

# The Past and Present of Women in the Muslim World\*

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DISCUSSIONS of the past and present of women in the Muslim world are often charged with ideological commitments, even when their authors are attempting to be scientific and objective. The discussion of Muslim women may be particularly wrenching for a scholar who wishes to overcome widespread prejudices against Islam on the one hand, but not ignore the problems of Muslim women on the other. Roughly speaking, there tend to be three approaches to the problem. One is to deny that Muslim women are any more oppressed than non-Muslim women, or even to say that in key respects they are and have been less oppressed. A second is to say that oppression is real but is extrinsic to Islam: had the true intent of the Qur'an been followed, there would have been gender equality, but this true intent was undermined by Arabian patriarchal practices and by imports from surrounding inegalitarian civilizations. A third and opposite trend is to blame Islam for being irrevocably gender-inegalitarian and to posit that gender equality cannot be achieved until Islam, at least as we know it, is undermined or radically altered. There are, in addition, intermediate positions, as well as a strong trend among historians and social scientists to avoid controversy by sticking to

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monographic or limited studies that do not have to confront the above issues. Some scholars say that *Islam* has been overstressed especially as compared to economic and social influences.

In addition to contested questions of interpretation, there is also the problem that monographic studies, especially in women's history, remain rare, although many scholars are now working to overcome this. In view of the paucity of studies and the abundance of controversy, it might seem that it is premature to attempt a survey of some of the major questions in the field. But not only are such surveys useful to the nonspecialist who wishes to understand something of the field, and perhaps to teach something about it, but they also help situate the field's problems and point to useful future directions. The widespread resistance by many contemporary Muslims to male-female equality may lead us to exaggerate the differences between men's and women's status in the Islamic past as compared to other civilizations. On the whole, relative to non-Muslim areas, differences in gender status in the Muslim world are greater in modern times than they were in the past. Usually differences between Muslims and non-Muslims regarding gender status are attributed primarily to the Qur'an, or, by some, to the way it has been predominantly interpreted, especially in the shari'a (holy law). There are, however, other reasons for modern Muslim resistance to western-sanctioned change. These are tied to centuries-old hostility between the Muslim and western worlds, which has become exacerbated in modern times. Many Muslims dislike borrowing customs, especially regarding something at once so intimate and so basic as gender relations, from the west, for such borrowing is seen as a surrender to neocolonialism. The conviction of many believers that the west is out to undermine Islam, so vividly displayed in the *Satanic Verses* affair, is also frequently expressed in less dramatic but equally tenacious fashion regarding changes in women's status and dress. So-called fundamentalism, which has been on the increase in recent years, involves not only reactionaries, but also young people with predominantly technical and scientific educations whose views on women are not simplistic. These Islamists see western practices and views regarding women as part of a western cultural offensive, which accompanies political and economic offensives. For many believers, western gender practices are seen more as aggression than as liberation, and Islamist women can find some genuine advantages for themselves in their new interpretations of Islam.

## I

Although the origins of gender inequalities in the ancient near east are a subject of scholarly dispute, it seems clear that early hunter-gatherers and other pre-plow peoples were more egalitarian between genders than were people who had undergone the early agricultural revolutions. The growth of an economic surplus along with the development of technology and technique were accompanied by the development of class differences and slavery, and encouraged limiting many women to domestic spheres and occupations. Class differences developed among women as well as among men; some women were slaves with menial roles or sexual roles, or both, and others engaged in different degrees of non-domestic as well as domestic labor, while on top were primarily women who did not have to venture outside the home.<sup>1</sup> Veiling and seclusion developed in the pre-Islamic near east and adjacent areas largely as a marker for upper-class women that showed they did not have to interact with strangers.

With the rise of property and the subordination of women, many peoples developed myths that depicted women as the source of evil and of sexual temptation, who were hence dangerous and should be controlled. Regarding sexuality, once property and inheritance in the male line became important, female virginity and fidelity became central ideological concerns. Males in many cultures were allowed to be legally polygamous; in any case their de facto polygamy was not censured. The basis for this is often made explicit among Muslims: male polygamy does not bar us from knowing who the father is, but female polygamy would. Hence women must be socialized, controlled, and watched over to minimize their chances of contact with men other than their husbands.

This close guarding and control of women has been especially strong in Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies from ancient times to the present. Because many so-called Islamic customs go back to pre-Islamic civilizations, something should be said about earlier customs before discussing Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the many discussions of the interaction of these factors, the most important, if controversial, recent one is Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). See also Karen Sacks, "Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production, and Private Property," *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimhalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

The earliest text we know of regarding veiling is an Assyrian legal text of the thirteenth century B.C. It restricts veiling to respectable women, specifically prohibiting prostitutes from veiling. Both then and in later times, veiling was a sign of status. Respectable Athenian women were usually secluded, and veiling was known in the Greco-Roman world. Strabo says the practice came to Greece from Persia via Medea, whom he considers a Mede, and this probably reflects a real eastern origin. Veiling and seclusion existed in pre-Islamic Iran and in the Byzantine empire, the two areas conquered by the first Muslims, although we do not know how widespread it was. The first visual depiction of top-to-toe veiling comes from bas-reliefs in Palmyra, Syria, in the first century C.E. (The people depicted were northern Arabs, but they had no direct connection with the first Muslims.)<sup>2</sup>

Veiling and seclusion protected wives and daughters from male contact outside the family. This made women easier to control and helped assure paternity. Again, veiling was and sometimes still is a sign of status, for a husband who has the means to keep his wife veiled and secluded demonstrates that she is protected from sexual advances and that she is not so poor as to need to go out to work or even to shop. Veiling, especially in its stricter forms, has traditionally been not only a class phenomenon but overwhelmingly an urban one as well; rural women, who had to work in the fields, could not easily veil.

Veiling and avoidance of male contact are not exclusively Muslim phenomena, and it seems clear that the early Muslims adopted these practices from the peoples who lived near them whom they conquered. Other Mediterranean peoples, like the Spanish, the southern Italians, and the Greeks, had much in common with the Muslims when it came to guarding girls and women from outside males, as well as with respect to other aspects of female relations centering on honor.

The similarity around the Mediterranean of attitudes toward male-female relations has been discussed by Germaine Tillion, in a book called *The Republic of Cousins*. According to Tillion, Mediterranean peoples favor endogamy, and endogamy increases the tendency to control women in tightly interrelated lineages. She

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<sup>2</sup> See Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, eds., *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 21, and p. 32, n. 12. I have seen the impressive Palmyran bas-relief.

notes that the ancient Egyptians and Persians preferred unions that we would call incestuous, while most Mediterranean peoples have favored cousin marriage.<sup>3</sup> Building on Tillion, I would say that nomadic tribal groups, who were very numerous among the Muslim peoples of the Near and Middle East, have special reasons to want to control women and to favor cousin marriage.

The term "tribe" has been so loosely misused that in some groups, notably among Africanist scholars, it is now avoided altogether. While Africans and those who study Africa may justly react to a word that is wrongly used to characterize nations with millions of people, there is a useful role for the word tribe in Middle Eastern studies. It corresponds to terms in the main Middle Eastern languages that refer to contiguous population groups claiming descent from one ancestor. A tribe is a politico-economic unit, and tribal leaders, generally chosen from a single family, are usually given more loyalty and respect than is the central government, though they may now have little real coercive power. Tribes are strong when central governments are weak, and central governments usually try to weaken tribes.

