

# CARNEGIE PAPERS

## **Women in Islamist Movements:**

Toward an Islamist  
Model of Women's  
Activism

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC ▪ MOSCOW ▪ BEIJING ▪ BEIRUT ▪ BRUSSELS

Carnegie Middle East Center

Number 2 ▪ June 2007

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Women are beginning to play a bigger role in shaping the politics of Islamist political movements in the Middle East. Mounting evidence suggests that women activists have made important inroads in Islamist movements by creating strong women's branches and pushing for broader political participation and representation in the upper echelons of the entire movements. Although women in these movements deny that they are embracing a Western-style feminist agenda and remain instead quite concerned with the preservation of Islamist values, most display dissatisfaction at being relegated to the women's branches of their respective movements. They want to be seen as potential leaders, not just as dedicated organizational foot soldiers, and in many countries they are pushing the leadership of their movements for change. To some extent the women's demand for greater recognition of the importance of their role in the service of the Islamist cause is also translating into activism in the cause of women's rights and equality more generally, just as it has with women activists in other political movements elsewhere in the world.

We conducted interviews with women belonging to Hizbollah in Lebanon and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as well as less structured conversations with women Islamic activists in Morocco, Kuwait, and other countries. Their responses indicate that there is much ferment and discussion among Islamist women. The outcome of these ongoing debates is still unpredictable and it is doubtful that the participants themselves know how far their ideas will develop and evolve. But it is certain that women's political activism in Islamist movements is a growing phenomenon that needs to be watched carefully.

The idea that Islamist women play important roles in the movements to which they belong and that through their participation they may be defining a new model of Islamist activism or even feminism is contrary to views commonly held in the West. There, it is generally assumed that the battle for women's rights is being fought by secular, modern organizations, not by Islamist movements that are part of a tradition that has historically oppressed women. The idea that women in Islamist movements may have something to contribute to women's rights is also rejected as preposterous by most secular Arab feminists. Many angry debates have broken out at international meetings of women's organizations concerning this issue. But many Islamist movements today are breaking new

ground in terms of their views of politics and society, and the rise of women activists is part of this renewal. Past history is not necessarily an indication of future positions.

The importance of women in the organization of Islamist movements appears somewhat puzzling in view of the fact that Islamist movements in many countries have opposed legislation that gives more rights to women on the grounds that it is contrary to the precepts of Islam. Islamist organizations in Kuwait waged a long, though ultimately unsuccessful, battle against women's suffrage. The Moroccan Party for Justice and Development, one of the most moderate and pragmatic among Islamist movements, originally resisted reforming the personal status code, although it eventually accepted it when the new law was enacted in 2004. The key role women play in Islamist organizations is understandable, however, if one considers the enormous attention paid by Islamist movements to building strong organizations, getting their message out to large segments of the population, and providing financial support and health and educational services to those in need through their networks of charitable organizations. In countries where there is universal suffrage, political organizations must reach women as well as men, and thus they need women as well as men activists. Islamist parties in many countries are realizing that in election-based political systems where women are allowed to vote, female candidates may help Islamist parties win votes. Some Islamist parties have already fielded, or are discussing fielding, female candidates.

Furthermore, the thinking of most Islamist movements on issues concerning women rights is evolving. Representatives of Islamist movements now invariably proclaim their commitment to the rights of women—as long as those rights are interpreted and recast in an Islamic framework. This formulation is extremely ambiguous and does not assuage the concerns of secular Arabs and the West, particularly since women in the Islamic movements always wear the *hijab* (head scarf). But even if the claims of respect for women's rights do not convince everybody, they represent recognition by Islamic leaders that it is impossible in today's world for a movement to gain international legitimacy without at least paying lip service to the rights of women. And it does not take much work for a researcher to discover that there are many powerful personalities and determined individuals behind the head scarves and the seemingly self-effacing behavior of women in Islamist movements.

The rise of Islamic women's activism is a phenomenon that deserves close attention and study. At a minimum, it helps explain the way in which Islamist parties operate and how they reach out to the population. Women's organizing plays an important part in Islamist movements'

outreach efforts. But the importance of women's activism goes further. If it spawns a full-fledged Islamist movement for women's rights—and there are indications that it may—such a movement has the potential for reaching a large number of women. Secular women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) led by educated women have only limited outreach outside the urban upper class they come from. Islamist movements, in contrast, have proven themselves adept at building a broad following across social classes. If women activists become more influential, Islamist movements could become important instruments—possibly the most important instruments—for promoting the rights of Arab women.

## Western Views of Women and Islam

Dominant Western views of women in Islamist movements and more generally of women and Islam are largely marked by stereotypes rather than knowledge. Western commentators have generally projected a negative view of the relationship among Islamism as a political ideology, Islam as a religion, and women. Although some writings have taken into consideration the variations and diversity among the Islamist groups, the dominant and more influential views treat Islamism and Islam as monoliths. The prevalent Western view depicts women as living in oppressive patriarchal societies and shackled by a long list of cultural and religious codes of conduct oppressing them. Some of the restrictions were lifted in many countries, particularly those with greater exposure to the West or with Arab nationalist governments that promoted a secular outlook, but the rise of Islamism since the 1970s is deemed responsible for the process of reversal that is eroding much of the sociopolitical gains for women in the Islamic world.

Supporters of this view can point to the remarkable and at times astonishing increase in the number of women of all social classes wearing the *hijab*, even in countries where twenty years ago Western dress prevailed except among peasant women. Secular entities jump to the conclusion that Islamism or even Islam itself makes “use of religion to perpetuate discriminatory laws and practices,” in the words of Zainah Anwar, founder of the NGO Sisters in Islam.

Among the supporters of the thesis that women's rights and Islam are antithetical are some Muslim women living in the West and most activists in women's NGOs in the Arab world. They tend to condemn indiscriminately the prevalent social customs they consider to be symbols of the inherent oppression of women. Organizations such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), Sisters in Islam, Challenging Fundamentalisms (WHRNet), the Muslim Women's League, and others

all offer similar views on the reasons why Islamism (and sometimes Islam) is incompatible with progressive women's rights. These groups often fixate on social customs presented as symbolic of the deeper oppression of women.

Marieme Hélie-Lucas, co-founder of WLUML, writes:

To impose a veil on a minor is, strictly speaking, to violate her, to use her body, to define it as a sexual object for men... The shame of inhabiting a body full of shame, a veiled body, the anguish of inhabiting a body full of guilt, guilty of existing... Far from representing a 'return to tradition,' the 'Islamic dress' has no ground in most of our cultures: it largely kills them.<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly, some of the customs such women's organizations denounce are oppressive—there is no justification for domestic violence or the condoning of so-called “honor crimes.” Other customs are much more complex; inheritance and personal status laws, for example, do not recognize equal rights for men and women but do at least recognize some rights. The wearing of the *hijab*, invariably condemned in the West, is a particularly difficult custom to evaluate. It can be an imposition on women by male members of the family or more broadly by social customs, but it can also be an assertion of identity or an act of rebellion against families and milieu by women who freely choose to cover their heads. For some women, wearing the *hijab* is a political act of defiance against an oppressive regime or the West.

For those critics who believe that Arab and Muslim societies inherently discriminate against women, the only possible way to change the status quo is the adoption of the Western liberal paradigm that places a high premium on women's individual rights and personal freedoms. At times, views of what Arab women need turn into a parody of Western customs. For example, during her first trip to the Middle East in September 2005, U.S. Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes repeatedly touted the ideal of the Western “working mom” to audiences of Middle Eastern women who wanted to discuss the Iraq war and reassured Saudi women they would soon win the right to drive cars—eliciting the angry, and probably untruthful, reply that they had no interest in driving.

A feminist movement that advocates the Western path to women's rights has emerged in many Arab countries, gaining attention and funding from Western governments and international feminist groups. These women's organizations believe that women in Islamist movements are at best confused and misled, that their representation is token, and that they are only passive actors, shackled by the movements' strict codes of conduct and assigned few if any significant roles in shaping their politics.



More sophisticated views recognize that there are important differences among Islamist movements. The United Nations Development Program's *Arab Human Development Report 2005*, for example, argues that "the most that could be expected from the Salafites was an acceptance of independent feminist activity in private charities." However, the report considers the Muslim Brotherhood to be "on the other side of the arena."<sup>2</sup> Another writer describes the Brotherhood's stance on women's political participation as "intellectually liberal."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, some scholars in the West, such as Mervat Hatem of Howard University, argue that the discourse on women within Islamist communities is more complex than meets the eye.<sup>4</sup> There is diversity within the realm of Islamism, Hatem points out, and women living among Islamists are not de facto victims of oppression. A few other scholars admit that women in Islamist movements are far from passive and subservient and that their status is not static. These scholars do not take a hostile stance against all things Islamic, but they do hold Islamism responsible for women's failure to claim their rights. These more discriminating voices, however, remain few and far between.

## Origins of Islamist Women's Activism

The rise of women's activism in Islamist movements has complex causes. First, Islamist movements needed women in their ranks to reach out to all segments of the population. Second, as more and more educated women joined the ranks of Islamist movements during the past two decades, they became increasingly aware of their importance to the movements and started petitioning for a more significant role as political actors. Third, many women's rights activists found a safe space in those movements from which they could press ahead with their demands to better the status of women without risking being stigmatized as Western stooges or rendered social outcasts.

Islamist movements that have chosen to participate in the legal political process in their countries, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Party for Justice and Development in Morocco, Hizbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine, among others, have paid great attention from the outset to the role women could play in furthering their political goals and agenda. Strengthening the organizational structures of women's branches as well as engaging women in crucial political tasks such as election campaigning and voting on election day have been at the heart of the movements' strategic efforts to capitalize on the presence of women in their ranks. Women activists possess valuable political and social capital because women constitute almost half the population across the Arab world.

What Islamist movements did not consider was the way in which political activism in the service of the organization would also lead women to become more aware of their own rights. By being involved in various political roles ranging from mobilizing members to campaigning to monitoring the electoral process, women proved their value to Islamist movements. Like women in political movements elsewhere in the world, they soon started asking whether activism only meant helping with the implementation of policies decided by male leaders or whether women had a right to be involved in making decisions.

The leadership of Islamist movements was not prepared to tackle this issue at the beginning. Influenced by social and cultural norms as well as dominant interpretations of Islam that prevent women's full political and social participation in Arab countries, most Islamist movements were reluctant to put women in leadership positions. They acknowledged the role played by women in furthering the movements' political and social agendas; some even challenged prevalent social and cultural norms by nominating women candidates on their electoral lists. But initially they did not see the need to go further. Under the pressure exercised by women activists, however, the situation has begun to change. Actual change in the position of women in the Islamist movements remains slow, and the issue of women continues to be highly controversial. Nevertheless, a debate is taking place, muted much of the time but occasionally more open.

## **Emerging Women's Agenda**

Islamist women are doing more than questioning their role in the movements. They have also initiated a far-reaching debate about women's roles, concerns, and rights from within an Islamist frame of reference, which challenges both dominant interpretations of Islamic views of women and the Western view of a universally valid definition of women's rights. In other words, Islamist women activists are seeking to derive the answers to the questions posed by women's organizations throughout the world by working from within the Islamic tradition rather than by embracing the Western tradition.

Islamist women activists argue that defending women's rights is part of defending Islam itself against corruption of its own ideals. They argue that Islamic precepts originally did not aim at subjugating women but were distorted by social and cultural norms that antedated Islam and persisted despite the spread of Islam. In this view, the struggle for women's rights is thus also a struggle to restore Islam to its original form. Islamic activists believe that Islam provides the basis for the recognition of women's rights and that placing feminist demands within the wider context

of a religious discussion has an additional advantage for them: It helps counter accusations that they are pursuing a narrow feminist agenda to the detriment of the good of the entire community.

It is premature at this point to conclude that a full-fledged Islamist paradigm for addressing women's issues and concerns has emerged, but there is certainly an attempt to develop one. And if such a paradigm were to become widely accepted, it could be enormously influential in the Arab world and more broadly in the Muslim world, much more so than the efforts to promote women's rights by Western and Western-supported feminist organizations.

So far, Islamist women remain divided on many issues. On the one hand, it is clear that there are strong, powerful women among Islamist activists, and that they are extremely unlikely to accommodate themselves meekly to an interpretation of Islam that relegates women to a subordinate social and political condition. On the other hand, Islamist women are critical of some feminist ideas and demands, so that it is difficult to know for sure what an Islamist paradigm for women's rights will be like in the end. Some key concerns and trends are already evident, however.

### **Rejection of "Feminism"**

Interviews with women activists in both Hizbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood revealed rejection and even contempt for the concept of Western feminism, which they interpret not as a struggle for the recognition of the rights of women, but as a movement to free women from all social constraints and obligations to family and community, leading to excessive individualism and even licentiousness.

The women we interviewed were all activists who have gained status, legitimacy, and respect within their movements and thus feel empowered and self-confident. Nevertheless, they rejected outright the idea that they were at the forefront of an Islamic feminist movement. As one Hizbollah activist put it, "Islam and feminism are two contradictory terms." