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TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY IN THE ARAB/MIDDLE EAST REGION: ISLAM, CULTURE, AND FEMINIST ACTIVISM

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ISLAM, CULTURE, AND FEMINIST ACTIVISM

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1. Introduction

Social indicators and gender statistics reveal that women in the Arab region are on average more disadvantaged economically, politically, and socially than are women in other regions, and certainly more so than in regions with similar income levels or at similar stages of economic development (e.g., Latin America, Southeast Asia, East Asia). Arab women's share of the formal non-agricultural labour force is relatively small, as is their share of earned income. Given the region's oil wealth and urbanization, literacy and educational attainment rates are comparatively low, especially for the adult female population. Women also are under-represented in governance and decision-making positions. All Arab countries have in place family laws – also known as personal status codes – that confer upon women the status of dependent and minor with respect to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Because of these family laws, states that have signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women have done so with significant reservations. Although the sexual division of labour operates in varying degrees in most of the world, it is particularly resilient in the Arab countries. Women remain associated primarily with their family roles, and a kind of "patriarchal gender contract" prevails across the region. The cumulative effect is gender-based discrimination and second-class citizenship for women, albeit in varying degrees across the countries of the region.

At the same time, since at least the early 1980s, issues pertaining to women and the family have been highly politicised, partly due to with Islam's cultural and political revival. One manifestation has been the re-emergence or expansion of *hijab* (Islamic dress, or veiling) in countries such as Egypt, which led to spirited debates among feminists in the 1980s and 1990s concerning the meaning of this

phenomenon.[1] Another was the stricter application of Muslim family laws by the state, partly to placate Islamist movements or revive state legitimacy. Islamic revival raised questions not only about women's rights but also about human rights. In contradistinction to "Western" conceptions of women's rights and human rights (with their emphasis on individual autonomy, choice, agency, and rights), the idea of "Islamic" women's rights and human rights has been advanced, with an emphasis on respect for family, religion, and community.[2]

The distinctive pattern of gender inequality and women's marginalization from economic and political life in the Arab region raises several sets of questions. First, what factors explain this state of affairs? To what extent are Islam and Arab culture implicated? What is the role of factors such as patriarchal social structures, the regional oil economy, authoritarian states, and the strength of Islamist movements? Second, despite the fact that all Arab countries are governed to some extent by Islamic laws and norms and all are part of what used to be called the "Arab nation", what differences can be observed in gender norms and relations, and what explains these differences? Third, what is the potential for a progressive interpretation of Islam that is in line with the advancement of women and the promotion of gender equality and women's rights? Fourth, how have Arab states responded to feminist demands for equality and empowerment, and what legal, policy, and discursive changes have come about as a result of women's collective action?

The Arab world has been known in part for its attachment to religious and cultural traditions, for its limited political and civil rights, and for stalled or stagnating development, whether measured by economic or social indicators. Amartya Sen argues that the central objective of development is not income growth,

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[1] In the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan, veiling is or has been compulsory, and the authorities defend it on grounds of religious imperatives and cultural practices.
[2] This has been especially the case in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

industrialization, or employment *per se*, but capabilities in a much broader sense, defined in terms of what people are actually able "to do" and "to be", or "the substantive freedoms—the capabilities—to choose a life one has reason to value" (Sen 1999: 74). Can human development be pursued in the Arab region in a way that makes possible women's advancement, human rights, and cultural freedoms?

This paper examines the relations among gender, culture, and Islam, and draws attention to the tensions that exist between concepts of cultural heritage and concepts of cultural freedoms in the Arab region and elsewhere in the Middle East. I argue that notwithstanding elements of a shared culture and shared religion, there is considerable variability in gender norms and laws in the Arab world/Middle East, and there have been significant changes over time in the position of women. In particular, I describe debates and discussions within the region pertaining to women's rights.

Following this Introduction, Part 2 offers an overview of debates and arguments pertaining to women's status in Islam and in the Arab region. I cover "culturalist" arguments, sociological perspectives, and the emerging Islamic feminist and reformist views. Part 3 provides information and data on the region's political economy, state types, legal frameworks, and gender policies, in order to put in comparative perspective the forms of disadvantage, discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion that Arab women face, and in order to show patterns and variations. Part 4 describes the contention over Muslim family law. In Part 5, I describe the women's movement, including the various types, activities, goals, and accomplishments of women's organizations, and draw attention to the similarities and differences in the discourses and political strategies of secular feminists, Muslim feminists, and Islamic feminists across the region. Women's collective action ranges from consensus-building (e.g., Jordan, Egypt) to confrontational (e.g., Algeria), and

that Arab feminism's relationship to the state also varies. State responses to feminist activism have ranged from indifferent (e.g., Palestine Authority, Lebanon) to hostile (Saudi Arabia, Egypt) to receptive (Algeria, Morocco), with a number of states now actively promoting women's rights and implementing legal reforms (Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia). Finally, the paper concludes with some reflections on the promises and limitations of Islamic feminism, and the need for a consistent body of laws, policies, and norms that draw on the region's rich history, cultural understandings, and universal standards.

2. Islam, Culture, and Gender: Contending Approaches

A longstanding "culturalist" argument – revived in recent years by Samuel Huntington – is that women's positions in the Muslim world in general, and in the Arab region in particular, result from intrinsic properties of Islam, such as a preference for female seclusion and domesticity and male guardianship over women. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, a new wave of commentary appeared, especially in the United States, that questioned the capacity of Muslim and especially Arab countries to establish modern, democratic, secular, and gender-egalitarian social systems (e.g., Landes and Landes 2001; Huntington 2002; Fukuyama 2002; Lewis 2002).

Feminists and those working in the field of women and development have long been concerned about the status of women in Muslim societies in general and in Arab countries in particular. Their perspectives on the issues – while contrary to the assumptions of orientalists and Islamists that I will discuss below – nonetheless often share a focus on cultural and religious norms. In the 1970s and 1980s, a large literature linked the high rates of fertility, low literacy, maternal mortality and limited

labor force participation observed in Muslim countries to the low status of women. This lower status was, in turn, attributed to the prevalence of Islamic law and norms in Muslim societies. It was argued that due to the continued importance of values such as family honor and modesty, women's participation in nonagricultural or paid labor carried with it a social stigma, and gainful employment was not perceived as part of women's role.[3] More recently, feminist scholars have pointed out that Islamic patriarchy is evident in the reluctance of Muslim states to sign the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) without reservations. Most of the reservations pertain to women's equality within the family (Al-Raida 1998; Connors 1996; Mayer 1995).[4]

Since the 1980s, the subject of women in the Muslim world has been tied to the larger issue of Islam's cultural and political reassertion. In particular, the emergence of Islamist movements in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and parts of Africa and southeast Asia has led to spirited and, sometimes, contentious debates about women and Islam. Critics and advocates of Islam have held sharply divergent views on this matter, producing a literature on the status of women in the Muslim world that may be categorized as either "misery research" or "dignity research." The former focuses on the oppressive aspects of Muslim women's lives, while the latter seeks to show the strength of women's positions in their families and communities. In either case, it is usually the status of women *in Islam* (rather than in actually existing societies) that is being scrutinized and debated, criticized or defended. In some of their writings, secular feminists such as Juliette Minces, Mai

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[3] In fact, most of these studies were on the Arab countries. See, for example, Youssef 1978; Beck and Keddie 1978; Mernissi 1987; Abu Nasr, Khoury and Azzam 1985. See also Sivard 1985 and Boserup 1990.
[4] Specifically, reservations pertain to Articles 2, 7, 9, 15, 16, 29 on non-discriminatory measures, political and public life, nationality, equality before the law and civil matters, including the right to choose residence and domicile, equality in marriage and family life, and arbitration between states and referral to the International Court of Justice.

Ghoussoub, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Haleh Afshar, Haideh Moghissi, and Hammed

Shahidian have described adherence to Islamic norms and laws, and often the content

of those norms and laws, as the source of women's oppression and the main

impediment to women's advancement in the Middle East and North Africa.[5] Freda

Hussein raised counterarguments based on the concept of "complementarity of the

sexes" in Islam; she also distinguished egalitarian "authentic Islam" from patriarchal

"pseudo Islam". Leila Ahmed wondered why Muslim women should be compelled

"to make the intolerable choice between religious belief and their own autonomy and

self-affirmation" (Ahmed 1986: 679). Muslim feminists Azizah al-Hibri, Riffat

Hassan, Asma Barlas, Amira Sonbol and other Western-based Islamic feminists (e.g.,

Amina Wadud-Mohsin in the United States), along with groups such as the Malaysia-

based Sisters in Islam, seek to show the egalitarian and emancipatory content of the

Qur'an, which they maintain has been hijacked by patriarchal interpretations since the

early middle ages. They deny that Islam is sexist – though they concede that aspects

of their cultures are – and seek to recuperate an anti-patriarchal Islam in favor of

women's rights, participation, and equality.[6] I will return to Islamic feminism

presently, but now I turn to an examination of what I call orientalist and Islamist

culturalist views.

Several recent studies have highlighted some distinguishing features of

Muslim societies to suggest a distinctive pattern of values and behaviour that sets the

Muslim world apart from, and sometimes in collision with, the West and/or other

regions. Many of these are culturalist arguments that emphasize the constraining

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[5] See Minces (1982) on Algeria; Ghoussoub (1988) on the Arab world; Najmabadi (1982), Afshar (1985), Moghissi (2000), and Shahidian (2003) on the Islamic Republic of Iran. The late French ethnologist Germaine Tillion, however, argued that it was not so much Islam as endogamous patrilineal arrangements that resulted in women's oppression and male domination. See Tillion (1983).
[6] Hussein 1984; Barlas 2002; Hassan 1996; Al-Hibri 1997; Majid 2002; Sonbol 2003.

impact of Islamic orthodoxy on intellectual, technological, scientific, and economic

achievement in the Muslim world and especially in the Middle East (Landes 1998;

Shayegan 1997; Viorst 1998). Cross-national research on world values has found that

countries with a higher degree of religiosity – such as Arab countries – are less likely

to be egalitarian, modernized, or democratic (Engelhart, Norris, and Welzel 2002).

Others cite the role of "petro Islam" and the damage wrought by Islamist movements

in Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, and elsewhere as principal culprits (Roy 1994;

Kepel 2002; Berman 2002). According to Samuel Huntington (1996), who is the

best-known proponent of the culturalist explanation, modernization, interdependence

and democratisation have resulted not in convergence and increased cooperation

among nations but rather growing divergence, which is likely to culminate in a clash

of civilizations. The spread of democracy to non-Western societies, Huntington

claims, provides an avenue for religious fundamentalists or indigenous cultural

movements that often embrace values far removed from those that are characteristic

of Western democracies. He is particularly concerned that the demographic surge of

the Islamic world, which he sees as a source of strength, is a threat to the West.[7]

Meanwhile, a number of arguments have been made to demonstrate that

Muslim societies are the most resistant to advancing the goal of equality between men

and women. David Landes and Stephen Landes (2001), for example, are among those

who maintain that Muslim societies have fallen behind Western societies because of

the "slow evolution of Islamic societies' treatment of women". Ronald Inglehart and

Pippa Norris (2003), too, define the cultural fault line dividing the West and the

Islamic world in terms of gender relations, the position of women, and attitudes

toward sexuality – which according to them are strong indicators of a culture of

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[7] By contrast, most political economists and sociologists who specialize on Arab countries
convincingly show that the demographic explosions of the region are sources of economic and political
vulnerability.

tolerance and egalitarianism.[8] They maintain that as younger generations in the West

have gradually become more liberal on issues of gender and sexuality, "Muslim

nations have remained the most traditional societies in the world." They further assert

that although surveys show that citizens in Muslim societies favour democracy, their

lack of "commitment to gender equality and sexual liberalization" would imply that

"democracy may not be sustainable in their societies" (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003:

65).

Some of the above-mentioned perspectives, especially that of Huntington, can

and have been challenged as orientalist (in Edward Said's sense). Nevertheless, it

does seem reasonable to posit that: 1) gender inequality and women's marginalization

has been a barrier to human development in large parts of the Muslim world,

including the Middle East and North Africa; and 2) continued resistance to women's

economic and political emancipation and their full participation in all aspects of

national life threatens to hinder many countries' future progress, whether measured in

terms of economic growth, human development, or democratisation. Empirical

research shows that women have been locked into a patriarchal family unit, which has

had economic and social costs for a number of Middle Eastern countries (Karshenas

and Moghadam 2001).

A second version of the culturalist argument is Islamist.[9] The Islamist and

orientalist versions mirror each other, in that both arguments conflate religion and

culture, essentialize and dehistoricize them, and absolutize cultural differences (or, in

Huntington's terms, "civilizational" differences). Both arguments latch on to a

particular interpretation of Islam or construct an ideal-type (typically patriarchal in

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[8] Inglehart and Norris include attitudes not only toward male-female equality but also "sexual
liberalization", or attitudes toward homosexuality, as an indicator of tolerance.
[9] I distinguish "Islamist" from "Islamic", the former being the politicised version of the religion. See
also Bassam Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics* (Palgrave 2001).

social and gender terms and orthodox in terms of doctrine) and agree that this is what "true" Islam is about. The Islamists vigorously defend it as divinely-ordained and superior to Western atheism and moral decadence, while the orientalists point to it as the reason for the Islamic world's presumed inability to modernize, democratise, establish gender equality, or permit cultural freedoms. Another perspective shared by both Islamists and orientalists is that secularism is a Western/Christian phenomenon and alien to the Middle East.[10] Those who identify most closely with Islamic law are convinced that Islam provides all the necessary rights for humankind and womankind, and that Islamic states go the farthest in establishing these rights.[11]

It may be helpful to examine more closely the Islamist discourse on religion, culture, and gender – in this case, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) of Algeria – to illustrate its rejection of contemporary human rights and women's rights discourses and standards and its implications for human development. In 1990, Cherifa Bouatta and Doria Cherifati-Merabtine (1994) analyzed forty-two articles and letters in the FIS magazine *El Mounquid* to discern images of womanhood and of Islamist women's self-representation. A critical theme running through the texts was that there was no need to address the woman question in terms of new rights because Islam established these rights fourteen centuries ago. To raise the issue of women's rights, moreover, was to imitate the West; another line of argument was that feminism is a Marxist or Jewish plot. The FIS claimed that Muslim women have rights equal to those of men—the right to education and to religious instruction; the right to respect; the right to vote; the right to employment; the right to struggle. There are also

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[10] Islamists argue that Islam is a total system and cannot be compartmentalized. Thus politics, economics, and culture must be Islamic, and secular political and legal systems are alien. This is also the position of Bernard Lewis, in for example, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (Lewis 2002).

[11] See, for example, Mutahhari 1982.This is an essential part of the Islamist argument, which I will discuss below. It is also a claim that has been made by official delegations of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Sudan at various international women's conferences.

prohibitions. According to the FIS, a woman could not be a political ruler, nor could she be a judge. Women should refuse mixed gatherings, should always appear in *hijab,* should not use cosmetics or perfume or wear clothes that reveal the female form. The maternal function was exalted and salaried work was deemed inappropriate. In the Islamist discourse of *El Mounquid,* these rights, obligations, and proscriptions were based on divine precepts and biological and psychological differences between the sexes.

Bouatta and Cherifati-Merabtine also found two "anti-models" of the non-Islamist woman in the pages of *El Mounquid*. First, the Western woman: She was depicted as a mere sexual object, a commodity, an exhibitionist, subjugated to male desires, sexually and socially exploited. The second representation was that of the Westernized Algerian woman. She was presented as deformed and a traitor: Neither a Muslim woman nor a Western woman, she was deemed to be a caricature, an alien by way of dress, language, outlook. And what do these women want, FIS asked? They want to subvert women's natural and sacred tasks; to dominate men; to marry when they want and divorce when they want; to go out and return as they wish; to travel without a chaperon or guardian; to reject male authority; to demand the abrogation of the family law, the sole juridical text based on the Shari'a; to create *fitna* (conflict) between men and women. The rights that these women want were described by the writers in *El Mounquid* as unacceptable, inconceivable, and illusory.

Bouatta and Cherifati-Merabtine were critical of the Algerian state's gender policy as well, but they argued that the feminine model projected by the Algerian *intégristes* diverged from that of the state because the official state discourse combined notions of tradition and modernity, whereas the discourse of the FIS, in its construction of a new tradition, rejected modernity and any form of pluralism. The

authors argued that the FIS adopted a homogeneous discourse and presented ideal-types of women to the detriment of real, actually existing women.

The (mis)representations of women that Bouatta and Cherifati-Merabtine described for Algeria had earlier taken place in revolutionary Iran, where Islamists argued that women had "lost honor" during the Pahlavi era. They decried the overly made-up "bourgeois dolls"—television announcers, singers, upper-class women in the professions—of the Pahlavi era and claimed that "genuine Iranian cultural identity" had been distorted by Westernization, or what they called *gharbzadegi* (literally, struck or plagued by the West). To the Iranian Islamist, the unveiled, publicly visible woman was a reflection of Western attacks on indigenous culture, and to many men of the lower middle class, the growing number of educated and employed women frightened and offended them. Such men came to regard the "modern woman" as the manifestation of Westernization and imperialist culture and a threat to their own manhood. Islamists projected the image of the noble and selfless Fatemeh—daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and consort of Imam Ali, earlier popularized by the late radical Islamic sociologist Ali Shariati—as the most appropriate model for the new Iranian womanhood (Tohidi 1994; Najmabadi 1994).

2.1 Feminist Critiques

Given such extreme views of gender, culture, and religion on the part of Islamists, it is not surprising that many Middle Eastern feminists responded with fierce critiques that singled out religious laws and cultural practices such as veiling as sources or symbols of women's oppression; they condemned Islamic fundamentalism as misogynist; and they called for secular and democratic political-legal frameworks

as the best guarantee of citizen rights.[12] At the same time, there emerged among feminists some disagreements over the implications of women's identification with Islamic resurgence, leading to debates on veiling (Hoodfar, 1993) and "feminist Orientalism" (e.g., Hammani and Rieker, 1988; Hammami 1988; Lazreg 1988). More recently, a debate has emerged on the meaning and implications of Islamic feminism. For some, it is an oxymoron and a contradictory movement that may help to strengthen Islamism and impede genuine cultural change (Moghissi 1999; Shahidian 2003), while for others it is an innovative and indigenous response to the problem of women's status (Badran 1999, Majid 2002) that is also an integral part of global feminism, although it has its limitations (Moghadam 2002).

Islamic feminism is a Koran-centred reform movement by Muslim women with the linguistic and theological knowledge to challenge patriarchal interpretations and offer alternative readings in pursuit of women's advancement and in refutation of Western stereotypes and Islamist orthodoxy alike. Islamic feminists are critical of women's legal status and social positions and agree that women are placed in subordinate positions – by law and by custom – in the family, the economy, and the polity. In particular, they are critical of the content of Muslim family laws and the ways that these laws restrict women's human rights and privilege men. And yet they vigorously disagree that Islam is implicated in this state of affairs. Their alternative argument is that Islam has been interpreted in patriarchal and often misogynistic ways over the centuries (and especially in recent decades), that Sharia law has been

[12] Perhaps understandably, given the stakes involved, the strongest critiques of culture and religion came from Iranian feminists in the 1980s. See, for example, Azari (1983), Neshat (1982), Tabari and Yeganeh (1982); more recently, see Shahidian (2003). But see also al-Khayyat (1990) on Iraq. Similarly critical views were expressed by Turkish feminists when the Islamist movement emerged in Turkey (e.g., Arat, 1990; Acar 199X). Criticisms of the Afghan Mujahidin were muted (but see Moghadam 1989), though the women of RAWA were implacable foes of the *jehadis,* and of course later, of the Taliban. In Algeria, women formed a fiercely anti-fundamentalist feminist movement with a strong secular orientation.

misunderstood and misapplied, and that both the spirit and the letter of the Koran have been distorted. Their insistence that what appears as God's law is in fact human interpretation is an audacious challenge to contemporary orthodoxy. Asma Barlas (2002), for example, argues that all texts are open to variant readings. She cites the Algerian philosopher Mohammed Arkoun, who has stated that the Koran "has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary, and psychological contexts and then been continually recontextualized in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors". She emphasizes that "in particular, we need to examine the roles of Muslim interpretive communities and states (the realm of sexual politics) in shaping religious knowledge and authority in ways that enabled patriarchal readings of the Qur'an."

Islamic feminists engage in a re-reading of the Koran and of early Islamic history to highlight the emancipatory and egalitarian spirit of the Prophet's message, the active role of women in the early years of Islam, and the ethical (rather than strictly legalistic) basis of Sharia. Islamic feminism is part of what has been variously called Islamic modernism, liberalism, and reformism – a transnational effort to marginalize patriarchal, orthodox, and aggressive forms of Islamic observance and emphasize the norms of justice, peace, and equality.[13]

Islamic feminists also should be seen as part of the growing women's movement in the Arab region. The growth of a population of educated, employed, mobile, and politically aware women (the influence of socio-demographics), as well

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[13] These non-orthodox forms of Islam are represented by, for example, the Center for Studies in Islam and Democracy, in Washington, D.C. and are often found in the publications of the Leiden-based International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, and of Sisters of Islam in Malaysia, which is affiliated with the transnational feminist network Women Living Under Muslim Laws. Among the intellectuals of liberal or progressive or reformist Islam – apart from the Islamic feminists mentioned above – are Iran's Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari, and Hassan Youssefi Eshkevari; Egypt's Hassan Hanafi and the exiled Zeid Abu Nasr; and Abdullahi An-Naim of the Sudan (and his teacher, the late Mahmoud Taha), and Chandra Muzzafar of Malaysia.

as the globalization of concepts of human rights and women's rights (the influence of world culture/world polity) has led to the formation of a women's movement consisting of women's organizations and groups of activists that utilize a variety of discursive and political strategies towards women's inclusion, equality, and empowerment, as well as overall social change. This has contributed significantly to the making of a civil society in the Arab region and also has led to some positive developments for women in some countries in recent years, including important legal changes. Islamic feminists are aware of what may be called global feminism and many have attended international women's conferences, but they are keen to make their case for women's rights in a religious idiom.

In contrast to the culturalist bias of orientalist and Islamist arguments, and in contrast to the theological concerns of Islamic feminism, a sociological perspective eschews essentialism and examines social relationships, power structures, and change. The Islamic world is too vast and differentiated for the sorts of generalizations made by both orientalists and Islamists, as even a superficial glance at countries as divergent as Senegal, Indonesia, Tunisia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia would reveal (Moghadam 2003b). Although these are Muslim-dominant countries, their political economies, cultural practices, legal frames, and gender norms differ rather significantly. Moreover, Islam is experienced, practiced, and interpreted quite differently over time and space. As the Tunisian sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (1985) has shown, although the transnational Islamic community may consider itself unified, Islam is fundamentally "plastic," inasmuch as there are various Islams—Tunisian, Iranian, Malay, Afghan, Saudi Arabian, Turkish, Nigerian, and so on. Even among Arab countries, differences in cultural practices, religious observance, and gender norms may be discerned. Veiling and gender segregation in public is

mandatory in Saudi Arabia but not in Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, or Syria. Female circumcision is practiced widely in Egypt and Sudan but hardly at all elsewhere in the Arab region (and not at all in Iran). And only in Saudi Arabia (and outside the Arab world, Iran) do religious police compel citizens to observe Islamic rituals and codes of public morality. Indeed, what are often regarded as fixed and unchanging cultural/religious practices such as polygamy, female circumcision, and veiling (which, for example, have been resolutely defended by some immigrants in Europe as their cultural right) are not practiced widely throughout the region, or are frowned upon, or are banned. Islamists of course defend these practices, but secularists and Islamic feminists and reformers are more likely to emphasize issues of choice, health, and human dignity. And social scientists are able to show that certain practices are not uniquely Islamic but are characteristic of Mediterranean or patriarchal cultures.

Despite the obvious overlaps between, and mutual influence of, religion and culture, the two must be kept analytically separate. Among other things, certain practices regarded as intrinsically Islamic are in fact, the legacy of tribal or Mediterranean or pre-Islamic Arabian cultural practices. Among these are veiling and seclusion of women, controls over women's sexuality, male privilege, son preference, cross-cousin marriages, brideprice/dower, and the honour/shame complex that underlies honour killings (see, e.g., Rapp 1975; Pitt-Riberts 1977; Peristiany 1966; Goody 1990; Tillion 1983; Hirschon 1984; Lerner 1986; Mernissi 1987). Middle Eastern countries are part of the "patriarchal belt" (Caldwell 1982) or "the belt of classic patriarchy" (Kandiyoti 1988); they also may be described as "neopatriarchal" (Sharabi 1985), although patriarchal social structures may be stronger or weaker in parts of the Middle East (Moghadam 2003a). Indeed, some of the practices in the

Arab region that are fiercely defended as part of the cultural heritage or as divinely ordained may be recognizable to the historical sociologist as patriarchal practices that have been observed cross-culturally (e.g., controls over women, arranged marriages, spatial segregation, veiling, the male breadwinner/female homemaker norm).[14]

In the Marxist-feminist version of the sociological explanation, women's positions lag behind in the Arab region/Middle East compared to other regions because of the characteristics of the regional oil economy, the rentier and authoritarian nature of Middle Eastern states, the prevalence of Muslim family laws which place women in subordinate positions, and the strength of Islamist movements in recent decades. Neither culture nor religion is static and unchanging, and Islam is neither more nor less patriarchal than the other major religions (Moghadam 2003a).

Cultural and gender changes have come about partly through long-term structural processes such as industrialization, proletarianization, and urbanization, including the expansion of education and urban employment. But some of the most profound cultural changes and changes in gender relations have come about via revolutionary processes or state-led legal reforms, such as the Kemalist revolution in Turkey, the Nasser revolution in Egypt, the Bourguiba reform of family law in Tunisia, the Shah of Iran's White Revolution, the socialist revolution of the former PDRY, the social reforms of the former Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Apart from Iran's Islamic Revolution, which can be said to have initially resulted in cultural regression and legal setbacks for women, revolutions and legal reforms in the Middle East accorded women a wider range of rights and opportunities than had been the case under customary or Islamic laws, gave

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[14] In discussing the effects of endogamy, patrilineage, kin-structures, and cross-cousin marriages in North Africa, Germaine Tillion called for a transition from "the republic of cousins" (also the title of her book) to "the republic of citizens".

them access to the public space and public sphere, and helped change perceptions and attitudes within at least some sections of the population.

Nonetheless, what the *sociology* of culture recognizes is different from the *politics* of culture. Since the 1980s, advocates of social change often have been accused of "alien" or "inauthentic" ideas, values, and discourses; in extreme cases, feminists and secularists are accused of being a sort of fifth column for imperialism or Zionism.[15] To a very great extent, the Middle East has been experiencing not only political conflicts but also cultural conflicts. Of course, "culture wars" have occurred not only in the Middle East but also in the United States and Europe, over such issues as abortion, homosexuality, pornography, public art, literary works, and immigration. In the West, contention over cultural issues have been resolved largely through democratic processes (public debates, local and national dialogues, referenda, elections) within a legal framework that guarantees the civil and political rights of citizens, including free speech and free press.[16] In the Middle East, where democratic processes are weak at best, advocates of progressive social change tackle contentious cultural issues – including those pertaining to women's rights, minority rights, and human rights –through consensus-building NGOs (a stand-in for fully-fledged social movements) and reference to global standards, conventions, and norms (e.g., the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action). As we have seen with Islamic feminists, some advocates also seek

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[15] As noted above, in Iran in the late 1970s and the 1980s, the Islamist movement deployed the epithet *gharbzadeh* – or "struck by the West" – to denigrate women who were unveiled, mixed with men, etc. In Algeria in the late 1980s and early 1990, Islamists tried to denigrate the feminist organizations by calling them *hezb-e fransé,* or the French party.

[16] Protest movements have also been instrumental in effecting legal reforms and broader cultural changes – e.g., the feminist, gay rights, and animal rights movements.

legitimacy by grounding their ideas and proposals in the language and history of Islam.

3. Gender Relations and Women's Status in the Middle East

In the Middle East, culture and religion are often conflated and are sometimes difficult even for the analyst to separate. For example, in Iran, where veiling is compulsory, the official ideology holds that "the Muslim woman is *the* Iranian woman" (Shahidian 2003: 140). Among other things, this denies freedom and identity to non-Muslim citizens (Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Bahai's) as well as to non-believers. Although the religious minorities in Iran are accorded the right to practice their own religions, in public they must behave and dress according to the "Islamic norms" legislated by the state and clerical authorities. Iranian citizens, however, tend to be more cognizant and appreciative of differences between culture and religion. For example, pre-Islamic Zoroastrian practices remain firmly entrenched in the national's cultural heritage, and the Islamist regime has found them impossible to eradicate.[17] Many within Iran's large middle class find compulsory veiling and the Islamic regime's prohibitions against parties, dancing, and women's singing to be an affront to their own cultural understandings. Possibly because the "original Iranians" were Zoroastrian and because Zoroastrian customs continue, Iranians themselves do not insist that Muslim identity and Iranian identity are one and the same.[18]

However, the idea that Arab culture and Islam are one and the same is commonly accepted in the region, and also has been argued by a number of otherwise

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[17] The Khomeini regime had initially sought to ban what it saw as pagan practices associated with the celebration of the Persian New Year (March 21), but the practices continued. In more recent years, the custom of jumping over a small bonfire on the Wednesday before the New Year (*chaharshanbeh-souri*) has been carried out more openly, and the ban is no longer enforced.

[18] On the part of the old upper middle class, a common way of denigrating the Islamic Revolution was to call it "the second Arab invasion" (*hamleye dovvom-e Arab*). Of course, this is also indicative of a type of chauvinism among a section of the population.

progressive scholars (e.g., Majid 2000). Islam emerged and expanded in the Arab

region, and it here that the Sharia manifests itself in countries' constitutions, family

laws, and penal codes – albeit in varying degrees across countries.[19] The period of

Arab nationalism and state-building saw the emergence of secular discourses of

development, national unity, and progress – including women's rights. But the 1980s

saw a discursive shift from economic and social development to the defense of culture

and religion (Moghadam 1994). The growing strength of Israel, the demise of Arab

socialism, the non-resolution of the Palestinian question, and the expansion of

Islamist movements have all helped to harden positions on cultural and religious

issues. Instead of cultural pluralism or cultural freedom there has emerged an

emphasis on cultural conformity and adherence to religious laws and norms. Leila

Ahmed recognized the dilemma this created for women when in the early 1980s she

wrote: "For the Islamic woman … there is a whole further dimension to the pressures

that bear down on her urging her to silence her criticism, remain loyal, reconcile

herself to even find virtue in the central formulation of her culture that normally she

would rebel against: the pressure that comes from being as a result of the relationship

in which Islamic society now stands in relation with the West" (Ahmed 1982: 162).

To argue that to be an Arab is to be a Muslim may be common, but it is

obviously exclusionary of non-Muslims, in particular Christian and Jewish citizens. In

recent decades in particular, the vulnerability of non-Muslim Middle Easterners – in

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[19] In the ongoing Islamic Reformation, there is a debate regarding the nature of Sharia and the authority of the current interpretations that are in place in most Muslim countries. Reformers argue that Sharia is not a fixed legal code but rather a code of ethics that is open to interpretation and flexibility, apart from the theological fundamentals. (The late Mahmoud Taha, for example, bravely argued for the abolition of Sharia, for which he was executed by the Nimeiry regime, which had introduced an extremely conservative and patriarchal form of Islamization.) They also argue that current Islamic laws which discriminate against non-Muslims and women, or judge harshly and exact brutal punishments, contravene the spirit and message of the Koran and the Prophet and the example of the early years of Islam, in particular the Medina Compact. They see no incompatibility between Islam and democracy, Islam and human rights, and Islam and women's rights, and also argue that changing norms and laws are necessary as a result of changing attitudes and conditions. The Iranian activist lawyer Shirin Ebadi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2003, has made such arguments.

the face of growing Islamist movements, application of Islamic laws, and discrimination in employment and political participation in some countries– has compelled them to emigrate to Europe, Australia or Canada. If Islamic law in its treatment of non-Muslims was far more enlightened than were European laws and practices in the middle ages and the early modern period, today's sensibilities cannot countenance the exclusion of non-Muslims from positions of leadership or even the teaching of Arabic (because Koranic verses are used), or accept that a lower value be assigned a non-Muslim compared to a Muslim when a crime has been committed and blood money is being computed. Abdullahi An-Naim (1987) urges the reform of Islamic law to conform to human rights and he is confident that equality of Muslim and non-Muslim can be found in Islamic texts and history. Asma Barlas has explained that although in contemporary interpretations of Islam, apostasy is a capital offense, this is a distortion and she insists that the true Koranic message is that there is no compulsion in religion.[20] Anouar Majid (2000) argues for a progressive Islam and a non-patriarchal Arab culture that can provide an alternative to the hegemonic, capitalistic, and "dogmatically secular" West and help create a "polycentric" world, though he is silent on cultural pluralism and the rights of minorities in the Arab region or in the Muslim world.

Certainly the status of religious minorities in the Middle East (e.g., Copts in Egypt, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is in Iran) and the need to formulate legal frameworks that consistently guarantee the equal rights of all citizens regardless of religion, sex, color, or national origin is a compelling issue. After all, if Muslim immigrants in Europe may dress as they wish, build mosques, and form their own associations as well as take part in larger societal and national institutions and

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[20] Asma Barlas, in an e-mail communication with the present author, April 2002.

practices, surely the indigenous Christians of Egypt or Iran (or Pakistan) should be able to do the same? Is it not something of a tragedy that as Europe and North America have become more multi-cultural, the Middle East has become less so?

The treatment and integration/exclusion of non-Muslim citizens and the cultural freedoms accorded them vary across the region, but in general they are based on foundational Islamic principles regarding the status of the *dhimmi.* The *dhimmi* is tolerated or respected but is never equal to the Muslim (Mayer 1999). For example, even in otherwise very liberal Tunisia, the non-Muslim widow of a Muslim may not share in her late husband's inheritance. I will return to the question of Muslim family law and its implications for gender equality, cultural change, and human development, but in the following section I draw attention to differentiation in the region, to refute notions of a fixed cultural homogeneity and uniform status of women in the Middle East.

3.1 A Socio-Economic and Political Profile of the Region

Arab women constitute a diverse and heterogeneous population, and their social positions within and across countries vary by social class, ethnicity, age, education, and urban/rural location. Other important factors that shape women's legal status and social positions are the country's social structure and stage of development, as well as the nature of the state and its economic, social, and cultural policies. There is no archetypal Arab Woman, but rather women inserted in quite diverse socioeconomic and cultural arrangements. The fertility behavior and needs of a poor peasant woman are quite different from those of a professional woman or a wealthy urbanite. The educated Saudi woman who has no need for employment, has a Filipino maid and is chauffeured by a Sri Lankan migrant worker has little in common with

the educated Moroccan woman who needs to work to augment the family income and also acquires status with a professional position. There is some overlap in cultural conceptions of gender in Morocco and Saudi Arabia, but there are also profound dissimilarities (and driving is only one of the more trivial ones). Saudi Arabia is far more conservative than Morocco in terms of what is considered appropriate for women. Women are likewise divided ideologically and politically. Some women activists have aligned themselves with liberal, social democratic, or communist organizations; others have lent their support to Islamist/fundamentalist groups. Some women reject religion as patriarchal; others wish to reclaim religion for themselves or to identify feminine aspects of it. Similarly, whereas some women reject traditions and time-honored customs, others find identity, solace, and strength in them. More research is needed to determine whether social background shapes and can predict political and ideological affiliation, but in general women's social/class positions have implications for their consciousness and activism.

Economically, the countries of the Arab region comprise oil economies poor in other resources, including population (Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE); mixed oil economies (Algeria, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria); and non-oil economies (Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Yemen). The countries are further divided into the city-states (such as Qatar and the UAE); the "desert states" (for example, Libya and Saudi Arabia); and the "normal states" (e.g., Egypt, Syria). The latter have a more diversified structure, and their resources include oil, agricultural land, and large populations. Some of the countries are rich in capital and import labor (Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia, UAE), while others are poor in capital or are middle-income countries that export labor (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen). Some countries have more-developed class structures than others; the size and significance

of the industrial working class and of the modern middle class, for example, vary across the region. There are differences in the development of skills, in the depth and scope of industrialization, in the development of infrastructure, in standards of living and welfare, and in the size of the female labor force.

Politically, the state types range from theocratic monarchy (Saudi Arabia) to secular republican (Tunisia and Turkey). Several Gulf states have no constitutions; until 1992, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had no formal constitution apart from the Koran and the Sharia, the Islamic legal code. Still, almost everywhere, religious law is elevated to civil status, and religious affiliation is a requirement of citizenship. Many Arab states have experienced legitimacy problems, which became acute in the 1980s. Political scientists have used various terms to describe the Arab states: "authoritarian-socialist" (for Algeria, Iraq, Syria), "radical Islamist" (Libya), "patriarchal-conservative" (for Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia), and "authoritarian-privatizing" (for Egypt and Tunisia). Most of these states have strong capitalistic features while some retain feudalistic features. The term "neopatriarchal state," adopted from Hisham Sharabi (1988), is a useful umbrella label for the various state types in the Middle East, especially in terms of the implications for women. In the neopatriarchal state, unlike liberal or social democratic societies, religion is bound to power and state authority; moreover, the family, rather than the individual, constitutes the universal building block of the community. The neopatriarchal state and the patriarchal family reflect and reinforce each other. Of course, in some cases, modernizing or revolutionary states have undermined patriarchal structures, or attempted to do so, through legislation aimed at weakening traditional rural landlord structures or the power of tribes.[21] But most states have been ambivalent about transforming women

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[21] This was done in different ways in Egypt, Iraq, the former PDRY, and the DRA.

and the family. They have sought the apparently contradictory goals of economic development and strengthening of the patriarchal family. The latter objective is often a bargain struck with more conservative social elements, such as religious leaders or traditional local communities.

For example, the Nasser period often has been described as "state feminist" (Hatem 1994), but Botman (1999) shows how despite Nasser-sponsored measures allowing women unprecedented access to education and employment, the regime would not address the family law. This served to reinforce patriarchal gender relations and the distinction between the public and private spheres. It also allowed the religious establishment control over a key societal institution.[22] Similarly, Jordan's monarchy mobilized among the Bedouin tribes when the new military was created after 1946; in return for their loyalty, the monarchy retained tribal law among its legal frameworks (until 1972) and permitted a version of Muslim family law and the penal code highly colored by tribal customary law (see Brand, 1998; Sonbol 2003). Among other things, Jordan's tribal-inflected laws allowed fathers absolute control over their daughters, and permitted honor crimes, a social problem that persists to this day. In post-independence socialist Algeria, a kind of political and gender compromise prevented the adoption of Muslim family law (until the early 1980s), but the practical implications of Algeria's political economy and its official pro-natalist policy was to ensure that the vast majority of Algerian women were peripheralized from the productive process (Cherifati-Merabtine 1995).[23]

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[22] On Jordan see Amawi (2000); on Kuwait see Al-Mughni and Tétreault (2000).
[23] Khalida Messaoudi, the Algerian feminist activist, former math teacher, and more recently, cabinet minister, has noted that in post-colonial Algeria, education was free but not compulsory – hence high rates of female illiteracy, especially among the other age groups. (See Messaoudi and Schemla, 1995: 30.) She also offers a fascinating description of the travails of education in Algeria during the 1970s, when the program of Arabization was first implemented through the importation of teachers from Egypt, Syria, and Iraq – not all of whom were competent in their subject-areas. See the discussions in chapters 4 and 7.

The *Arab Human Development Report 2002* underscored the Arab region's

"democracy deficit", and some years earlier Hisham Sharabi had offered the

following indictment of Arab political regimes: "the most advanced and functional

aspect of the neopatriarchal state . . . is its internal security apparatus, the *mukhabarat.*

. . . In social practice ordinary citizens not only are arbitrarily deprived of some of

their basic rights but are the virtual prisoners of the state, the objects of its capricious

and ever-present violence. . . . It is in many ways no more than a modernized version

of the traditional patriarchal sultanate" (Sharabi, 1988: 145). The 1990s saw the

beginnings of political liberalization or quasi-democratization in a number of Arab

countries. But Arab states remain authoritarian and citizen participation limited or

managed from above (Richards and Waterbury, 1996; Henry and Springborg, 2001).

This often has affected the activities of NGOs, including women's organizations.[24]

Across the Arab/Middle Eastern countries, one observes a variable mix of

religion and politics. Apart from Turkey, none of the countries has a constitutional

separation of religion and the state, but only the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi

Arabia may be deemed religious states or theocracies. Islam is not a state religion in

Syria, whose constitution provides that "freedom of religion shall be preserved, and

the state shall respect all religions and guarantee freedom of worship to all, provided

that public order is not endangered." The constitution also guarantees women "every

opportunity to participate effectively and completely in political, social, economic,

and cultural life." Turkey is the only Middle Eastern state that is officially secular, but

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[24] The Egyptian government has been especially notorious in this respect. In 1991, it shut down the
Cairo-based Arab Women's Solidarity Association (founded by Nawal Saadawi) because of AWSA's
opposition to the Gulf War; in 1999 it closed down the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies,
along with its magazine *Civil Society,* and subsequently imprisoned its founder, Saad eddin Ibrahim, on
trumped-up charges; and in 2003 it refused (ostensibly for security reasons) an application by the New
Woman Research Centre for registration as an official association. The efficacy of international
pressure, however, is evident in the outcomes of such cases. Ibrahim was finally released from prison
in 2003, his Centre re-opened and the magazine re-started. Following a massive petition campaign by
transnational feminists, the New Woman Research Center received official recognition as an NGO.

Tunisia comes close to being a secular republic, as Islam plays a very limited role in public affairs (unlike, for example, Egypt). In Syria and Tunisia, as in some other countries in the region, urban women, especially those who are educated and professional, enjoy a degree of freedom comparable to their counterparts in, for example, Latin American countries.

The economic and political diversity in the region results in intra-regional differentiation in gender norms, as measured by differences in women's legal status, education levels, fertility trends, employment patterns, and political participation. For example, gender segregation in public is the norm and the law in Saudi Arabia but not in Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, or Syria.[25] The age at first marriage for women is about 19 in Yemen and fertility rates are high, whereas in Tunisia, the average age at marriage for women is 24 and contraceptive use is widespread. Women's participation in government as decision-makers and as members of parliament varies across the region; it is highest in Syria and Tunisia but is increasing in Algeria and Morocco. In all but the most conservative Gulf countries, women vote, run for parliament, and are appointed to governmental positions.

Tunisia is the Arab country usually singled out as a model of legislation for women's rights, equality, and empowerment – albeit within an overall authoritarian political environment. The trajectory begins with the liberal Family Code in 1956 and President Bourguiba's encouragement of women's social participation. Since 1968, women and men have had equal rights to employment, job security and remuneration. In 1991, in support of Tunisia's 8th development plan, a Commission on "Women and Development" was established to focus on the needs of Tunisian women as essential development partners (Brand 1998). Similar Commissions have participated in the

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[25] It is, however, common to see heavily veiled women in Damascus and Amman.

drafting of the 9th and 10th development plans. The general provisions of the Labour Code were amended to confirm the principle of non-discrimination between men and women with respect to labour. Unlike many other countries, Tunisian women are legally able to work at night and guaranteed the same minimum agricultural wage as men (Brand 1998; Charrad 2001). Women's groups are relatively influential in Tunisia, even though some groups and some individual feminists may experience harassment, and the 1993 supplemental reforms to the Family Law are regarded as an accomplishment of the women's movement (Charrad 2001; Gilman 2002).

Despite the diversity described above, there are some common characteristics across the Arab region, which are particularly noticeable when comparisons are made with women in some other regions. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, these common features are relatively high (though declining) fertility rates, gender gaps in literacy, relatively limited access to paid employment, and under-representation in the political system. (See Tables 1 and 2.) The income growth of the Arab/Middle East region from 1960 to about 1985 – which surpassed that of any other developing region – did allow for the expansion of education and health, but it did not result in high levels of literacy or educational attainment, especially for women. Urbanization occurred at a rapid pace, but there remain sizable rural populations in countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. As a result of these large rural populations, the marriage rate remains high in the region and the fertility of Arab women tends to be higher on average than other countries at similar stages of development (UNDP, 2002; Moghadam, 2003: 133-34). Moreover, women in nearly all the countries of the region experience second-class citizenship due to certain provisions in Muslim family law and patriarchal cultural practices and norms.

Tables 1 and 2 about here

3.2 Inclusion or Marginalization? Women's Economic and Political Participation

Although all Arab countries have a female labour force, including a population of professional women in such fields as teaching, healthcare, and some areas of public administration, the Arab region has not experienced the kind of extensive industrialization and proletarianization that other regions in the world-economy have had (e.g., Latin America, Southeast Asia, East Asia). Among Arab/Middle Eastern countries, Morocco and Tunisia stand out for higher levels of female employment, especially in the manufacturing sector. Still, women have not been incorporated into the labour force to the same extent as, for example, women in southeast Asia, east Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Arab women's labour force participation rates are lower than those of sub-Saharan Africa – which suggests either that rural women are not enumerated correctly in the Arab countries or in fact they do not participate in the agricultural sector to the same extent as African women.

Why has this been the case? The relatively limited access of women to paid employment is largely a function of the capital-intensive, male-intensive nature of the regional oil economy, as well as the existence of relatively high wages for men during the oil boom years (from roughly 1960 to the mid-1980s). During this time, the oil economy and high wages kept women locked into a patriarchal family structure, affecting both the demand for and supply of female labour (Karshenas and Moghadam 2002). The fact that women were not required for labour outside the household also led to relatively less investment (whether familial or governmental) in female literacy, educational attainment, and training – hence the high rates of illiteracy of the adult female population, the low mean years of schooling, and the gender gaps in educational attainment until the 1990s. This also helps to explain the high rates of fertility in the Arab countries. A kind of "patriarchal gender contract" (Moghadam

1998) operated, whereby men were the breadwinners and women were wives and mothers, which was reinforced not only by political economy but also by Muslim family laws (see below). The extreme expression of this has been witnessed in the Gulf countries, which imported much of their labour force (male and female) and where the foreign population of migrant workers exceeded the native-born population. In the Gulf countries, domestics, nannies, and nurses were almost entirely foreign women. Even in Jordan (not an oil-rich, capital-surplus country), Sri Lankan and Filipino women continue to be imported to work as nannies, domestics, and hotel personnel.

The patriarchal gender contract may have been "rational" during the oil boom, but its longer-term outcome has been dire. The fallout from the pattern described above has been the uncompetitive nature of the Arab countries and their labour forces vis-à-vis globalization and foreign direct investment; a demographic explosion at a time of economic difficulties; soaring unemployment rates; and large populations of restless young men. Gender inequality and women's marginalization, therefore, have adversely affected human development in the Arab region.

In Arab/Middle Eastern countries, an extreme form of occupational sex-segregation exists that is based on cultural attitudes regarding women's family roles and appropriate/ inappropriate occupations and professions (e.g., wholesale & retail trade, restaurants/hotels, factory work, top decision-making positions masculinized; social/public services feminized). In some cases these attitudes are codified into law; for example, until early in 2003, Egypt prohibited women from serving as judges or public prosecutors (Mahmoud 1998); this remains the case in Saudi Arabia and other

conservative Gulf countries.[26] In Saudi Arabia, a 1985 royal decree stipulated that the

state "prevents the Saudi Arabian woman from working in all spheres except teaching

in female schools and nursing" (cited in Altorki 2000: 230). The vast majority of

Saudi women remain economically inactive, and those who do work "earn less than

men in comparable jobs despite having the same level of education and

qualifications" (Altorki 2000: 231). The same form of wage discrimination occurs in

Kuwait (al-Mughni and Tétreault 2000: 245). In many countries, entrepreneurship is

biased against women because Family Law provides women with half of what males

inherit in family wealth; family wealth is usually used as start-up capital in small

businesses, and thus women begin with fewer assets than men. Because females are

legally placed under the guardianship of fathers or husbands, they may not seek

employment, continue in their jobs, or undertake travel (including business travel)

without their husband's authorization.

Women are thus a small proportion of the workforce, especially in paid

positions (e.g., Algeria, 10%, Iran 10%, Jordan 14%, Saudi Arabia 7%). The civil

service is becoming feminized, but the private sector is male-dominated (Moghadam

2002, 2003). Some countries ban discrimination (e.g., Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia) but

violations are rampant and Ministry of Labour inspectors do little to enforce the law.

Women experience extremely high rates of unemployment. In some countries (e.g.,

Egypt) many women do not have ID cards, without which they cannot work, vote, and

so on. Saudi Arabia only instituted identity cards for women in late 1999. Before that,

they were listed on the ID cards of their fathers or husbands (U.S. Department of

State, 2002).

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[26] This is not, however, the case in Algeria and Tunisia, where about 25 percent of judges are women,
working mainly but not exclusively in the family courts.

Social insurance policies are gender-biased in many countries. In Jordan's Social Security Law, a woman employee's rights and entitlements are unequal to those of a man. The Government continues pension payments of deceased male civil servants to their heirs but discontinues payments of deceased female civil servants. Upon her death, her family does not receive her social security benefits unless they can prove that she was the sole provider for her family. Old-age benefits accrue only to the husband, on the assumption that he is the sole provider. Restrictions in the Health Insurance Law prevent a woman from being included in her husband's policy if she is employed, and excludes her spouse or dependants from her own health insurance benefits (Amawi, 2002; ICFTU 2001). However, divorced and widowed women may extend coverage to their children. Many countries in the region allow women to retire after 20 years of service, and also have provisions in place to practically encourage women to leave their jobs. For example, according to Article 14 of Jordan's labor law, "Benefits payments deducted from the salary of an employed woman who resigns her job are to be returned to her", and "a woman has the right to leave her job and receive her end-of-service bonus at the time of her marriage" (Sonbol, 2003: 108).

The current high unemployment rates among men in Arab countries make it harder for women to compete in male-dominated job markets and to find and retain jobs. But although the unemployment rates in Arab countries are generally high, they tend to be higher among women than men. For example, even in Saudi Arabia, where Saudi women account for only seven percent of the labour force, women's unemployment rate in 1999 was 16 percent, more than double the unemployment rate for men (Taecker 2003). Generally, educated women are more likely to face unemployment than are educated men.

While some aspects of Arab/Middle Eastern women's economic lives have been shaped by specific cultural and religious norms, other aspects are similar to problems faced by working women around the world. Moreover, there is variation in women's access to employment across countries in the region. The same may be said of political participation.

In Arab countries, male citizens have few political rights, and women even fewer. In several Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, women have yet to receive basic political rights. (In the latter part of 1999, women in Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwaiti women won the right to vote and to participate in elections in 2002 and 2003.) Arab women have always been involved in political movements (e.g., independence, national liberation, socialist, and feminist movements) but their presence in formal political structures (e.g., political parties, parliaments, governments) has been more recent and remains limited. Most Arab countries granted women voting rights in the 1950s (Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia), the 1960s (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) or even later (Iraq). In Saudi Arabia, women still do not vote or participate in any meaningful way in the political process. Arab women's limited political participation, therefore, has partly to do with the relative novelty of elections and partly to do with the patriarchal gender system. Although women are found in the rank-and-file and sometimes leadership of political parties in some countries (e.g., Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), nowhere have they reached a "critical mass", and their appointment to party or government positions has been largely a form of tokenism. As seen in Table 2, women are certainly elected to parliament, but their share of parliamentary seats in 1999 ranged from a mere one percent in Morocco to 10 percent in Syria. By contrast, Viet Nam and Argentina had about a 27 percent female share in parliament.

Table 2 also shows that some of the Arab countries – notably Algeria and Tunisia – have higher percentages of women in decision-making positions in the civil service, such as in sub-ministerial posts. The generally low proportions for the developing countries suggests the extent of the "glass ceiling" operating for career women at such levels. Still, over half the Arab countries had no women in sub-ministerial positions in 1998, which is indicative of the exclusion and marginalization of women from the political process.

A closer look at Tunisia shows that women's representation in political life is mixed. In 2001, there was only a 9.3% female share of government but women's share was growing in sub-ministerial positions (e.g., about 20% of Heads of Departments). There was an 11.5% female share of parliamentary members after 1999 elections (up from only 4.3% in 1989 and 7.36% in 1994). At the municipal level, women had 20.6% of municipal council seats for the 2000-05 term (up from 16.6% in the 1995-2000 period). There were no women elected governors, but 10 out of 24 deputy governors are women. Women also make up 21 of the RCD deputies in the 1999 Chamber, an increase from the 13 women deputies in the 1994 Chamber. In 1998, women's share of the RCD central committee was 21 percent. In the judicial branch in the late 1990s, women composed 13.3% of the Higher Council of the Magistracy (2 among 15 members) and constituted over 24% of the judiciary. However, in 1998 only 18% of all lawyers who were members of the National Bar were women and only one woman lawyer was a member of the Council of the Order (Pelletreau 2002).

Two positive developments in Algeria and Morocco need to be cited. In the summer of 2002, President Bouteflika of Algeria appointed an unprecedented five women – two of them well-known feminists – to cabinet posts. The establishment of a

gender quota system in Morocco resulted in a 10.8 percent female share in the November 2002 parliamentary elections. It will be interesting to see the results of the 2004 elections in Tunisia.

4. Muslim Family Laws and the Legal Status of Women

Among the most contentious issues in the Arab/Middle Eastern region today is the legal status of women and the nature of the Muslim family laws that prevail. If polemics on *hijab* dominated public discourses in the 1980s, the period since the 1990s has been characterized by much public debate on the reform of Muslim family law. Muslim Family Law – also known as the Personal Status Code in North Africa and the Levant – covers marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance – and in all four areas women have fewer rights than men (and non-Muslim wives fewer rights than Muslim wives) and are placed under male guardianship.

For most Arab countries, the post-colonial period of state-building entailed a compromise with the religious establishment or tribal leaders.[27] In return for state control over education, the religious or tribal authorities retained control over family matters or influenced the civil laws that were designed to cover family matters. Thus Lebanon, for example, retained but also extended the Ottoman *millet* system of confessionalism, so that today there are 16 personal status codes for the 18 religious groups (Shehadeh 1998).

Many Arab countries have signed international conventions regarding women's rights and pay lip service to UN recommendations on integrating women in development and enhancing women's economic and political participation, but it is difficult to reconcile women's rights with current interpretations of the Sharia, which

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[27] On Morocco and Tunisia see Charrad 2000; on Jordan see Sonbol 2003; on Kuwait see Al-Mughni and Tétreault 2000.

remains unfavorable to women with regard to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Although at its inception Islamic law was emancipatory and just, especially when compared with other legal or customary codes of the time, today's sensibilities cannot countenance legal discrimination on the basis of sex and religion. Under Islamic law, men have more privileges than women, and Muslims more than non-Muslims (An-Naim 1987; Hatem 2000; Mayer, 1995). In most countries there is a fierce belief on the part of Islamists and many believing people, including some government officials, that such laws and norms are divinely ordained. But feminist scholars point out that many existing family laws reveal the legacy of tribalism or misinterpretations and biases of the medieval *fuqaha* (theologians) who founded the legal schools of Islam and then closed the door to further interpretation. Many Muslim scholars argue that current laws distort the meaning, intent, and even letter of the Koran (see, for example, An-Naim 1987; Barlas 2002, Sonbol 2003). These are important debates and discussions within the Muslim world, and they reflect the ongoing Islamic Reformation.

Most Arab/Middle Eastern countries are governed to some degree by the Sharia, particularly in the area of family law.[28] Tunisia is an exception to the general patterning of Muslim Family Law, as it established a fairly modern and liberal personal status law immediately after independence (under President Bourguiba), and instituted further reforms in 1993 (under President Ben Ali). In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, the PDRY (South Yemen) was known for its progressive, socialist-influenced family law. But unification with North Yemen in 1990 resulted in the abrogation of that law and the adoption of a more conventional Muslim family law

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[28] In some countries, notably Saudi Arabia, the penal code is similarly based on or influenced by Sharia law. This was also the case in the Islamic Republic of Iran, although Sharia-derived punishments have not been applied frequently. Indeed, recently judicial officials have declared that stoning (of adulterous women) will be put aside.

(Molyneux 1995; Carapico and Wuerth 2000). Under the late Shah and at the instigation of the Women's Organization of Iran, the Family Protection Act of 1967 modified the Muslim family law, and further reforms were passed in 1973. Among other things, they required men to seek the permission of their wives in the event of a second marriage, and they granted women the right to divorce. The age of marriage for girls was raised to 16. But after the Islamic Revolution, the Family Protection Act was abrogated, a very conservative form of family law was instituted, and the age of marriage was lowered to puberty, or as young as nine. In general, Islamic family laws are quite conservative in Arab countries and confer on women second-class citizenship (An-Naim 2002). In Egypt and Jordan, for example, Muslim family laws, conservative governments, and the power of Islamist movements have created an inhospitable political-legal environment for women.

What are some of the key elements of Muslim Family Law? Although Islamic law gives women the right to own and dispose of property, they inherit less property than men do. The highly formal Islamic marriage contract does require the consent of the wife, and in some countries women may insert stipulations into the contract, such as the condition that she be the only wife. Marriage, however, remains largely an agreement between two families rather than two individuals with equal rights and obligations. Moreover, marriage gives the husband the right of access to his wife's body, and marital rape is not recognized (see Shehadeh 1998; Welchman 2001), and a wife is required to obey her husband. Children acquire citizenship and religious status through their fathers, not their mothers. Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men. Under Muslim family law, non-Muslim widows cannot inherit from Muslim husbands. This is even the case in otherwise liberal Tunisia. (Tunisian mothers can, however, pass their nationality to their children.) In many countries, the

criminal code provides for acquittal or a reduction of sentence for men who commit "honour crimes".

A characteristic of legal frameworks in the Arab region is their inconsistency. Constitutional guarantees of equality of all citizens and labor laws that ensure rights for men and women workers are contradicted and contravened by family laws that place a woman under the guardianship of a male and require her to obtain the permission of father, husband, or other male guardian to marry, seek employment, start a business, or travel. Among other things, this means that women are seen as incapable of entering contracts on their own. A husband has the legal right to forbid his wife (or unmarried daughter) from seeking employment or continuing in a job. Although wives (at least those who are educated and politically aware) may stipulate the condition that they be allowed to work in their marriage contracts, many wives make no such stipulations, and courts have been known to side with the husband when the issue is contested.[29] In rendering women minors and dependents of fathers, husbands, or other male guardians, religiously-based family laws reinforce the distinction between the public sphere of markets and governance – which are cast as the province of men – and the private sphere of the family, with which women are identified. Writing about Saudi Arabia, Altorki notes ironically that although the law grants women the right to ownership of property, this right "has not extended to ownership of their persons" (Altorki 2000: 229).

Of course, secular family laws have been patriarchal or have discriminated against women (e.g., that of Turkey), but family laws that are derived from religious texts and practices have proven more difficult to challenge and revise. When a Moroccan feminist organization spearheaded a million-signature petition in the early

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[29] On Jordan, see the discussion in Sonbol, 2003: 89-99.

1990s to the late King Hassan II to reform the family law, their campaign was met with the fierce resistance of Islamic organizations and denounced as blasphemous. In the late 1990s the campaign and counter-campaign continued, when feminists and the social-democratic government of Prime Minister Abdelrahman Youssefi joined forces to promote the proposed National Plan for Women's Development, which included provisions for changes in family law. The Plan came under fierce Islamic opposition, despite Prime Minister Youssefi's attempt to promote it democratically through a "social dialogue", and it was shelved in 2002.[30]

As Sharabi (1988) pointed out, the neopatriarchal state upholds the traditional order in a modernizing context. Thus it is the state that has reinforced discriminatory family laws and upheld family and social controls over women. Hatem (2000) shows how re-Islamization under Anwar Sadat – whereby the Constitution was changed to state that the Sharia was *the* source of Egyptian laws (rather than *a* source) – allowed Islamists to mobilize a large segment of the middle class that pushed for tighter laws pertaining to the family and public morality. What Hatem (2000: 55) calls the "political manipulations of the state" continued under Hosni Mobarak, who in 1985 approved a law that compelled women to prove material and nonmaterial harm in their attempt to divorce after the decision of a husband to take a second wife. Guenena and Wassef (1999:1) argue "that recent political discourse in Egypt is dominated by the conservative polemics of the Islamists and that the state, in its attempt to contain the Islamists, has subordinated women's issues to its own concerns for security and legitimacy".

By codifying the patriarchal structure within the family, the state and its laws not only restrict women's economic and political participation and confer upon them

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[30] In October 2003, King Mohammad VI of Morocco issued a royal decree calling for reforms of the family law. The parliament is expected to pass the recommendations. See Section 5.2 for details.

second-class citizenship, but also justify violence against women. "Honour crimes" are instances where the father, brother or first cousin murders a female relative to "cleanse the family honour". In Jordan, between 1990 and 1995 these crimes averaged about 150 cases or 30.3% of all murder cases. In 1995 alone there were 19 cases or 24.3% of all murder cases. Most of these crimes were committed based on the suspicion of an illicit relationship or other behaviour perceived to have dishonoured the family.[31]

The link between honour crimes and the differential status of women and men in the family should be highlighted. In most Arab countries, the head of the family, the patriarch, enjoys the prerogative of demanding obedience, dissolving the marriage, and regulating the behaviour of family members, especially women; most importantly, he constitutes his wife's "direct" link to the State. In Jordan, a woman cannot conclude her own marriage arrangements. At the same time, the Penal Code also stipulates this gender-based discrimination. Under the provisions of Articles 326–332 of the Code, capital punishment is to be applied in cases of premeditated murder. However, the Law – which does not otherwise consider the motive or purpose of a crime to be relevant in the determination of the punishment – does not define honour crime as premeditated murder but rather treats it as a special case that warrants reduced punishment. The justification for reducing the sentence relates to the perpetrator's temporary loss of reasoning – the "fit of fury" he experiences as a result of the "defamation" of the family's honour (Amawi, 2000, 2002; Sonbol 2003).

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[31] Islamic law, and Middle Eastern culture, prohibits premarital and extramarital sex, especially on the part of women, and demands not only virginity but also proper conduct on the part of young women. Although more educated citizens look down upon honour killings as "backward", they are not likely to argue for sexual rights or sexual autonomy, as this is regarded as Western, alien, and detrimental to family values. Honour crimes have been sometimes carried out by refugees or asylum-seekers in Europe, and in the past may have been overlooked by the authorities in the interests of multiculturalism or cultural relativism. On 29 September 2003, however, a Kurdish man was sentenced to life imprisonment in Britain for the rather brutal murder of his 16-year-old daughter, who had been dating a young man of Christian Lebanese descent.

Writing on Algeria but relevant also to Jordan and other Arab countries, Marnia Lazreg argues that "citizenship cannot be but formal (reduced to the act of voting) under conditions of a dual legal system, one secular, the other inspired by religious texts. The ensuring loss of personhood and the subjectivization of women may lead to violence against them." (Lazreg 2000: 69).

In Arab/Middle Eastern countries, the characteristics of the oil economy, the stances of the neopatriarchal state, and Muslim family laws have combined to create a political-legal environment highly disadvantageous and discriminatory in the case of women. The problem is perpetuated further through socialization via religious institutions, the media, and schools. As a result, families, especially among the lower-income groups, generally make greater investments in education for boys than for girls, contributing to the gender gaps in education and in economic opportunities that were discussed above. Nevertheless, there has emerged a population of educated, employed, politically aware, and mobile women who have established women's organizations and look to the UN and international conventions for inspiration and legitimacy in their efforts to help effect broader cultural changes and legal reforms in favour of gender equality and empowerment.

5. Modernizing Women

"Feminism" may be widely seen as a Western import and an alien concept, but many women activists in the Arab/Middle Eastern region are either self-declared feminists (e.g., the ADFT in Tunisia, the New Woman Research Group in Egypt, and those in and around the journal *Jens-e Dovvom* in Iran) or *de facto* feminists. Moreover, it may be provocatively argued that feminist activities in, for example, Iran are more culturally rooted than is government ruled by clerics, which when implemented in Iran in the early 1980s was historically unprecedented. There is also

evidence, as seen from recent surveys, of significant changes in attitudes and perceptions on the part of Arab and Iranian publics (see below). Certainly the growing mass of educated and employed Arab/Middle Eastern women has taken part in national-level movements and is increasingly aware of international and global developments. The UN Decade for Women (1975-85), four UN world conferences on women, the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the global women's rights agenda all have influenced domestic politics and discourses in the Arab/Middle East region. Women's organizations increasingly look to the UN's women's rights agenda for legitimacy and support. In some cases they have seen the cooperation of governments.