Tribes do not represent a "primitive" form of social organization, but embody a long prior period of sociohistoric development. Pastoral nomadic tribes, the most common type in the Middle East, can develop only after animals are domesticated and there is a settled population with whom nomads can trade animal products for agricultural and urban ones. The cohesion of tribes and subtribes is necessary to their economy, which requires frequent group decisions about such issues as migration. To make decisions amicably, groups closely tied by kin are desirable. The practical benefits of close kinship are surely one reason cousin marriage has long been preferred among Middle Eastern peoples. Cousin marriage encourages family integration and cooperation.

Endogamy is often attributed to a desire to increase family property, but people also say that exogamy increases their property, and statistically both systems should end up identical in this respect. The difference is that the property that stays in the family in endogamous systems is property that is already in the hands of the extended family, and thus is likely to be both more contiguous and more satisfying emotionally. Gertrude Stern documents that Muslim Arabs increased cousin marriage after the Qur'an re-

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<sup>3</sup> Germaine Tillion, *Le Harem et les cousins* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).

quired female inheritance, which had been rarer before Muhammad.<sup>4</sup> When women inherit as they are supposed to according to Muslim law, there are clear advantages in keeping land and animals in the hands of close relatives via cousin marriage, since in this way contiguous family property will be maintained.

Tribal structures also place special emphasis on premarital virginity and marital fidelity by the woman, since tribes and subtribes even more than nontribal units are held together by kinship in the male line, and any doubt thrown on the purity of this kinship would be even more disastrous in the tribal than in the nontribal environment. Hence it appears likely that controls on women are connected to the pervasiveness of tribal structures in the Middle East. Even though most nomadic women are not veiled and secluded, they are controlled.

## II

It was in a situation of different levels of sexual inequality both among Arab tribes and non-Arab empires that the Qur'an was written. Whether it, and later Islamic law, improved the position of women, and, if so, to what degree, is a matter of controversy.<sup>5</sup> The predominant Muslim view is that before Islam, Arabs lived in ignorance and barbarism, and with regard to women, as with other questions, the divinely revealed Qur'an provided a great step forward. Some western scholars, however, notably Robertson Smith and Montgomery Watt, found conditions of matriliney and high female status in pre-Islamic Arabia, which would imply less of a reforming role for Islam.<sup>6</sup> This view has been adopted by a number of recent feminist scholars. The predominant western scholarly view is that the Qur'an marked an improvement on previous practices, though not as dramatic an improvement as is held by believing Muslims. In my view, some scholars in the last group denigrate what do indeed appear to be matrilineal and matrilineal customs among some pre-Islamic tribes, including free divorce for women and frequent matrilineal marriage, and take these customs as signs of disorder—as do many Muslim believers—and

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<sup>4</sup> Gertrude Stern, *Marriage in Early Islam* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1939).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the issues, see particularly Leila Ahmed, "Women and the Advent of Islam," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (1986): 665–91.

<sup>6</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885); W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

hence regard the suppression of such customs as progress. On the other hand, some feminist scholars may take reports of matrilineal and matrilocal customs from particular tribes and generalize them to all tribes or all Arabs.

What appears to be true is that the Qur'an prescribed some improvements for women (but on balance not for those from matrilineal tribes) and some limitations. Improvements were not revolutionary, nor do we know enough about the practices of all tribes to evaluate them precisely. A clear Qur'anic reform was the outlawing of female infanticide, and another was payment of the male dower to the bride, not to her guardian. Possible improvements for some were regulations about female inheritance—half that of a male heir and of women's control over their property; these had been known, however, among pre-Islamic Arabs, as evidenced by Muhammad's first wife, the wealthy widowed merchant Khadija. Much less favorable Qur'anic prescriptions were free divorce for men, while for women divorce became very difficult, and polygamy for men. Predominantly, pre-Islamic Arab women had equality in divorce. Polygamy is presented by the Qur'an as helping the condition of unprotected widows and orphans, who were numerous in those warlike times. Men are first admonished not to take additional wives unless they can treat them all equally, and they are then told that no matter how hard they try, they will not be able to treat all equally. This contradiction is taken by modernist Muslims to show that the Qur'an meant to discourage or forbid polygamy, but this is unlikely, as polygamy is encouraged in specific circumstances. Veiling and seclusion are not enjoined in the Qur'an, although later Muslim interpretation says that they are. One verse of the Qur'an tells women to veil their bosoms and hide their ornaments, and the term "ornaments" was later taken to mean everything except the hands, feet, and perhaps the face, though this interpretation makes no logical or linguistic sense. If everything was to be veiled, there would be no point in ordering bosoms veiled separately. Another verse tells women to draw their cloaks tightly around them so that they may be recognized and not annoyed. These are the only words taken to refer to veiling.

Other verses, however, indicate that after Muhammad had taken several wives and had some problems with men talking to these wives, there was a revelation saying that men should talk to the Prophet's wives only from behind a curtain and that his wives should be limited in other ways as well. The Prophet's wives

apparently came to be subject to types of veiling and seclusion that resembled those later followed by the urban upper and middle classes. It would be simplistic to say, however, that later veiling was simply an emulation of the practices of the Prophet's wives. In her book on Muhammad's favorite wife, A'isha, Nabia Abbott notes that this turn toward veiling the wives was itself a reflection of greater prosperity among the Muslim ruling group, which enabled them to hire servants and to keep women from duties outside the home, and also of the Muslims' greater contact with surrounding societies where women were veiled.<sup>7</sup> Hence, as the society of the Muslims came increasingly to resemble that of surrounding and conquered peoples, it is not surprising that many of those peoples' customs and practices regarding women, which were found appropriate to their stratified social structures and their reliance on family regulation to maintain general social control, were also found appropriate by the Muslims and were adopted or adapted by them.

In addition to the Qur'anic points on female behavior already mentioned, men are given control of their wives, extending in some cases to beating, and adulterers of both sexes are punished, when there is confession or *four* eyewitnesses to the act, by lashing.

It is often said that Islamic practices regarding women are so resistant to change because they have the sanction of the Qur'an, which believing Muslims take to be the literal word of God. Although this has some truth, we should be aware of how much breaking and bending of Qur'anic admonitions there have been throughout Muslim history. To limit ourselves to women, it has been noted by anthropologists and others that many, and possibly the majority, of Muslim women have never inherited as the Qur'an says they should, especially with regard to land. The inheritance rules of the Qur'an were very hard to follow in rural and nomadic societies, since most daughters marry out of the family, with a minority meeting the first-cousin marriage ideal, and land or flocks given away reduce the property of the patrilineal line. Hence, especially in rural areas, means are found to evade women's inheritance rights. Nor could a woman, who might be secluded and whose husband had powers of threat and coercion, always hold onto or manage her own property. Adultery or forni-

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<sup>7</sup> Nabia Abbott, *Aishah, the Beloved of Mohamad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942).

cation have rarely been punished in accordance with the Qur'an's teachings: the Qur'anic four eyewitnesses are rarely demanded, and very often the girl or woman is killed by a member of her own family—frequently her brother. Stoning to death, a custom practiced by Jews and some Christians, was sometimes adopted and is often considered Islamic, even though the Qur'an says otherwise.

In general, the Qur'an was followed on sexual and other matters when it was not too inconvenient or repugnant to men or the patriarchal family to do so, and not followed when it was. The divergences went mostly in the direction of reviving and reinforcing patriarchal tribal practices, as in rules of inheritance, or else in adopting customs from the Byzantines and Persians, such as veiling and seclusion, and reading those customs back into the Qur'an. In some cases, however, practice might be less male-dominant than a mere reading of the Qur'an might suggest, notably with regard to divorce. Since marriages were carefully arranged and the groom's parents paid a significant bride-price, the groom could be in trouble with his family if he divorced quickly or lightly. Polygamy was often favored over divorce.

