

Islam and the Liberation of

SEPARATION OF MOSQUE AND STATE IS THE ONLY ANSWER

Women in the Middle East

Azam Kamguian

Women's status in Middle Eastern societies has aroused great interest recently. What role do Islamic ideology and practice play in the oppression of women in the region and other societies where Islam holds sway?

Few would argue that the situation of Middle Eastern women can be understood without reference to Islam. Although no two Middle Eastern countries have identical legal-religious systems, women are second-class citizens in all of them. But the position of women in the region cannot be understood without a thorough appreciation of the economic and political contexts in which they live, in addition to Islam's long-standing influence.

There are many schools of thought in this debate. One group denies that the great majority of women are any more oppressed than are non-Middle Eastern women. A second group says that oppression is real but extrinsic to Islam and the Qur'an—which, they say, intended gender equality but has been undermined by Arabic patriarchy and foreign influence.

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Among intellectuals and in the academic world, any attempt to blame Islam for women's oppression is stamped as Orientalism. Those who defend Islam against Western critiques focus on proving the “progressive” nature of the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sharia, either by denying the low status of women in Middle Eastern societies, or by attributing it to pre-Islamic traditions and the contemporary political Islamic movement.

Many feminists and academic intellectuals apologize for Islam by saying that such practices as veiling women and female genital mutilation are not restricted to Middle Eastern societies. Some say that women who wear make-up in the West are just as oppressed, but it is a

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Postmodernist, neo-colonialist kind of oppression. They say that all religions regard women as inferior. They fail to take into account that Islam is largely unrestricted by secularism and the secular states that in the West have restricted Christianity's power over women's lives. This attitude is obvious in the following words of Nawal El Saadawi:

I've noticed that many people including professors of religion and Islamic studies, pick up one verse and say that in the Qur'an, God allowed men to beat women. They don't compare it to other verses. They also don't compare the Qur'an to the Bible. If you do, you will find the Bible more oppressive to women.¹

According to El Saadawi, women in the Middle East are oppressed not because they live under the rule of Islam or belong to the East, but as a result of the patriarchal class system that has dominated the world for thousands of years. In her view, the struggle for women's civil liberties, individual freedom, and secularism have no significance. In this discourse, *patriarchy* is used as a blanket term to disguise Islam's role in the oppression of women. Every aspect of women's subordination in the Middle East is inaccurately labeled as the result of patriarchy. If Islam has no effect on women's status, why is the position of women in the Middle East worse than in any other part of the world?

ISLAMIC RESISTANCE TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Historically, Islam has resisted women's rights, secularism, and modernization. Dramatic differences between the East and non-Muslim West emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Economic and social changes, along with the impact of exposure to Western culture, gave rise to forces within Middle Eastern societies that favored changes in the condition of women. Starting in the early nineteenth century, the process of change set in motion by Western influence led to broadly positive outcomes, as mechanisms for controlling women and excluding them from major domains of activity in their society were gradually dismantled.

At first this didn't involve legal changes, but rather such things as education. Western economic penetration of the Middle East and the exposure of Middle Eastern societies to Western political thought and ideas did little to dismantle either Islamic law or the backward social institutions oppressive to women. Changes in Islamic law pertaining to women, especially changes to law set forth in the Qur'an, have met with considerable resistance. The leaders of nationalistic factions viewed any proposed changes in the status of women in society as Western intrusion into their last sphere of control. They had already seen Western inroads upon their sovereignty and their economies. Islamists saw modern values such as women's rights as a Western conspiracy accompanying the political and economic offensive and turned to their own traditions as a cultural reaction. For an early example, when Napoleon came to Egypt, the wearing of the veil increased as a reaction to the French presence.

Men were prominent in the early struggles to improve the condition of women in Islamic society, but from the beginning women, too,

were involved. For the first time in the history of Islam, the veil and other issues such as polygamy, divorce, and segregation were openly discussed in Middle Eastern society. Advocacy for women's rights became widespread in the twentieth century. Modernization further improved women's position. As women's economic and social situation improved, ideologues struggled with how to reconcile the changes with Islamic law. Women figured more prominently in public life and took a role in the history-making nation building of Turkey and Tunisia, which led to further secularization and economic modernization.

But establishment Islam and Middle Eastern governments continue to cling to the law as the cornerstone of Islamic oppression of women. That it is still preserved almost intact signals the existence of enormously powerful Islamist and traditionalist forces. Calls for reformist interpretations such as stressing the "egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an" and reshaping Sharia by reinterpreting the Qur'an mainly arose because of a rapidly changing economy and society experiencing the influence of the West. Legal reforms have targeted areas where the law was not egalitarian, such as divorce, polygamy, and marriage age. Some progress has been made: men must now justify their demand for divorce or practice of polygamy to the courts.

POLITICAL ISLAM

In recent decades the rise of political Islam has rolled back women's rights and impoverished their lives across the region. Political Islam as a political movement arose in reaction to secular and progressive liberation movements, which had heightened egalitarianism and brought about cultural and intellectual advances. The political Islamic movement started to gather real power and to spread in the 1970s. During the 1980s it was supported and nurtured by Western governments, which found it useful in Cold War conflicts and in opposing progressive movements in the region. Key features of political Islam included opposition to women's freedom and civil liberties, and to their freedom of expression in the cultural and personal domains. It supports the enforcement of brutal laws and traditions, including beheading and genocide. In Iran, the Sudan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan under the Taliban, Islamic regimes transformed societies in general and women's homes in particular into prisons. For women confinement, exclusion from many fields of work and education, and brutal treatment became the law of the land. In addition, the misogynist rhetoric of political Islam in the social sphere implicitly sanctioned male violence towards women.

SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS

At present, women throughout the region are second-class citizens, being excluded from the rights, privileges, and security that all citizens of a country should enjoy. Unjust laws, discriminatory constitutions, and biased mentalities that do not recognize women as equal citizens violate women's rights. A *national*, that is, a citizen, is defined as someone who is a native or naturalized member of a state. A national is entitled to the rights and privileges allotted to a free individual and to protection from the state. However, in no country in the Middle East or Northern Africa are women granted full citizenship; in every country they are second-class citizens. In many cases, the laws and codes of the state work to reinforce gender inequality and exclusion from nationality. The state is used to strengthen Islamic and tribal/familial control over women, making them even more dependent on these institutions. Unlike in the West, where the individual is the basic unit of the state, it is the family that is the basis of Arab states. This means that the state is primarily concerned with the protection of the family rather than the protection of the family's individual members. Within this framework, the rights of women are expressed solely in their roles as wives and mothers. State discrimination against women in the family is expressed through, among other things, unjust family

laws that deny women equal access to divorce and child custody.

Throughout the region, Arab women who marry foreigners are denied the right to extend citizenship to their husbands. Furthermore only fathers, not mothers, can independently pass citizenship to their children. In many cases, where a woman has been widowed, divorced, or abandoned, or if her husband is not a national in the country where the couple reside, her children have no access to citizenship or its rights. These rights include access to education, health care, land ownership, and inheritance. There is no such obstacle to men who wish to extend their nationality to their wives and children. This inequality not only denies women their right as citizens; it also denies children their basic rights as human beings.

If the law is designed to protect women only within their role in the family, it will fail to protect those who need protection *from* their fam-

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ilies. By failing to protect women from violence such as domestic abuse, rape, marital rape, and honor killing, the state fails to provide the rights available to a full citizen. In fact, by ignoring issues of gender-based violence and granting lenient punishments to the perpetrators of violence against women, the state actually reinforces women's exclusion from the rights of citizens.

Family laws based on Sharia frequently require women to obtain a male relative's permission to undertake activities that should be theirs by right. This increases the dependency women have on their male family members in economic, social, and legal matters. For example, in many Arab countries adult women must obtain the permission of their fathers, brothers, or husbands in order to attain a passport, travel outside of their country, start a business, receive a bank loan, open a bank account, or get married.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Given Islam's intrinsic animosity to equality between the sexes, to women's rights, and toward women's roles in society, how can the condition of women in Islamic societies be improved? The answer must be to eliminate political Islam as a precondition to any improvements in the status of women in the Middle East. The social system is based on Islamic misogyny and backwardness, and Middle Eastern women will have no cause to regret its passing.

The twenty-first century must be the century that rids itself of political Islam. I believe that this movement will begin in Iran. In Iran, women presented the first and the most effective challenge to the Islamic regime by courageously questioning the right of Islamic authority to define the conditions of their lives. The most hopeful signs and the most remarkable force for change continue to come directly from Iranian women, both in Iran and in exile.

As ever, the key to Middle Eastern women's liberation is secularism and the establishment of egalitarian political systems. Secularism has been and continues to be a prerequisite for women's liberation in the Middle East. Our objectives must be:

- the complete separation of religion from the state;
- the elimination of all religious and religiously inspired concepts

- from laws;
- definition of religion as the private affair of individuals;
- removal of references to a person's religion in laws, on identity cards, and in official papers;

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- a ban on ascribing any religion to people, whether individually or collectively, in official documents and the media;
- elimination of religion from education; and
- a ban on teaching religious subjects and dogma and on presenting purely religious interpretations of secular subjects in schools.

Why should Islam be eliminated from the operations of the state instead of modernized and reformed? If someone says that slavery, fascism, or patriarchy can become humane and modernized, I would ask them why they should not be abandoned altogether. In the view of advocates of Islamic reform, if Islam allowed a woman to go to school in a knee-length skirt or to become a judge as long as she does not speak of her sexuality, then it would be acceptable. This is not the improvement that we deserve. Attempts to modernize or reform Islam will only prolong the age-old oppression and subordination of women. Rather than modernize Islam, it must be caged, just as humanity caged Christianity two centuries ago. Islam must become subordinate to secularism and the secular state. **fi**

Note

1. Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (London: Zed Publications, 1980), p. 211.

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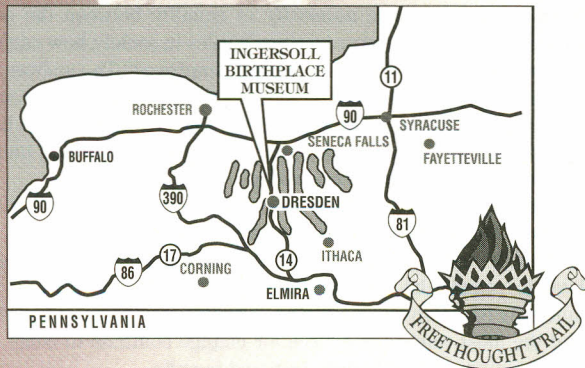
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