The Arab women's movement can be said to have "taken off" at a regional preparatory meeting for the Beijing Conference in November 1994. Organized by the UN's Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA), the November 1994 inter-governmental meeting in Amman was preceded by a two-week gathering of representatives of women's organizations, which produced a bold document calling for women's rights (Moghadam 1998, ch. 8). The global women's rights agenda and the UN conferences of the 1990s – especially the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, which took place in Cairo, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, which convened in Beijing – created a favourable environment that allowed for the proliferation of Arab women's organizations and women-led NGOs. Whereas the period from the 1950s to the1970s saw women involved almost exclusively in either official women's organizations or charitable associations, the 1990s saw the expansion of many types of women's organizations. At the same time, increasing state conservatism in some countries forced women's organizations and feminist leaders to assume a more independent stance than before.

In analyzing the proliferation of women's organizations during the 1990s, I have identified seven types of women's organizations: (1) service organizations, (2) professional associations, (3) women-in-development (WID) NGOs, (4) worker-based organizations, (5) research centres, media outlets, and women's studies institutes, (6) women's auxiliaries of political parties, and (7) women's rights or feminist organizations. There is some overlap across the categories (e.g., the research centres may or may not be feminist), with overlapping memberships, as well. The various women's organizations across the region have different priorities (e.g, some are devoted to advocating for women's identity cards, others focus on the problem of child labour, yet others work to enhance reproductive health and rights), but four common demands may be identified. They are:

- The modernization of family laws,

- The criminalization of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women, including honour crimes;

- Women's right to retain their own nationality and to pass it on to their children (a demand mainly of Arab women), and

- Greater access to employment and participation in political decision-making.

    Another common feature is that the women's organizations favour the removal of reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and they point out that existing family laws are at odds with the universal standards of equality and non-discrimination embodied in international instruments such as the Cairo Declaration, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Women's Convention, various ILO conventions, and the International Covenants on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and on Civil and Political Rights.

Although all the women's organizations are working, in various ways, to enhance women's citizenship rights, the feminist organizations are perhaps doing so most deliberately (see also Guenena and Wassef 1999; Sadiqi 1999; Al-Ali 2000; Al-Raida 2000). They target women's subordinate status within family law, women's low participation in formal politics, and violence against women. Members of such organizations, such as the Lebanese League for Women's Rights, often run (successfully or otherwise) for political office. Beirut is also home to the Women's Court: The Permanent Arab Court to Resist Violence Against Women, which launched highly visible campaigns in 1995, 1998, and 2000. Women's rights and feminist organizations are numerous in North Africa, where the Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité was the major organizer behind the "Muslim Women's Parliament" at the NGO Forum that preceded the fourth UN world conference on women, in Beijing in September 1995. In preparing for the post-Beijing follow-up, the Collectif 2000 formulated an alternative "egalitarian family code" and promoted women's political participation.

In Palestine, during the heady days after Madrid and the Oslo agreement, feminists formed the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, the Legal Aid and Counseling Center in Jerusalem, and a Women's Studies Program offering a master's degree in Gender, Law and Development at Birzeit University. They organized a Model Parliament and drew media attention to women's issues, particularly inequality in the family. They succeeded in having more schools established for girls, securing social rights for working mothers in the Labour Law, removing the regulation that a male guardian authorize a woman's request for a passport and travel, ending the requirement that female drivers be accompanied by a male guardian, and producing

the first women's newspaper, *Sawt an-Nisssa.* [32] Palestinian feminists developed

sophisticated analyses of gender relations and the problems and prospects of women's

citizenship as well as technical reports on questions pertaining to social policy, the

family law, the proposed Basic Law, the NGO sector, and the political situation.

Arab/Middle Eastern women also have formed publishing collectives and

media outlets, as sources of employment and social participation as well as vehicles

for political participation. Morocco's Edition le Fennec has produced numerous books

on women's rights issues as well as many literary works by women. As early as 1987,

the Moroccan Union de l'Action Féminine produced the Arabic-language feminist

magazine *8 Mars.* The women's press in Iran – a stand-in for an organized women's

movement – consists of popular and audacious magazines and women's studies

journals such as *Zanan, Hoghough-e Zanan,* and *Farzaneh,* and a publishing house,

Roshangaran Press. The new Cultural Centre of Women produces calendars,

compendiums, and the journal *Jens-e Dovvom*. Feminist newspapers are produced in

Turkey, and the Women's Library in Istanbul contains research and documentation on

women and gender issues. The first Arab Women's Book Fair, held in Cairo in

November 1995, was organized by Noor, a woman's publishing house in Cairo. *Al-Raida*, a quarterly feminist journal of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab

World, of the Lebanese American University, has had issues since 1976 on topics

such as women in Arab cinema, women and the war in Lebanon, women and work,

and violence against women. The cumulative effect of these literary activities has

been to raise "the woman question" in the public sphere, question the status quo, and

challenge the public and the state to take issues of women's rights seriously.

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[32] Suheir Azzouni, director of the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, Palestine, in a talk delivered at the ERF/MDF3 conference, Cairo, 8 March 2000, and in conversations with the author. Unfortunately, what began as a very promising women's movement appears to have been set back seriously as a result of the second Intifada, the continued Israeli occupation, and the terrible cycle of violence since 2001.

A number of the women's professional associations not only provide support for their members but also work to promote women-owned businesses, to prepare women for jobs in the private sector, and promote women's employment. Notable among them are the Arab Business Women's Council and the Business and Professional Women's Associations. Members of such women's groups in Tunisia joined the National Consultative Commission on Women and Development, formed in 1991 to prepare a report for the Eighth National Development Plan. In 1995, a number of Moroccan women's professional associations joined an initiative spearheaded by the more feminist groups called the Roundtable on the Rights of Women Workers.

The WID NGOs have an important function in contributing to human development and fulfilling the development objectives of civil society: decentralized, participatory, and grassroots use of resources, as well as in providing women with job opportunities and with needed services. In Bahrain, "women's voluntary associations have come to form an integral part of civil society", which is responsible for "initiating all organizations for the handicapped as well as institutions for modern education" (Fakhro 1997: 2). In countries with weak or absent states (e.g., Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq), the WID NGOs offer micro-financing, literacy classes, courses in health and nutrition, legal services, and other welfare services. In Egypt during the 1990s, many NGOs cooperated with the Ministry of Social Affairs in implementing the "Productive Families Project", which sought to capitalize household resources by converting the home into a unit of production. An umbrella organization, the General Association for Vocational Training and Productive Families, coordinated NGO assistance in the provision of credits and loans, equipment, training, and marketing. Tunisia also had in place a "productive families" program in which NGOs were

involved in poverty-alleviation and income-generating projects. In Jordan, the National Project for the Development of Traditional Handicrafts was sponsored by the Queen Noor Institution. Since 1985 it had provided income-generating opportunities for poor women and aimed also to revive Jordan's traditional handicrafts (Kandil 1995: 63; Moghadam 1998, ch. 6).

Other NGOs without royal sponsorship evolved as the vehicle of donor funding and came to be regarded as "closer to the grassroots" or more efficient than government agencies. This category included ENDA Inter-Arab, based in Tunis, as well as Lebanon's Association for Popular Action, la Fondation René Moawad, and the Lebanese Women's Council. Tunisia's Association de Promotion des Projects de Femmes dans l'Economie (APROFE) was set up in 1990 to improve the integration of women in investment and employment, and to help women start up new projects. In Egypt, the Association for Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW) had projects geared to low-income women maintaining households alone, providing credit, legal assistance, and awareness of "their importance and potential in the development process" (El-Messiri, 1993). Technical assistance provided by ADEW included: introducing options for diversification of product lines to meet demand and increase profit; assisting local women in identifying new wholesale and retail market opportunities; training local women on basic budgeting principles (El-Messiri, 1993; Moghadam 1998).

Tunisian feminists and women's NGOs have been somewhat more successful than women activists elsewhere in working with government agencies to develop and implement a national action plan in accord with the Beijing Platform for Action and to insert the rights of working women into the labour code. During the 1990s, for example, the National Commission on Working Women, formed in 1991 as part of

the Tunisian General Federation of Workers (UGTT), had 27 branches throughout Tunisia, and carried out surveys and studies pertaining to women and the workplace. Similar studies on working women's issues are regularly carried out by CREDIF, the respected women's research institute.

Such economic and research activities by women's groups both reflect and contribute to cultural and gender changes. They show the dynamic nature of women's movements, the importance of women's economic activities, and broader cultural changes.

Tunisian women's organizations include the state-affiliated UNFT (Union National des Femmes Tunisiennes) as well as the independent organizations AFTURD; ATFP (Tunisian Association for Professional Training); ATFD (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates); and the research institute CREDIF. There is overlapping membership across these and with LTDH, the officially recognized Ligue Tunisienne des Droits Humaines. Among its many activities, the ATFD sponsors a counselling centre for victims of domestic violence. There is some consensus that the *Femmes Démocrates* are the principal activist organization of the autonomous women's movement (see Brand 1998; Gilman 2002) and that they have encountered some problems with the government.

The experience of Tunisian feminists (and women's rights activists elsewhere) raises the question of the relationship between feminists and the state. Women's engagement with the state is illustrative of an approach that I call "critical realism". By this term I mean that feminists are aware of the neopatriarchal nature of the state and the way that it reinforces their subordinate status; they are also aware that the authoritarian state limits the political participation of citizens, including women's rights activists. At that same time, they understand that the state is an unavoidable

institutional actor in the struggle to advance their status. They therefore make claims on the state for the improvement of their legal status and social positions, or they insist that the state live up to commitments and implement the conventions that it has signed. This sometimes creates serious dilemmas or untenable positions for women's organizations, and in different countries, feminist groups have dealt with these inevitable tensions in various ways. For example, when Algerian feminists began to form independent organizations in the early 1980s, they were very critical of the "parti unique", of state tolerance for the growing Islamist movement, and of the Chadli Bendjedid government's accommodation of Islamist demands by drafting a very patriarchal family code. After the FIS was not allowed to assume power following elections in 1991 and the Islamists turned to armed violence, Algerian feminists entered into a de facto alliance with the state in opposition to the Islamist agenda and later advanced the slogan "no dialogue with the fundamentalists" when Islamist terror extended to kidnappings, rapes, and murders of women and girls (Moghadam 2001). This is perhaps why President Bouteflika "rewarded" feminists by appointing five women to cabinet positions in the summer of 2002 and by promising to look into the contested family law. In Tunisia, as well, there was a tactical alliance with the state in the late 1980s, again in the context of the emerging Islamist movement. The National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) issued "an appeal to all citizens, and foremost to Tunisian women, to show vigilance especially at this time … and to mobilize themselves even more around our President" (Charrad 1997: 300). This was to be expected, given the state affiliation of the UNFT. But a Tunisian feminist leader explains that the independent Tunisian women's organizations that gained legality in 1989 joined in the new consensus opposing Islamism with the slogan "No democracy for the enemies of democracy" (Labidi

2002: 34). More recently, what Gilman (2002) has called the autonomous women's movement in Tunisia, exemplified by the ATFD/Femmes Démocrates, has been faced with the dilemma of engagement or irrelevance – and has chosen to engage with the state and its agencies.

At the same time, Arab states have evinced an ambivalent and largely instrumental and self-serving approach toward NGOs, including women's organizations. They tolerate and even welcome NGO cooperation in providing social services or social assistance. They sometimes seek the cooperation of women's groups for broader agendas and in return take measures in favour of women's rights in a kind of *quid pro quo* (as in the anti-fundamentalist alliances in Algeria and Tunisia, the Moroccan attempt to institute a National Plan for Women and Development, and the changes to the penal code in Jordan to institute some punishment for honour killings). But in general they prohibit any form of political advocacy on the part of NGOs. For example, when in 1994, representatives of women's independent organizations in Tunisia submitted a petition calling for democratisation, they were detained and harassed. Moreover, associational laws control the formation, composition, and activities of NGOs.[33]

5.1 Secular, Muslim, and Islamic feminisms

As mentioned previously, the politicisation of religion and culture in recent decades means that advocates of cultural change and gender equality are often put on the defensive and made to prove that they are not spouting alien and Western concepts. Thus the issue of how "frame" women's rights – as well as human rights and democracy – has been a source of much discussion. In the same way that many

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[33] See Note 24 for details.

communists in the past sought to show their "cultural relevance and authenticity" by integrating cultural concepts or paying deference to religion in their discourses and political programs, today's advocates for cultural change and gender equality in the Middle East find themselves walking the cultural tightrope. This sometimes creates rifts among secular, Muslim, and Islamic feminists. Secularists in the Middle East – apart from Turkey and to a lesser degree in Algeria, Tunisia, and Syria – are vulnerable and tend to keep a low profile, as their position is usually denigrated as advocacy of atheism. It is very difficult to argue that separation of religion and politics protects citizen rights – although this argument is making headway in Iran, where 23 years of Islamist rule has led to a societal backlash. Still, it remains illegal to advocate for secular, non-religious rule in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and elsewhere, arguments for reform of Islamic laws must be made with great caution and framed in culturally and religiously sensitive ways. For this reason, Muslim feminists and Islamic feminists are seen as having the most potential, although it should be noted that the activities of secular feminists also have been influential, and across the region, they tend to represent the worldview of the educated, upper middle class (see, e.g., Al-Ali 2000).

Secular feminists do not use religious discourse; in general they refer to international conventions and global discourses to make their case for women's rights, human rights, and democracy. Secular feminists may or may not hold religious beliefs, but they argue that separation of "mosque" and the state/legal frameworks is a prerequisite for a pluralistic and democratic society with equality of all citizens. They are opposed to compulsory veiling and are the strongest advocates of the modernization of family law. The secular feminist position in Iran is represented by Noushin Ahmadi-Khorassani and her Women's Cultural Centre. In a 2002 paper, the

Femmes Démocrates of Tunisia established gender equality, secularism, and full and complete citizenship for women as fundamental to a just legal system and a democratic society.[34] In Egypt, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), the New Woman Research Group, and other feminist groups criticize conservative Islamist calls for women to retreat to the home (Badran 1994; Al-Ali 2000).

Muslim feminists are believing women who agree that Islamization has been detrimental to their countries and to women; in calling for reforms they often use familiar cultural concepts and religious phrases but are equally conversant with international conventions such as CEDAW. The Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi exemplifies the Muslim feminist position, a somewhat more pragmatic position than either secular or Islamic feminism. Islamic feminists are largely focused on a reinterpretation of Islam through a re-reading of the Koran and early Islamic history; they wish to reclaim their religion to undermine both Islamist patriarchal distortions and Western stereotypes of Islam as backward and terroristic. Islamic feminists are knowledgeable of the global women's movement and of international conventions such as CEDAW, but their focus is the recuperation of their religion.

These three categories of Arab/Middle Eastern feminists should be distinguished from Islamist women, who are less concerned with the advancement of women's rights than with the advancement of Islamization as currently understood and practiced.[35]

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[34] ATFD, Commission pour le 8 mars, "Pour les droits des femmes: Quelle Constitution?" Tunis, ATFD, 8 March 2002. I am grateful to Pamela Pelletreau for bringing the document to my attention.

[35] As Badran has explained, well-known Islamist women activists in Egypt such as Zainab al-Ghazali and Safinaz Kazim are hostile to secular and Westernized feminism and extol women's roles as wives and mothers. But they also stress the importance for women to work in society, including *da'wa* (proselytizing) in the society and within one's profession. They believe in and preach the message of liberation of women within Islam *and its laws*. As such, these are Islamist women rather than Islamic feminists, who question the laws and prefer to return to the original source, the Koran.

Arab/Middle Eastern feminists have had to contend with neopatriachal states, patriarchal Islamist movements, and religious-based family laws – a rather formidable combination of forces. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that their organizations continue to advocate women's participation, inclusion, and empowerment, using a variety of legal and discursive strategies. Some use a secular discourse and take a confrontational stance (e.g., feminists in Algeria and Turkey) while others frame their demands in Islamic discourse and engage in consensus-building (e.g., feminists in Egypt and Iran). Cooperation among secular, Muslim, and Islamic feminists has been increasing. In Iran, after a long period of ideological hostility, some forms of cooperation and even mutual respect have emerged among secular, Muslim, and Islamic feminists. They agree on the need to modernize the family law and to enhance women's economic and political participation. On other more contentious cultural and gender issues, however, they disagree and prefer to remain silent – notably on the issues of choice in dress rather than compulsory veiling, and sexual rights and autonomy.[36] In Egypt, Muslim and secular feminists cooperated to introduce a new Islamic marriage contract (modelled on the Iranian marriage contract) wherein brides would stipulate their rights and conditions. They also have worked together to promote the acquisition of ID cards for low-income women, and campaigns against female circumcision. In 1999, they secured the reversal of Article 291 – which exonerated rapists who married their victims. The feminist lawyer Mona Zulficar and other activists succeeded in introducing a new marriage contract that would stipulate the rights of the wife.

Secular feminism is of course strongest and most established in Turkey, and until recently there was no dialogue with non-secular feminists. But the expansion of

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[36] Iranian Islamic feminists have tackled the question of compulsory veiling, issuing statements calling for choice in dress. However, given the legal/political environment, they have not made veiling a key issue. And they themselves continue to adhere to conservative veiling.

an Islamic movement in Turkey has raised new questions and new possibilities for dialogue. In the 1980s, and parallel with the emergence of the Islamist movement and its women's wing, an autonomous feminist movement arose that became critical of the Turkish version of modernity and nationalism. This new wave of "radical feminists" distanced themselves from those who considered themselves Kemalist feminists and identified with the nation-state. They developed a language of individualism and autonomy and took up issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape. Yesim Arat (1994, 1999, 2000) concludes that women from different corners of Turkish civil society – Islamist, Kemalist, and radical feminist – have helped to promote liberalism, democratization, and secularism, and advanced the rights and autonomy of women. Not all Turkish feminists would agree, however.[37]

5.2 Accomplishments of the Women's Movement

In Jordan, the criminalization of honor killings of daughters and sisters has become a major social issue, a preoccupation for feminist lawyer Asma Khader, journalist Rana Husseini, and other activists, as well as some concerned members of the Jordanian royal family. Initially, the state was somewhat timid in the face of a tribe and kin-based social structure, but women's groups and the Royal Commission for Human Rights pushed for legal reforms. In December 2001 the Jordanian Cabinet approved several amendments to the Civil Status Law. The legal age for marriage was raised from 15 for women and 16 for men to 18 for both, and Jordanian women were given legal recourse to divorce. New restrictions on polygamy require a man to inform his first wife of plans to marry again and to submit evidence of his financial

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[37] This was made amply clear to me in conversations with Arin Cenan, a feminist lawyer in Istanbul (Istanbul, 31 October 2003), and Professor Necla Arat, who founded women's studies at Istanbul University (Vienna, 7-8 November 2003). Both remain opposed to the expansion of Islamic politics in Turkey, to veiling in public places, and to any changes to the strict, French-style secularism practiced in Turkey.

ability to support more than one wife. As a result of an amendment to the Penal Code, perpetrators of honour crimes are no longer exempt from the death penalty (though judges are still allowed to commute the sentences of the convicted).

In Lebanon, feminists formed The Permanent Arab Court to Resist Violence Against Women, and a Feminine Rights Campaign to focus on gender equality in divorce. In a country where communal traditions hold sway, the state is weak, and there are 15 family codes for the 18 legally recognized religious sects, many feminists favour the adoption of a woman-friendly civil code to supersede sectarian authority (Joseph 2000; Shehadeh 1998). Secularists, feminists, and democrats in an array of civil society organizations encouraged President Hrawi to propose an optional civil marriage, though it was defeated by entrenched religious forces, especially among the Sunnis (Saadeh 1999).

Lebanese feminists within the Lebanese League for Women's Rights are working to increase women's parliamentary participation – a matter of some importance in Egypt, too, where the National Council for Women provides some funding for women candidates. In Morocco, l'Association Démocratique des Femmes Marocaines (ADFM) prioritizes the identification and removal of obstacles to women's political participation. To that end it formed the Centre pour le Leadership Féminin (CLEF).[38]

In Yemen, a woman was appointed state minister for human rights in 2001, and a successful campaign was against the "house of obedience" law, or the forced return of a woman to the matrimonial home. Yet much remains to be done. Feminists and human rights activists seek to insert an equality clause into the constitution (it was removed four years after the 1990 unification of the progressive South and the

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[38] Nouzha Skalli, ADFM vice-president, in a talk delivered at the ERF/MDF3 conference, Cairo, 8 March 2000.

conservative North), to criminalize honour killings (the penal code currently

exonerates a husband's killing of his adulterous wife), to decriminalize sexual

misconduct by women (90 percent of women prisoners are charged with adultery or

similar sexual misconduct), and to change the electoral laws to allow for quotas for

women candidates. Activist Amal Basha has explained that the strategy is to

encourage "a progressive, enlightened reading of the Sharia, one that hopefully is

acceptable to religious leaders."[39]

In Palestine, feminists formed the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, the

Legal Aid and Counseling Center in Jerusalem, and a Women's Studies Program

offering an MA in Gender, Law and Development at Birzeit University. The

Jerusalem Link is an organization formed through an alliance between Bat Shalom,

the Israeli women's peace group, and the Jerusalem Center for Women, a Palestinian

women's peace organization that counts Hanan Ashrawi as a founding member. In

early 1991, an audacious feminist group, El Fanar ("The Lighthouse") was formed

with the explicit aim of establishing an independent women's movement outside the

confines of political parties in order to more effectively push for women's rights.

According to a founder, "It is our conviction that women must organize themselves in

an autonomous feminist context. . . . [T]he existing political parties refuse to confront

the patriarchal traditions which oppress women."[40]

In the post-Oslo period, Palestinian feminists organized a Model Parliament

and drew media attention to women's issues, particularly inequality in the family.

They succeeded in having more schools established for girls, securing social rights for

working mothers in the Labour Law, removing the regulation that a male guardian

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[39] Amal Basha, Sisters' Arabic Forum for Human Rights, Sana'a, Yemen, in a conversation
with the author, Chicago, 22 May 2002.
[40] Mana Hassan, cited in *Women's International Network News* 18 (1) (Winter 1992): 53.

authorize a woman's request for a passport and travel, ending the requirement that

female drivers be accompanied by a male guardian, and producing the first women's

newspaper, *Sawt an-Nisssa.*[41] Palestinian feminists also developed sophisticated

analyses of gender relations and the problems and prospects of women's citizenship

as well as technical reports on questions pertaining to social policy, the family law,

the proposed Basic Law, the NGO sector, and the political situation (see, e.g.,

Hammami and Johnson 1999; Johnson and Kuttub 2001).

Before the eruption of the second intifada, and despite Islamist challenges,

Palestinian feminists made important interventions in the national dialogue on the

basic law, family law, social policies, and women's rights, and formed a number of

organizations. The Women's Affairs Technical Committee, which grew out of the

first intifada and included some remarkable women, sought to influence the process of

constitution-building and law-making. In March 1998 Palestinian feminists convened

the Model Parliament to discuss personal status laws, but they were met by a nasty

campaign orchestrated by Hamas that denounced them as tools of imperialism,

Zionism, and so on. They seemed especially exercised by the fact that the renowned

Palestinian-Jordanian lawyer Asma Khader, a Christian, had spoken about family law

from a national perspective (Hammani and Johnson 1999). At the time, the Palestine

Authority came to the defence of the Model Parliament, but this and other feminist

initiatives were shelved in 2000, when the second intifada and Israeli military actions

began. Since then, women's groups have found it difficult to counter the new religio-

militant discourse and actions. For example, Jerusalem Link continued some joint

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[41] Suheir Azzouni, director of the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, Palestine, in a talk delivered at the ERF/MDF3 conference, Cairo, 8 March 2000, and in a conversation with the author. Unfortunately, what began as a very promising women's movement was set back as a result of the second Intifada (which began in October 2000), the continued Israeli occupation, and the terrible cycle of violence since 2001.

actions to promote an end to the Israeli occupation and a peaceful resolution of the

Palestinian question, but cooperation "has not been easy", according to Salwa

Qannam, one of its Palestinian members.[42]

Algerian feminists have shown a most audacious opposition to Islamism – and

to state autocracy as well – in a manner that cost a number of women activists their

lives during the wave of Islamist terror in the 1990s (Bennoune 1995; Moghadam

2001). Khalida Messaoudi, one of the leaders of the anti-government women's

campaign in the early 1980s and the anti-fundamentalist women's campaign in the

late 1980s and early 1990s, was appointed advisor to President Bouteflika after he

assumed office in summer 1999. When Bouteflika issued an amnesty to several

thousands who had been jailed for terrorism, he acquiesced to feminist demands that

those Islamists guilty of "crimes of rape" be exempt from the pardon (Cornwell,

1999). Algerian women's involvement in the judiciary has increased. In 2001, they

constituted about 25 percent of judges, and President Bouteflika increased the number

of courts headed by women. He agreed "to the long and persistent demand of

Algerian women's organizations for the need to amend the Family Status code issued

in 1984."[43] And in summer 2002 he appointed five women to cabinet posts – the

largest number in MENA.

North African feminists have long worked for reform of the family laws, or

personal status codes, which they argue perpetuate women's subordination in the

family and in the society. According to Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité, surveys in

Algeria and Morocco found similarities in perceptions of women's and men's roles

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[42] Salwa Hdeib Qannam, in a conversation with the author, Istanbul, 19 September 2002.
Salwa is head of the Association of Women's Committees for Social Work in Jerusalem, head
of the board for Trustees for the Jerusalem Center for Women (Jerusalem Link), a member of
the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, and a member of the Higher Committee of Fateh.
[43] Machreq/Maghreb Gender Linking & Information Project, March 2001 Regional Monthly
Update. www.macmag-glip.org.

within the family: the man is expected to be the breadwinner, while the woman should be the care provider. The surveys had also found that violence against women actually enjoyed social acceptance among both men and women; two-thirds of the women surveyed were able to justify domestic violence under certain circumstances. North African feminists attributed such attitudes to the unequal provisions of the Personal Status Code (UNIFEM 2003). In an official address on the occasion of International Women's Day 2002, Algerian President Bouteflika referred to the survey findings as indicators of the persistent gender inequalities in Algerian society, and of the need to abolish them. "This statement is considered to be quite exceptional in the annals of the women's movement in Algeria." (ibid., p. 22) In Morocco, the results of the surveys were used to fine-tune the communications strategy of the women's associations, which have called for amendments to the CSP since at least 1993. Their efforts bore fruit in 2003.

In a royal declaration in early October 2003, Mohammed VI presented a reform bill to improve women's rights on marriage, divorce, and status within the family. Among its stipulations, the reform would "place families under the joint responsibility of both spouses" – not just the men, the king said. Often referring to the Koran, the king also said the plan would establish "draconian criteria" on polygamy and make it nearly impossible. The practice is rare in cities but exists in some rural areas. The proposal would raise the minimum age of marriage from 15 to 18 and simplify divorce procedures for the benefit of women. Acting in his role as "Commander of Beliefs", the 40-year old monarch said the move was designed to help heal a divide in society between women's groups and a powerful Islamic movement. Parliament is expected to approve the action. He said the proposal was designed to "lift the iniquity weighing on women, protect children's rights and

preserve the dignity of mankind." And: "These reforms must not be seen as a victory of one camp over another but rather as advances for the benefit of all." Last but not least, he said the changes were also designed to "bring a modern code of the family in perfect keeping with the spirit of our tolerant religion."[44] The bill was approved by the parliament in early 2004.

6. Conclusions: Cultural Change Happens, and Gender is at its Centre

Across historical periods, the world of Islam, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, has shown remarkable diversity and tolerance, as well as innovation and dynamism. During much of this time, the Christian world was mired in fanaticism. One need only recall the cosmopolitan world of Islamic Spain, or the way that the Ottoman Empire received Jews fleeing from Spain in the late 15th century to recognize the dynamic and pluralist civilization that Islamdom once represented. But the roles were reversed as capitalism developed and democratic revolutions took place in Europe while the Islamic world stagnated. The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the indignities of European colonialism initially led to vibrant modernizing movements, but the problem of Israel and other external factors (e.g., U.S. interventions) have served to heighten fears of cultural invasion and to lock segments of the population in a religious defensiveness. The rigid legal systems that are currently in place reflect this. During the Islamic golden age and the later Ottoman period there was considerable flexibility due to legal pluralism, so citizens had recourse to different courts and judges. The paradox of modern nation-state-building is that countries adopted a single Islamic legal school, and over time it has tended to harden (e.g., Egypt since 1980, Iran since 1979). Moreover, the various legal codes that are

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[44] Cited in *The Jordan Times,* 12 October 2003, p. 4.

currently in place are often not in harmony with each other. Thus, constitutional guarantees of equality of citizens and labour laws that protect working women and men are contradicted by Muslim family laws that subordinate women to male kin or penal codes that delineate different punishments for Muslims and non-Muslims, women and men.

Both orientalist and Islamist arguments should be rejected for their biased, ideological, and ultimately incorrect perspectives about each other and their own cultures. Neither the ethnocentrism of orientalists nor the nativism of Islamists can help to bring about human development and citizen rights, including gender equality and women's full participation. Islamic feminists and reformists have an important part to play in showing that cultural change is inevitable and healthy, that cultural diversity is in fact part of the history and make-up of the Middle East, and that the marginalization of women has been a distortion of the spirit of Islam and contrary to the examples set by the women of the Prophet's era. Along with secular feminists, human rights activists, and democrats, they can build cultural support for the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It should be noted that when governments signed on to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, they reached a consensus to "seek to promote and protect the full enjoyment of all human rights and the fundamental freedoms of all women throughout the life cycle." Arguments should be made in the Middle East and elsewhere that the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the Convention, and the Platform for Action are all intended to set out universally agreed-upon norms. They were framed by people from diverse cultures, religions, and nationalities and intended to take into account such factors as religion

and cultural traditions of countries. For that reason, the Convention makes no

provision whatsoever for differential interpretation based on culture or religion.

Instead, it states clearly in Article 2 that "States Parties . . . undertake . . . to take all

appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws,

regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women. . .

."[45] All three conventions are thus culturally neutral and universal in their

applicability – and in my view, are as relevant to "Islamicate" cultures as they are to

Western cultures.[46] They provide a solid and legitimate political point of departure for

women's rights activists everywhere. In turn, women's rights activists throughout the

Middle East seek implementation of CEDAW and the formulation of national action

plans for women's advancement based on the Beijing Platform for Action, and are

strong proponents of human rights, which they understand to encompass civil,

political, and social rights. Many feminists would agree with Abdullah an-Nain that

"human rights are claims we make for the protection of our vital interests in bodily

integrity, material well-being, and human dignity."[47]

Huntington is incorrect to suggest a clash of values between the Islamic world

and the Western world. Indeed, a number of scholars from the world polity/world

culture school of sociology have posited a worldwide isomorphism in values and

institutions, including such developments as the extension of political rights to

women, the adoption of international conventions, and the proliferation of non-

governmental organizations, including human rights, women's rights, and

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[45] See Division for the Advancement of Women, United Nations Office at Vienna, "International Standards of Equality and Religious Freedom: Implications for the Status of Women," in Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., *Identity Politics and Women.*
[46] Marshall Hodgson, in his masterful *The Venture of Islam,* differentiated between Islam the religion and Islam the civilization, or "Islamicate" cultures. In that perspective, the Christians of Arab countries are "Islamicate" though obviously not Muslim or Islamic; the importance of family, religious values, an affinity for Islamic art forms, and the Arabic language certainly set them apart from Christians in Europe. Today, Islamicate cultures would include Central Asian countries, Malaysia, Senegal, etc.
[47] Abdullahi An-Na'im, "Promises We Should Keep in Common Cause", pp. 59-64 in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*

environmental organizations (e.g., Boli and Thomas 1997). In almost every Arab/Middle Eastern country, educated and employed women have formed women's rights organizations, have become involved in trade unions and professional associations, and are helping to change family relations from patriarchal to egalitarian. Educated and employed women are pushing for the modernization of family law, greater participation, and more equality. A "critical mass" of educated and employed MENA women, with fewer children and more time for civic activities and collective action has formed women's movements that are challenging patriarchal gender relations, the neopatriarchal state, and patriarchal family laws.

Sociological surveys (e.g., the World Values Survey) and a number of polls (e.g., Zogby International) have found that large sections of the modern middle class in Arab/Middle Eastern societies hold values and beliefs that would be familiar to their counterparts in North America, Latin America, and Europe. In 1999-2000, sociologist Mansoor Moaddel and his associates undertook a comparative study of value orientations in Egypt, Jordan, and Iran concerning religion, gender, and politics (Moaddel and Azadarmaki 2002). In all three countries, religion and the family matter, but there are instructive differences among the three. For example, on the issue of wife obedience, 47 percent of Egyptians, 42 percent of Jordanians, and only 24 percent of Iranians strongly agreed with the statement that a wife must always obey her husband. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of respondents in all three countries disagreed with the institution of polygamy.

Moaddel and Azadarmaki also found that the ideal number of children varied in the three countries. Most respondents in Egypt considered two-three children to be the ideal number, in Jordan four or more, and in Iran, two. It should be noted that this corresponds almost exactly to the total fertility rate in each country. In response to a

question asking if women needed to have children in order to feel satisfied, about 89 percent of Egyptians and Jordanians agreed, but only 47 percent of Iranians did so. On the question of whether men should be favored over women in jobs, given high unemployment rates in the region, a considerable majority of respondents in all three countries said that men should be given preference. But the younger age groups displayed less gender bias than the older age groups, and this was especially the case in Iran.

The three-country survey of value orientations further found that Iranians, despite living under a theocratic regime, placed less emphasis on religion and more emphasis on nationalism than did Egyptians and Jordanians. Likewise, in terms of the significance of religion in life, spiritual needs, and participation in religious services, Iranians appeared to be less religious than Egyptians or Jordanians, even though a majority still indicated that religious faith was important to them. Iranians were also less concerned about "Western cultural invasion" than were Egyptians and Jordanians. And although there was strong support for marriage, fully 17 percent of the Iranian respondents agreed with the statement that "the institution of marriage is outdated." Forty percent of Iranians – compared with 23 percent of Jordanians and just 19 percent of Egyptians – agreed that a working mother could develop intimate relationships with her children much as a non-working mother could. And only 24 percent of Iranians strongly agreed with the statement that a wife must always obey her husband – compared to 42 percent of Jordanians and 47 percent of Egyptians. Moaddel concludes that these responses are the result of "the experience of having lived for more than two decades under an Islamic fundamentalist regime."[48]

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[48] Mansoor Moaddel, "Religion, Gender, and Politics in Egypt, Jordan, and Iran: Findings of Comparative National Surveys." Report to the NSF (June 2002) kindly provided to me by the author. For a full exposition, see Moaddel and Azadarmaki 2002.

In all three countries surveyed, the changes in values discussed by Moaddel are the result of both internal dynamics and external influences. The more liberal attitudes in Iran – and the emergence of a movement for political reform, democratisation, and separation of religion and politics/law – may be attributed to the experience of two decades of authoritarian Islamism, as well as to the growth of an educated middle class with access to international information through the internet, short-wave radio, and satellite TV. In all cases, cultural change happens, and the question of women and of gender relations lies at the heart of it.

The "modernizing women" of the Arab/Middle Eastern region – who have been ignored by orientalists but targeted by Islamists – are at the center of cultural change and at the forefront of the movement for change (Moghadam 2003). As I have tried to show, they have already accomplished much, although they face numerous obstacles and constraints, and experience some tensions within their own movements. For the region as a whole, the most difficult tension may be that between a national identity based on Islamic civilization and culture, and the call for civil and political rights that may be construed as unduly inspired by Western traditions. Iran's women's rights movement has emerged parallel to a reform movement calling for political and social freedoms, and to a lesser extent, for separation of politics and religion. Yet there remains a powerful official ideology that invalidates "Western" concepts and practices and relies on the politics of "authenticity". Nationalism and Islamism, therefore, remain the major discursive frameworks. Among the countries of the region, Tunisia seems to have crafted a national identity and legal framework that reflect its own Arab-Islamic heritage as well as social and gender rights as understood

internationally, albeit within a dirigiste political environment.[49] There and elsewhere, the women's organizations are working to develop a framework for recognizing identities and elaborating equal rights for all, in a way that draws on history, religio-cultural understandings, and global standards.

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[49] Indeed, Bellin (1995:75) has described Tunisians as sharing "that overarching sense of political community so essential to the development of a 'civic culture' but so rare in the Arab world."

Table 1 Female Economic Activity Rates by Region, 2000

Region	Rate (in %)	Index (1990=100)	As % of male rate
Arab states	32.9	117	41
East Asia and the Pacific	68.9	99	82
Latin America and the Caribbean	42.0	108	51
South Asia	43.3	106	51
Sub-Saharan Africa	62.3	99	73
Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS [former Soviet Union]	57.8	99	81

Source: UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002,* Table 25, p. 237.

Table 2   Women's Political Participation, Arab Countries in Comparative Perspective

Country	% Parliamentary Seats in Single or Lower Level Chamber Occupied by Women			% Women in Decision-making Positions in Government			
	1987	1995	1999	Ministerial level		Sub-ministerial level	
MENA				1994	1998	1994	1998
Algeria	2	7	3	4	0	8	10
Bahrain				0	0	0	1
Egypt	4	2	2	4	6	0	4
Iraq	13	11	6	0	0	0	0
Jordan	0	1	0	3	2	0	0
Kuwait	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Lebanon		2	2	0	0	0	0
Libya				0	0	2	4
Morocco	0	1	1	0	0	0	8
Oman				0	0	2	4
Qatar				0	0	3	0
Saudi Arabia				0	0	0	0
Sudan	8	8	5	0	0	0	0
Syria	9	10	10	7	8	0	0
Tunisia	6	7	7	4	3	14	10
UAE	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Yemen		1	1	0	0	0	0
Other							
Argentina	5	22	28	0	8	3	9
Brazil	5	7	6	5	4	11	13
Chile		8	11	13	13	0	8
China	21	21	22	6		4	
Cuba	34	23	28	0	5	9	11
Israel	8	9	12	4	0	5	9
Malaysia	5	8	8	7	16	0	13
Mexico	11	14	17	5	5	5	7
Philippines	9	9	12	8	10	11	19
South Africa	2	25	30	6		2	
Venezuela	4	6	13	11	3	0	7
Viet Nam	18	18	26	5	0	0	5

Note: Blank spaces indicate data not available.
Source: *The World's Women 2000,* Table 6A.

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