Urban middle- and upper-class women, traditionally the most veiled and secluded, have also been much more likely to inherit as the Qur'an said they should. This is a paradox only to a westerner who reads contemporary concepts of women's rights into the past and thinks that veiled women were disadvantaged and that women who had more modern rights in one sphere should have them in another. It may be that urban men and women had a tacit bargain, with women getting more property and respect in return for more control. Class and regional differences among Islamic women were important. Significant differences existed in women's roles according to time, place, and social status, and there has never been a single category of Muslim women operating under one set of rules. Particularly when Islam spread beyond the Middle East to south and southeast Asia and to Africa, the position of women, traditionally freer in these areas than in the pre-Islamic Middle East, remained so. And these areas now have the vast majority of the world's Muslims.

This is not to suggest that the prescriptions of the Qur'an and of Muslim law counted for little among Muslims. The rules on polygamy, divorce, and child custody (custody belonged to the father after a young age) were generally followed. If polygamy and divorce were far less widespread than Westerners might imagine, they remained as a threat to a wife, and still do in many

areas. Divorce was the worse threat and condition in most cases, and polygamy seems always to have been a rare, mainly upper-class custom, except in Africa, where it preceded Islam.

On the whole, however, the condition of women does not seem to have changed radically from its previous Mediterranean status after the rise of Islam. Veiling and seclusion were stricter in Islam than in the European Mediterranean, but the general style of dress and deportment, including the stress on male and family honor residing in the proper sexual behavior of the female (and in brothers killing erring sisters and in carrying out occasional stonings,) were all present. Different were polygamy and divorce, although western husbands were hardly monogamous in practice. When we turn to other great civilizations, such as south and southeast Asia, we also find patriarchal customs with special restrictions for women of status, like foot-binding, widow-burning, and seclusion. The traditional status of most Muslim women does not seem to have been significantly worse than that of women in many other civilizations, and with regard to property it was often better. All of Asia and the Near East may be seen as a similar area, with young brides marrying into large families, gaining respect mainly via their sons, and only late in life getting power as mothers-in-law.<sup>8</sup>

The dramatic difference between Muslims and non-Muslims comes with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Muslim resistance to change and with the current Islamic revivalist desire to return to Islamic ways. Regarding gender relations this has no strict parallel in other civilizations, even though the recent exposure of bride-burning in India indicates that the Muslim world is not the area of the worst atrocities toward women.

### III

Some intelligent modern scholars argue against the view that the early deterioration of women's roles was a non-Muslim accretion and say that a steady development toward more restricted roles began in Muhammad's time. It seems no accident that the strongest Muslim women come at the very beginning of the Islamic period. Khadija the merchant, who married and employed the

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<sup>8</sup> See Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective," in *Shifting Boundaries: Women in Middle Eastern History and Theory*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990).

young Muhammad, fifteen years her junior, was the first convert to Islam; she helped Muhammad in every way toward his ultimate success. Muhammad's young wife A'isha, whom he married when she was a child, and whose heedlessness of opinion sometimes caused trouble, exercised much power. After Muhammad's death she joined the coalition against Muhammad's son-in-law Ali and participated in the crucial battle against him. Such major and forceful figures had a stature rarely repeated in Islamic history.

Wealth and stratification in the Muslim community began even in Muhammad's time, and contact with surrounding communities that practiced veiling and seclusion encouraged Muhammad to seclude his wives. Only families wealthy enough to have slaves or servants to do the outdoor chores and shopping could afford to keep women secluded. Hence women were increasingly brought to acquiesce in veiling and seclusion when to be less covered and more involved in outside activity was taken as a mark of low status or lack of respectability.

Muslim women's lives have varied tremendously, by class, mode of production, time, and place, but there are some general things that may be said, which remain in Islamic law and custom from early Islamic times until recently, and which provide some guideposts to understanding Islamic women.

Islamic law, which is much concerned with matters affecting women, developed in the first few Islamic centuries, after the seventh-century Muslim conquest of the Middle East. In theory this law, the shari'a, is based on four sources: the revealed Qur'an; reports on the sayings and deeds of Muhammad; analogy; and the consensus of jurors. In practice, Middle Eastern customs and the individual opinions of judges were also important. There were four schools of law belonging to the majority Sunni branch of Islam, while Twelver Shi'ism had its own school. Regarding marriage, schools differed as to whether a virgin's consent was needed for her own marriage or only that of her father or guardian, but one may imagine the difficulties of nonconsent (*not*, however, the impossibility). Marriage is a contract, not a sacrament, and the man's duties are to provide materially for his wife and to perform sexually. The woman must have sex whenever the man wishes, but she has no material obligations, no matter how much property she may own. A man may divorce a woman by a thrice-pronounced declaration, while a woman can, in general, divorce only for specified causes, agreed to by a judge in court.

Polygyny up to four wives is permitted, although the Qur'an

says it is allowable only if all are treated equally. In practice this came to mean that equal space should be provided to each, and that a man should rotate sexual relations and overnight stays. In addition, men were permitted unlimited concubines and female slaves, and there were special rules for the status of their children. Polygyny and further legal sexual relations were in practice available for the privileged classes. Shi'a Islam has another marital institution that goes back to pre-Islamic Arabia and seems to have been condoned by the Prophet, although it was definitively outlawed for Sunnis by the caliph 'Umar, whom the Shi'a do not recognize. The institution is temporary marriage—a contract entered into for a limited period of time, between a few minutes and years, after which it automatically ends. As with other marriages, there is a payment to the woman, and children are legitimate. Non-Shi'a often regard this as “legalized prostitution,” and it flourishes especially in pilgrimage centers where men may come without their wives. It is wrong to equate it with prostitution, however, and it has uses besides serving men's temporary sexual desires.

Within marriage the woman is supposed to obey any legal and feasible demand by her husband, and the Qur'an authorizes him to beat her if she does not. This is one of several Qur'anic verses that has been interpreted rather benignly by Islamic modernists. There are no grounds for asserting that wife-beating has been more frequent in Islam than in other cultures.

Regarding property ownership and inheritance, Islam was more favorable to women than most traditional cultures. Women could hold and manage any amount of property at any time, although seclusion often made effective management difficult. At least two-thirds of people's inheritance went according to fixed rules, elaborated from Qur'anic rules in different ways by different schools of Islamic law. In general, women received half the share of men. Shi'a law allowed daughters without brothers to inherit all property, while in Sunni law they generally could not inherit more than half. Despite provision for female inheritance in all schools of Islamic law, it was common for women not to inherit, especially land. From the family point of view this seemed not unfair, because girls married out of the family into another family, and hence might take away part of the family property when they married and inherited. Hence legal and customary fictions were often found to keep a girl from inheriting; for example, in exchange for her inheritance rights, a girl or woman might be

guaranteed sustenance by her natal family in case of divorce or widowhood. There also developed early in Islamic civilization the institution of *waqf*, or inalienable endowment, which was sometimes used to endow one's descendants in the male line, thus avoiding both the division of property and the female inheritance demanded by the ordinary rules of succession. A minority of *waqf*, however, were used to benefit women.

As in a number of societies, particularly those near the Mediterranean, the code of honor and shame was, and often still is, very important. A family's honor was considered to rest primarily in the purity of its girls and women, and shame lay in any possible aspersions being cast on that purity. Purity meant not only virginity for girls and fidelity for wives, but also the impossibility that anyone should think or say that the virginity or fidelity stood in doubt. Ideally neither girl nor wife should talk with a man who was other than a close relative forbidden as a marriage partner (father, brother, and so forth). This ideal of segregation from gossip-provoking situations obviously encouraged veiling and seclusion for the families that could afford it. Some wealthy families could (and in some parts of the world still can) keep women from going out of the house except occasionally, fully covered, to see close relatives. In families without much wealth women might have to have occasional business interaction with unrelated men, but if so they were to keep talk to a minimum and their eyes down. Although there is not yet anything like a complete history of Islamic dress, it appears that in the Middle East, which had known veiling before the Muslims adopted it, outdoor dress for the upper classes usually included a facial veil and loosely covered the rest of the body. Working women, as well as rural and tribal women, who also had to work outdoors, usually had no facial veil, and their head covering varied by time and area. The largest portion of women's lives was passed not in the outdoors, where they might have to veil and which was the only place where non-Muslim men ever saw them, but rather inside their own home or a home they were visiting. Here is where they wore, and sometimes showed off, their more important clothing and ornaments, which varied greatly over time and place. Current western reporters who are surprised that Saudi or Iranian women may wear tight jeans or miniskirts below their veils are really reporting nothing new, as Muslim women at home have long followed current fashions that often have originated far away.

The code of honor and shame also encouraged early marriage,

since leaving a girl unmarried after puberty was thought to create the danger that she might be violated and even impregnated, which was the greatest possible shame for the family. Mothers often played a greater role than fathers in finding a suitable groom, and matchmakers were often brought in. Paternal cousin marriage was favored, partly because it raised fewer problems of females taking family property out of the family. Despite this preference, only a minority of marriages today, and probably in the past, involved paternal first cousins, and even when they are said to have done so, investigation often shows that they linked more distant relatives. This has probably kept the institution from creating major genetic problems, and today many educated Muslims oppose first-cousin marriage for reasons of genetic inheritance.

Parental arrangement and the sizable male dower probably acted to discourage men from divorcing as freely as Islamic law permitted. Often the male dower was divided into two parts, the second of which went to the wife upon divorce or death of the husband. The wife was also entitled to support during the three-month period after the husband pronounced divorce, during which she could not remarry, as she might be pregnant. After that, however, as in most traditional cultures, there was no alimony, and the divorced woman usually went to live with her natal family. Divorced or widowed women had more say regarding their subsequent marriages than they did regarding the first one. In parts of north Africa, some women called "free women" were even allowed considerable sexual freedom between marriages without this status interfering with later marriage. This situation is unusual in the Muslim world, but it and other unusual situations, generally reported by anthropologists, should be a caution against taking the strict customary rules of most Near Eastern societies as absolutes. In contemporary Oman, for example, a woman anthropologist found a married woman who was widely known to be having sexual relations with another man, who gave her gifts, and yet she was not ostracized by friends or punished by her husband, who feigned ignorance of what was going on.<sup>9</sup> There are numerous oral reports of widespread infidelity among married Yemeni women as well, and more research would certainly uncover more examples elsewhere.

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<sup>9</sup> Unni Wikan, *Behind the Veil in Arabia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

In regions that do follow a strict traditional code, however, sanctions for transgressions, based more on tradition than on Islamic law, can be severe. A girl who is seduced may be killed by her brother, as may a wife caught in adultery by her husband. Otherwise, however, Islamic legal standards of proof for adultery are so severe as to be impossible to meet. As in much of Mediterranean Europe until recently, it is widely assumed that a girl and a man alone can be doing only one thing, and any unauthorized male-female contact may be punished. Traditional ideology assumes that a woman who behaves with other than traditional modesty arouses uncontrollable urges in men. Significantly, she is a cause of *fitna* or serious trouble, a word that also means rebellion or civil war.

In essence, like many other societies, most Islamic societies reserve to the state control over the public sphere, while fathers, husbands, and brothers are given control in the family, provided that they do not openly flout the Islamic legal provisions covering this sphere.

Despite this situation of formal and legal male dominance, however, women in the Muslim world as elsewhere could and did follow a number of conscious or unconscious strategies to increase their own sphere of power and control. Although men were supposed to control the quantity of sex (and their control was not as absolute as the law suggested), women could exercise much control over its quality and the amount of pleasure the man could have. Women controlled cooking, which many men found important, and they could keep the home neat or messy, noisy or tranquil, attractive or unattractive to the husband's visitors. Throughout Islamic history there are many examples of rulers who were ruled by their wives or mothers, and the same thing undoubtedly happened in many private homes. More equal husband-wife relations were also known.

Too little primary research has been done to provide a coherent history of how women fared over time in the Islamic Middle East. Here we can make only a few generalizations. For one, women seem to have enjoyed generally higher positions and more public roles just before the rise of Islam and in the early Islamic period than they did thereafter. The activities of Khadija and Xisha in the public sphere have been mentioned. It was during the first centuries of Islam that there were the most women scholars, some of whom were also teachers whose lessons might be followed by men. Women who passed on traditions from the Prophet

and from notable women mystics, whose poetry and influence extended to both sexes, were concentrated, at least as far as the Middle East is concerned, in the early Islamic centuries. The gradual decline in public roles of women probably occurred not because of the influence of Islam as such, but because of its interaction with Middle Eastern society and customs.

Women's positions tended to become limited in times of economic contraction. At the top, however, in empires where the royal heirs became weaker over time, sons of the sultans were more prone to be subject to harem influences, whether of women, eunuchs, or both. The classic, but not only, example, is the Ottoman empire, which ruled large territories from the fourteenth through the early twentieth centuries. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, potential heirs to the throne, instead of being given military or political roles that could make them a threat to the center, were immured in the harem. Here both women and eunuchs often influenced them greatly, and often continued to do so after they came to the throne without having experienced the outside world. The phrase and negative concept of "harem rule" to characterize this situation is surely in need of revisionist historians, though it is probably true that sultans with experience of administration and the world had a better basis to rule well than those who did not. The most significant point about the frequent influence of queens and queen mothers may be to suggest how possible it was at all levels of society for women to exercise much more power than cultural norms would sanctify.

The common western view of the harem has little relation to reality. The word "harem" in Arabic has no sexy connotations, but means the part of the house "forbidden" to men who are not close relatives. In most cases it was not polygamous and had no slaves or concubines. It was the area where the indoor work of the family was chiefly planned and carried on, usually under the supervision of the wife of the eldest male. In polygamous households and those with many servants and slaves, the work and activities of the harem were more complex, but it was not the den of idleness and voluptuousness depicted from the imaginations of western painters. (Westerners who saw photographs of nineteenth- or twentieth-century harem quarters were disappointed to find the clothing and furniture to be of Victorian taste and propriety rather than having any resemblance to the paintings of Delacroix.)

Little study has been done on female slaves. We may note that slavery in Islam was not characterized by heavy gang labor but

was overwhelmingly either household slavery or military slavery. Muslims could not be enslaved, and so slaves were either war captives or were purchased from among non-Muslims. Slaves were often sexually subject to their masters. Unlike the situation in the medieval west, their children were born free. Some slaves rose very high, even to the status of queens, and many were freed by their masters or mistresses. Despite the fact that the institution of slavery was much less onerous than it was in, say, the new world, it still meant a lack of freedom and sexual subjugation that was more severe than that experienced by free women. Slaves were often trained to be singers and dancers—professions that were not quite respectable in the Islamic world or in many other traditional areas.

Some variation in the condition and habits of many women occurred with the growth of nomadism in the Muslim world from the eleventh century on, partly via Turkish and other invasions. In nomadic societies women tend to have a stronger role than in the settled Middle East, and they rarely veil. Many powerful women had political roles under the Seljuq and Mongol dynasties in medieval Iran—dynasties of nomadic origin. Although much more study needs to be done, it seems that, at least for a time after they took power, nomadic groups often allowed women to go unveiled, even in town, and to be seen publicly more than before. The Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501–1722), which made Shi'ism Iran's state religion for the first time, came in supported by the military backing of large Turkic nomadic groups, and early Safavid miniatures are full of unveiled women. In addition, Italian travelers to Iran at this time and during earlier nomadic rule wrote that women were shockingly exposed! By late Safavid times, however, the influence of the religious classes had grown, and women were increasingly veiled and secluded in town. Throughout Islamic history, however, only part of the urban classes were veiled and secluded, while rural and nomadic women, who made up the majority of the population, were not. Veiling of some rural women, in imitation of middle-class town ways and as a sign of status and freedom from labor, appears to be overwhelmingly a recent phenomenon.

In the past century, as veiling and seclusion were rejected by many modernists and feminists, and as local nationalisms grew, those who opposed veiling ascribed it to a different nationality from their own, and this continues today. Many Arabs say veiling was imposed on them when they became subject to the Ottoman

Turks. In fact, the early nomadic Turks did not veil, and if a large proportion of Ottomans in Arab lands veiled, it was mainly because the ruling classes veiled, not because Turks in particular did. There is abundant evidence that widespread Arab veiling preceded the Ottomans. Iranian modernists often blame veiling on Arabs, and Turks on Arabs or Persians. As noted above, veiling and seclusion are ancient Middle Eastern customs, not originated by Islam or by any of the current language groups in the Middle East, but long practiced by all of them.

Some writers tend to deny the significance of veiling, treating it almost as a simple fashion option, which may be a reaction to frequent western exaggerations of its significance. Veiling or seclusion do not prevent women from living varied and significant lives, but they *are* signs and parts of a system in which males are dominant and in which it is believed that females must be controlled by a male household head if sexual and social anarchy are not to threaten. This system affects even those, such as rural women, who are not veiled or secluded. They too must always be modest and circumspect when males are around, and they are subject to sanctions even for innocent transgressions of the rules.

There is good evidence that even traditionally socialized women do not completely accept the male rules of the game, however. From both Yemen and Iran there are eyewitness reports of women's theater games in which male arrogance and other male cultural qualities are mercilessly mocked, and such mockery surely existed in the past. Women's independent attitudes are also expressed in folktales, popular poetry, and women's independent religious ceremonies.<sup>10</sup> Female leaders of women's religious ceremonies are formalized in Shi'a Islam, but are also important among the Sunni, as are women saints, shrines, pilgrimages, and ceremonies, all of which express women's initiative.

#### IV

The resistance of Muslim societies to modern or western-inspired changes in women's status is tied to belief in the sacred position of the Qur'an and of holy law. But this is not the whole story. For one thing, we have seen how Qur'anic provisions are often ignored

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<sup>10</sup> See Lila Abu-Luglod, *Veiled Sentiments* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), and the articles by Daisy Hilse Dwyer and Erika Friedl in Beck and Keddie, eds. (see n. 2 above).

or evaded when they do not fit needs or desires. Also, whole categories of Islamic law have been made inoperative in various countries at a stroke of the pen in the past two centuries without arousing significant resistance. The last area of law to be left to the Islamic courts, after criminal and civil law were westernized, was personal status law, which included the position of women. This is an area that many religious traditions have held onto tenaciously—witness the Catholic church on divorce and abortion—and also one that many governments hesitate to get into, as they prefer to leave social control to patriarchal structures. But, more than that, it is an area that felt the greatest resistance to the wholesale invasion by the west of the Middle East in the past two centuries.

If the close-knit family group, and especially its dominant males, felt a need to guard women from the stares of strangers, how much more was this need felt by many when the strangers were European Christians, for centuries the chief infidel enemies of the Muslims. Nada Tomiche has noted that with the French in Egypt after Napoleon's invasion, veiling increased as a reaction to the presence of Europeans, and later in Algeria some of the same reaction was seen.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Muslims became westernized and adopted western or western-influenced modes of thought. However, these westernized people tended to come from those in the middle and upper classes who had profitable contacts with westerners in trade, politics, and society. For larger if less visible and articulate groups, westernization was less popular. The petite bourgeoisie and bazaar traders in particular tended to support traditional Islamic ways. Juan Cole has traced this process in Egypt, where the modernizing reformers and liberals tended to come from, and appeal to, the higher social classes, while those who defended veiling and traditional customs came from and appealed to the traditional petite bourgeoisie.<sup>12</sup> Just as the upper classes were in politico-economic as well as ideological alliance with Westerners, so the traditional petit bourgeois classes were in competition with larger-scale western trade and manufacture,

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<sup>11</sup> Nada Tomiche, "The Situation of Egyptian Women in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East*, ed. W. R. Polk and R. L. Chambers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> Juan R. Cole, "Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1981): 387-407.

and tended to reject western ways partly out of a desire to defend their own economic and social position. In a sense women were (and are) partly used in a political and ideological game, which was really more about general politico-ideological questions, including colonial and semicolonial relations, than it was about women as such. It is striking how tenaciously the petite bourgeoisie in nearly all Middle Eastern countries stuck to essentially traditional positions on women. Many women from the petite bourgeoisie and popular classes also prefer the old ways to being thrown into the market in unpleasant and low-paying jobs. Muslim rearing in the notion that women who appear publicly and in western dress are semi-prostitutes could only be reversed in environments where people had much access to western ways and also found these ways directly helpful. Also, we may guess that upper-class men had less impetus to dominate their wives than did petit bourgeois men, both because they had servants who carried out domestic tasks, leaving time for wives and daughters to undertake educational and vocational activities, and because upper-class men had various people they could dominate, while most petit bourgeois and lower-class men did not. As noted, women from the latter classes might also prefer the old ways.

Within the parameters of different class positions, there were in most Muslim countries nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideological and political battles and activities concerning women's rights, which for many decades, until very recently, resulted in broadening those rights. The names that have been most associated with the earliest struggles for women's rights are those of male intellectuals and political figures, but from the beginning there were women who worked to broaden the scope of their rights and activities. Women's activities and organizations became public and fought for women's rights and education, especially in the twentieth century." However, as recent Islamist trends have underlined, the majority of men and women were not involved in movements or trends favoring women's rights. Mod-

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<sup>13</sup> On twentieth-century feminist movements see Leila Ahmed, "Feminism and Feminist Movements in the Middle East, A Preliminary Exploration: Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen," *Women's Studies International Forum* 5 (1982): 153-68; Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran* (New York: Praeger, 1982); Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh, eds., *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran* (London: Zed, 1982); and Margot Badran, "Dual Liberation: Feminism and Nationalism in Egypt, 1870s-1925," *Feminist Issues* (1988): 15-34.

ernization changed the position of many women for the better, but many poorer women suffered from the economic effects of modernization, as they were often forced to work in unhealthy and ill-paying positions and were removed from the social security of rural life.

Reformers on the question of women's rights had, from the first, to try to meet questions raised by the Qur'an and the holy law. Although a few, and notably the radical reforming Turkish ruler, Ataturk, took a secular position and legislated substantial legal equality for women on the basis of European, and not Islamic, law, this was rare. Far more widespread have been modernist or reformist interpretations of the Qur'an, associated with the early Egyptian modernists Muhammad 'Ahduh and Qasim Amin and many other male and female writers down to the present day. Attachment to the Qur'an and Islamic law is strong for most Muslims not only because of the sacred nature of these texts, but also as a point of identity in the face of western cultural onslaughts, which have been especially pervasive in the Middle East. There was and is a strong impetus to ground one's arguments in Islam, even for many who are privately secularists.

Modernist arguments are variable, but they display some common features. One such feature is to say that the Qur'an has more than one meaning (an old view), and that its literal prescriptions were designed for its own times, with later reforms suggested by Qur'anic phrases as interpreted by the modernists. An allied argument is to stress the "spirit of the Qur'an" and to say that the Qur'an is egalitarian (largely true) and favors human rights, and that these general principles were meant to be extended to women's rights. There is also extensive reinterpretation of certain verses and passages. The Qur'an says that men can marry up to four wives if they can treat the wives equally, and later in the same chapter it says that no matter how hard they try, men will not be able to treat wives equally. Modernists maintain that this means that the Qur'an was against polygamy, since the conditions it lays down as requirements for polygamy are, it says, impossible to meet. Various passages are interpreted to mean male-female equality, and in fact the Qur'an does refer to the equality of men and women as believers, and sometimes explicitly addresses both men and women.

The reformists tend, both on the issue of women and on other questions, to refer to the earliest sources—the Qur'an and traditions about Muhammad—and to reject later interpretation. This

allows them to call for radical reforms in Islamic law, which is seen, with justice, as more patriarchal than is the Qur'an. If the Qur'an is reinterpreted, law should similarly be reshaped. A reinterpreted Qur'an could bring restrictions on, or an end to, polygamy, as well as an improvement in women's property rights and the like. An easier form of divorce for women (*khul'*), dating back to the time of Muhammad, has received new emphasis.

These arguments were put forth by men and women against the background of a rapidly changing economy and society that had entered into new relations with the west. As in the west, the rise of capitalism and of new paid-job categories created new positions on the labor market for women, who had always worked in the nomadic, rural, and domestic economies. In the Middle East the early demand was especially for nurses, midwives, doctors for women, and for teachers. Demand spread to low-paid factory work and to white-collar jobs. As in other countries, the development of capitalist relations harmed some women and helped others. Putting some women in the paid labor force could mean changing rules and ideals about sexual segregation, although segregation rules often continued. Wealthier families, in contact with western men and women, saw the advantages in the modern world of women's education and participation in the wider, non-sexually segregated world. Women's education was advocated by reformists both to improve and modernize child rearing and to prepare some women for jobs. The first arguments stressed the need to educate women so their sons would be raised well, but women and men soon went on to argue for women's rights. Although steps toward more women's education, jobs, and freedom met some resistance, until recently the movement was almost entirely in the direction of greater equality for women.

Among the steps that deserve mention are the creation and expansion of women's schools and women's or mixed universities in almost every Muslim country, the opening of public-sphere jobs to women, and some reforms in laws regarding women almost everywhere. The most radical reforms were those of the 1920s in Turkey, where Atatürk took the still unique path of ignoring Muslim law and adopting western codes that outlawed polygamy and created substantial legal equality for women. Women got the vote in Turkey before they did in France or Italy. Turkey was able to move so radically partly because of a long contact with the west and experience of gradual reform, partly because the Islamic establishment was discredited there in the post-World War I

period, and partly because of the huge popularity of Ataturk, a military leader who had taken territory back from western powers—something no other Middle Eastern leader had done. The next most radical situations, apart from east bloc countries, are found in Tunisia and Marxist South Yemen. In Tunisia, Bourguiba's Personal Status Code of 1956 outlawed polygamy on Muslim reformist grounds and created substantial legal equality for women, while still retaining certain Islamic features and a few special rights for men. In South Yemen, polygamy is allowed in a very few circumstances, but the family law is otherwise egalitarian, and women's organizations are encouraged to carry out education and propaganda for it.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere legal reform has been more limited, but it is still very significant in most Muslim countries. Despite all the Islamist agitation, there has been very little retreat in women's reformed legal rights except in Iran and, on a few matters, in Pakistan, which thus far retains its main postindependence reforms. Even in Iran, all marriage contracts retain major features of the prerevolutionary reformist Family Protection Act.<sup>15</sup>

The normal form of legal change outside Turkey, Tunisia, and South Yemen is to place restrictions on divorce, polygamy, and age of marriage, often by finding Islamic precedents, and often by forcing men to petition courts for divorce or polygamy. All this follows a general modern trend of putting personal and family matters increasingly under state control and lessening the power of Islamic courts. Nearly all reforms, however, have been presented as Islamic, and Islamic courts generally retain some power.

This trend toward reform, however, which occurred mainly after World War I, was simultaneous with other changes, especially since World War II, that helped create an Islamist movement in our own time. Among these changes I will stress three: (1)

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<sup>14</sup> "Maxine Molyneux, "Legal Reform and Socialist Revolution in Democratic Yemen: Women and the Family," *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 13 (1985):1 47-72.

<sup>15</sup> This information is from Golnar Mehran, who also gave me a copy of the contract. Among the "modern" provisions in the Family Protection Act are: in case of male-initiated divorce, the husband must transfer half the property he earned during the marriage to the wife; the husband empowers the wife to obtain a certificate of incompatibility and divorce herself "in the instances provided by Article 8 of the Family Protection Law," including unbearable misconduct, dangerous illness, insanity, conviction to five or more years imprisonment, addiction, desertion, infertility, six months' disappearance, and unsuitable employment.

the growing cultural gap between the westernized elite and the majority of the population; (2) the continued growth of western cultural, economic, and political influence and of the power of Israel; and (3) socioeconomic dislocations resulting from rapid urbanization, oil-backed modernization, and growing income distribution gaps.

The gap between the elite and the masses has led me to speak of two cultures with regard to Iran, and the same phenomenon may be seen elsewhere. The elite cultures tend to be highly western-oriented, with young people getting a western or western-style education, and having very little contact with the traditional bourgeoisie or the masses. Sometimes the two groups literally speak different languages, as is the case in much of French-speaking north Africa. The popular classes identify more with Islam than do the elite. Islamic revival is especially strong for students from rural or petit bourgeois backgrounds who succeed in entering universities but are highly alienated.

To speak of the growth of western economic, political, and especially cultural influence may seem a paradox in a period of decolonization, but it is broadly true. There are far more westerners in most Muslim countries than there were in colonial times, and they enter more crucially into increasing areas of the economy. Most important to the Islamist phenomenon, western cultural influence is pervasive—in clothing styles, consumption articles, television, films, music, and the total elite culture. Although some of these are items of choice, the backlash of rejection of western cultural dominance in favor of indigenous tradition is not surprising. In addition, Israel is widely seen as a western-supported bastion of neocolonialism, which brings further reactions against pro-western leaders and western ways.

Socioeconomic dislocations, reinforced by first the rise, and then the decline, in oil income, include very rapid urbanization, opportunities for the rich to get richer while the poor improve their condition little or not at all, the problems of resettlement of migrants into cities or abroad, the forced return of some migrants from abroad and limits on further migration, and the breakdown of family ties and accustomed rural ways. Here again, Islamism provides a social cement that appears familiar in the face of these new problems.

Another important factor in the Islamic revival is disillusionment with postcolonial governments that generally had a nationalist and westernizing, not Islamic, ideology. These included the

governments of the Pahlavis in Iran, of Sadat in Egypt, and of Bourguiba in Tunisia. In this situation nationalist and western-style ideologies were discredited among many, who were attracted instead by new visions of Islam that had major implications for the position of women. Islam had the advantage of familiarity on the one hand and lack of recent rule, which could have discredited it, on the other.

Islamic revivalist movements have become frequent ever since the first important western economic impact in the Muslim world in the eighteenth century. Contemporary ideological Islamic revivalism, however, traces its roots to the interwar period, especially with the Egyptian Muslim Brethren, founded in 1928, and the work of Maududi for the Islamic government in Muslim India. Islamist groups grew after World War II, especially after the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel and the 1973 oil price rise, with its resultant economic dislocations.

Contemporary Islamism generally advocates Islamic states and Islamic law. In this it is more innovative than it seems, since, after the first four caliphs, Islam was in fact largely separated from rule, and Islamic law has not been applied in a thorough, much less codified and centralized way. So what is really demanded is a novel and modern centralized theocracy. Modern economic and technological means are accepted, although often with Islamic names.

Islamist movements are populist in their appeal, stressing the defense of the oppressed and the socially egalitarian nature of the Qur'an. Most Islamic revivalists are far from egalitarian about women, however, and they take what they see as the Islamization of women's position as a touchstone of being Islamic. This is in part because matters affecting women make up one of the few legislative areas contained in the Qur'an, and also because a return to what the Islamists see as Qur'anic injunctions on dress, polygamy, adultery, and so forth is a highly visible way to show one is a good Muslim. Dress is a particularly visible symbol of Islamist beliefs, and one might say that the dress adopted by Islamist women is almost as important as a badge of ideology as it is a means to modesty or seclusion. This shows up in the fact that Islamist women are not secluded from the world but are heavily concentrated among students and young working women, and they are also engaged in political activity. Further, the dress of most Islamist women is not traditional; this is true of the smocks, jeans, and running shoes of the Iranian leftist Islamic

Mujahedin-e Khalq, of the long dresses and scarves of Tunisia's Islamists, and of the fitted sarongs and cowls (both often brightly colored) in southeast Asia.

There is, however, separation of the sexes among Islamists when they study, gather, or demonstrate. This is part of a widespread Islamist ideology that can be stated, in terms familiar to the American past, as a separate but equal position regarding women. Few of the Islamists I have read and talked to around the world speak of inferior capacities or positions for women. They insist that men and women are equal but have been made with different capacities, according to their different roles. They go on to stress the dignity of child rearing without, in general, denying women the possibility of working, provided it does not interfere with child rearing. Practices in the Qur'an and Islamic law that are unequal are justified as being based in men's and women's different natures and needs. Polygamy is upheld as better than visiting prostitutes and keeping mistresses, which are taken to be typical of the west but not of the Islamic world, and early marriage is seen as preferable to western-style teenage promiscuity. (Western problems in such areas as teenage pregnancies and drugs helped turn many Muslims back to a traditional morality, and western dress and habits are shocking to many strict Muslims.) As in the former U.S. Supreme Court's separate-but-equal doctrine for blacks, however, separation in fact means inferior rights for women—whether in education, work, or family life.

Leading Islamists have usually been men with westernized, or partly westernized, educations, and to an extent this is still true. But a new phase began with the Iranian revolution, which was led, for reasons tied to the independence and organization of the clergy in Shi'i Iran, by clerics with a traditional Islamic education. These men were less inclined to compromise on questions concerning women's status than, say, men like the secularly educated leaders of Tunisia's main Islamist group, the Islamic Tendency Movement. Iran's reversal of reforms regarding women cannot be taken as typical of governments calling themselves Islamic: Saudi Arabia has in practice liberalized its strict position, especially regarding women's education and work; Libya has made some progress toward equality; and Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan was able to put through and enforce few inegalitarian measures in the face of an active women's opposition. In Pakistan and Egypt, Islamist moves against women's rights have mobilized women to effective resistance.

Islamist movements have had considerable appeal for women, especially among students and the popular or traditional classes. In Iran, more women actively supported Khomeini than opposed him. Elsewhere Islamist women are also numerous and well organized. The Islamists tend to encourage female activism and tend not to oppose women's rights on matters not covered by the Qur'an, such as education, jobs (provided the proper distance from men is kept), or the right to vote. Many women have chosen to wear Islamic dress, and, on questioning, one of the main reasons they give is that it keeps men from bothering them in the streets or in social relations. Islamic dress is once again a badge—here saying that this is a serious respectable woman who should not be touched or annoyed. Unfortunately, male socialization in many parts of the world has not taught that women in general should not be touched or annoyed.

Beyond the question of dress, however, there are other aspects of Islamism that appeal to many women. For one thing, Islamists in many countries have women's circles, organizations, or discussion groups where women are encouraged to speak up and discuss important matters in all-woman surroundings where they need not be intimidated by men. They are also encouraged to undertake religio-political propaganda activities. Girls and women whose parents or husbands would not let them out for other reasons will allow them to attend Islamist meetings or go to the mosque, and some, I was informed in Tunisia, can even reject proposed marriage partners on the grounds they are not good Muslims. Respect for, and protection of, women are appealing parts of Islamism for some.

In northern Nigeria in 1985 I attended a three-day founding meeting of a Muslim women's group, and it was clear from the stress on education, work, and coming out of seclusion that the new Muslims are advocating greater freedom than many women now have. Also, the legal reforms in Muslim countries often affected only, or chiefly, the elite, so that for most women Islamism may not mean a notable step back from reforms.

Those who *have* experienced benefits suffer under Islamist rule. Where Islamists are out of power they are often ambiguous about their position on women, thus facilitating their appeal to women. Thus, the leader of Tunisia's main Islamist movement told me that the Personal Status Code should be amended to increase men's rights, while a young woman in the same movement told me that the code was patriarchal and needed revision. Be-

cause the official group position until 1988 was that the code needed amending, either position could be accommodated, though it is clear that male leaders and members want the code made more "Islamic" and favorable to men.<sup>16</sup>

An important development I saw in travels through the Muslim world was in Pakistan, where many oppositional women and men are undertaking more thorough study than before of the Qur'an and of Islamic laws and traditions so as to find better Islamic bases for an egalitarian position. Under Zia, they argued that they were more in tune with that Islamic spirit than the government. Benazir Bhutto has spoken of the egalitarian nature of Islam as regards the sexes, and though this raises doubts among some westerners, it has some basis as well as a real appeal. Such interpretations of Islam are no more forced than our Supreme Court's varying interpretations of the U.S. Constitution. These Pakistanis may have found a way to appeal to the masses, who have been brought up with a loyalty to Islam, more than do highly westernized liberals or Marxists. Some similar trends are found elsewhere, although there are also women's rights activists who think it is wrong to use Islamic arguments. They believe that the Qur'an and traditional Islam are overwhelmingly patriarchal, and that seeking Islamic arguments compromises the fight for equality. They point to Turkey as showing that only a secular solution can achieve women's rights.

There are also modernists who take more radical and novel positions regarding Islam. Among them are a recent Egyptian scholar who maintained that the legal parts of the Qur'an were intended only for the lifetime of the Prophet and have no current validity. A similar view is propounded by a small group of Sudanese, who claim that only the Meccan suras of the Qur'an (which have religious and not legal content) and not the legalistic Medinan ones have validity after the Prophet.<sup>17</sup> From an abstract viewpoint such views are tenable, as there is nothing in the Qur'an that says that its legal provisions are valid for later times. Unfortunately, there is also nothing that says that its other provisions are valid for all times, so that the grounds for distinguishing

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<sup>16</sup> See Nikki R. Keddie, "The Islamist Movement in Tunisia," *Maghreb Review* 11 (1986):2 6-39.

