in Egypt, in recent years, producing cheap, popular Islamic texts, including texts on the role of women. (Badran, 1991.)

## **Dress**

The resurgence of veiling in Islamic countries, particularly Egypt, since the 1970s has attracted much attention, and is popularly associated with a rise in conservative religious values through the Islamist movement. However, the phenomenon is much more complex than this, and has political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions as well as religious ones.

The resurgence of veiling is not a return to traditional values or forms of dress. It is popular among young workers and students, often from low income backgrounds (although latterly veiling has spread into the middle and upper classes). Although in some cases there is pressure for on women from Islamist organisations to wear the veil, on the whole it is a voluntary phenomenon. The role of veiling as a statement of cultural identity or political ideology is important. (Ahmed, L., 1992; Hoodfar, 1992; Shukrullah, personal communication.)

Hoodfar (1991) and Ahmed, L., (1992) stress the economic dimension of the new veiling: for working or student women on a low income, it represents a way to save money on clothing. Moreover, in Islamic dress, women command more respect from male colleagues and feel freer in their social interaction in the public sphere. The role of the veil in reasserting Islamic norms within the household has already been noted.

Ahmed, L., (1992) also emphasises the great variety of styles of veiling adopted and the numerous new designs which are being produced. Based on interview evidence, she shows that young veiled women are quite ignorant about all the details of Islamic law, and tend to be quite progressive in their views, for example in relation to women working (although slightly less so than unveiled women). She also finds that women do not necessarily observe religious practices more actively when they take up the veil.

## **Religious practice**

The role of women in articulating religion in orthodox Islam would appear to be quite limited, although feminist historians and theologians are still in the process of uncovering new evidence on the extent of women's involvement. Historically, Shi'ism and Sufism have given more space to women as religious interpreters. (Keddie, 1991.)

The resurgence of the Islamist movement has brought women back into religious practice in a much more active way than previously, and also promotes active discussion by female adherents. This may be leading to women taking a greater role in religious interpretation. (Badran, 1991.) In rural areas, women's role in folk practices and spiritual life has already been noted. (See e.g. Abaza-Stauth, 1985.)

As evidenced by various examples in this report, the Islamist movement has also acted as a spur to some feminists, who are suspicious of its attitudes to women, to actively engage in their own reinterpretation of Islamic history and beliefs.

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

The attached bibliography gives a listing of all references referred to in the text, which represents only a small selection of the available materials. Literature was surveyed based on a search of the existing collection at the British Library for Development at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and on references and information accessed through external database searches. The MINISIS database at IDS was searched using the terms 'women' and 'Islam'/'fundamentalism' and well as the relevant country names.

The on-line databases searched were: **Public Affairs Information Service** - NY; **Sociological Abstracts** (Social Policy, Planning and Development Abstracts subfile) - Sociological Abstracts Inc.; and **Textline** (a media newswire service). The same search terms were used as specified above, for the period 1987-92 (with the exception of Textline which was only searched for 1992). References in English, French and German were extracted, but most of those used were English materials.

The available references were used selectively, partly due to lack of time, and partly to the difficulty in obtaining certain documents. As far as possible references which were both relevant to the request, and up-to-date, were selected. Further information and references were obtained through discussion with academic staff at IDS - particularly Susan Joeques, Anne-Marie Goetz, and Martin Greeley - as well as through discussion with visiting women postgraduate students from Egypt and Sudan.

The literature surveyed thus reflects the biases of the IDS collection in particular (which concentrates on development literature) and, in general, the bias of western academic sources. No Arabic or other non-European language literature was surveyed, which may have led to a bias towards secular, feminist viewpoints.

Many gaps in the presentation have been noted in the report itself. In addition, the lack of easily available material on the views and activities of women in the Islamist movement limits the analysis. Also, due to lack of time and to the difficulties of making a succinct presentation, certain issues which are addressed in the literature were not dealt with the report, in particular women's fertility and health (excepting female genital mutilation). Other aspects of women's 'physical' well-being, including mobility and violence, are touched on in the text, but no systematic presentation of these is given.

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