<sup>17</sup> For the gender-egalitarian doctrines of the underappreciated Sudanese Republican Brothers, see especially Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*, trans. Ahdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

between legal and other provisions are unclear. More important, such views are bound to be rejected by the great majority of Muslims today, although they may fare better in the future. Views that base themselves more solidly in Islamic texts, like some I have read and heard in Pakistan, seem more likely to gain a following now. There is also a feminist Pakistani theologian now essaying a more radical, feminist reinterpretation of the Qur'an. Such efforts are quite parallel to those found among Catholic feminists.

A word of caution is in order against seeing Islamist trends as necessarily continuing to be influential into the indefinite future. An Islamist like Khomeini is able to unite various kinds of discontented people, but once in power he arouses increasing discontent against himself. The other so-called Islamic governments—Saudi Arabia, Pakistan under Zia, and the late government of the Sudan—have not been supported by Islamists abroad, and at home they have contributed to disillusionment with Islamic government. In the one country where Islamists were allowed a legal party that participated in 1986 elections, Malaysia, they did very badly, even though many expected them to do well. In Egypt's 1987 elections the Muslim Brethren, who could run only on the list of other parties, did better, but they still make up a relatively small minority of Egypt's parliament. The Islamist phase of the 1970s and 1980s may certainly continue, but it seems unlikely in its current form to outlive widespread experience with so-called Islamic governments.

Another hopeful sign for women is that even now there is no general trend outside Iran toward repealing legislation favorable to women, although women's groups like those in Egypt and Pakistan have had to struggle to forestall such repeals. Also, Islamism to date has encouraged public activity by some women at the same time that it brings new problems and discrimination for other women. The struggle for women's rights in the Muslim world is far from being in general retreat, and in some places like Pakistan it has even grown under adversity. Economic realities bring women in most Muslim countries more and more into the paid labor force and the public sphere. On the other hand, the women's rights movement has been put on the defensive and has made few legal gains since the 1970s.

## V

This essay has dealt mostly with women in the Muslim Middle East, which is seen as archetypical of the Muslim world, both

because it contains mostly Arabic speakers, and also because it was the area first conquered and converted by Muslims. In fact, the great majority of the world's Muslims live outside the Middle East, mainly in south, central, east, and southeast Asia and in Africa. The three largest Muslim-majority countries by population are, in order, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and tens of millions of Muslims live in India, the Soviet Union, and China. As Muslim law and practices first developed in the Middle East, that area and its official laws and customs have come to seem normative by many Muslims. Although no comprehensive treatment can be given of the many differences between the position of Muslim women outside the Middle East and those in it, a few words should be said about some general trends.

In the Middle East and much of Pakistan, Islam was largely spread following conquest. With rare exceptions Muslim conquerors did not force religious conversion. But when conquest produced a Muslim government, there were incentives to conversion that both speeded it up and tended to encourage converts to follow a more or less Middle Eastern normative model of Islam. In the large areas of the world where Islam spread mainly peacefully, however, including black Africa and much of central, east, and southeast Asia, converts were less likely to conform to the stricter Middle Eastern model. In these regions Islam was spread largely by traders and by mystics (Sufi), neither of whom was typically concerned with strict behavior. This spread of Islam into new areas often continues today. In the areas where people learn before or soon after conversion the prescriptions and customs of orthodox Islam, they tend to conform to them, but in Africa and southeast Asia they often learn few of them. Hence, if the Muslim world as a whole is considered, restrictions on women, including veiling and seclusion, are much less notable than if only the Middle East is considered. In vast areas of the world, for example, there is nothing "Islamic" about women's dress, which is local in style. This is true of most of Asia and Africa.

Besides this generalization, one may note other points about women's greater strength in areas beyond the Middle East (not that the Middle East is lacking in strong women). Pakistan, whose culture is more south Asian than Middle Eastern, is full of powerful women in high political, educational, and cultural positions. Pakistan now has an elected woman president, and in Bangladesh the heads of the most important opposition parties are women. To

be sure, as elsewhere in Asia thus far, these women gained their position partly owing to a relationship to a deceased male leader, but in most western countries not even such a woman relative has come to be the leader of an opposition party or a government. And it is Benazir Bhutto, not her brothers, who became the political leader. Pakistan also has many active women's organizations, of which the most politically effective is the Women's Action Forum, which has campaigned with some results against the "Islamization" measures of Zia ul-Haq. Like many Muslim, including Middle Eastern, countries, Pakistan also has had women cabinet members. Variation in Muslim practice is also found in the fact that in much of Pakistan, as in parts of south and southeast Asia, it is the woman, not the man, who brings the dowry. Many women are vocal and outspoken in disagreeing with their husbands in public, and they often behave independently, even though many legal and informal restrictions and disabilities for women remain.

Veiling is exceptional outside the Middle East and is mostly seen among current Islamic revivalists. It is very rare in Indonesia, where many women wear knee-length skirts and uncovered hair, and it is almost unknown among Chinese Muslims. Many Soviet Muslims wear long skirts and scarves tied behind the head (as do many Egyptians today). Female education is somewhat better developed and more equal in southeast, central, and east Asia than in most of the Middle East. In Indonesia, for example, large numbers of Muslim women work in a great variety of paid and unpaid public jobs, including managing small businesses. In Indonesia and Malaysia, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century movement to regularize Islamic practice and reduce local variations has been influenced by Middle Eastern modernist reformists, not by fundamentalists. Islam in this region remains largely reformist and tolerant of many modern ideas. In Indonesia, going back to Dutch times, all marriage contracts have printed in them a condition that the husband cannot take a second wife without the first wife's consent—a provision that entered only later in a few Middle Eastern countries. Indonesia even contains a matrilineal Muslim area, Minangkabau, west Sumatra, where matrilineal inheritance and living arrangements have continued down to the present, and these arrangements have been only partially undermined—by the rise of an urban modern economy more than by Islamic law. Women in Minangkabau have high status and exten-

sive education and employment.<sup>18</sup> A smaller matrilineal Muslim area is found in south Asia.

The picture in the Middle East itself varies from fundamental reform to conservatism. The most radical early reforms were achieved within the Middle East, in Turkey, and although some of the Turkish reforms are under Islamist attack, none has yet been rescinded. The next wave of radical reforms came in communist-ruled countries, beginning in Soviet central Asia, where Russian-imposed radical reforms (unlike reforms imposed by the local hero, Atatürk) brought on a male backlash and a temporary retreat. Similar reforms leading to virtual legal equality for women came in Muslim-majority Albania and in Yugoslavia, with its large Muslim minority. Most dramatic were the postindependence reforms in Arabic-speaking, Marxist-ruled South Yemen. Countries outside the Middle East, like those within it, have a varied record of reform.

There has as yet been almost no reversal anywhere except in Iran of reforms in women's conditions, although it is also true that there have been few legal advances in the past decade. In the current phase of Islamist strength, legal advances are difficult, but as more and more women are educated, are entering the paid labor force, and are increasingly forming organizations and standing up for their rights, hopeful changes are also occurring that are more difficult to list than are legal reforms, but which may be just as important in women's long struggle for their rights.

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<sup>18</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, "Islam and Society in Minangkabau and in the Middle East: Comparative Reflections," *Sojourn* (Singapore) 2 (1987): 1-30, and the sources cited therein.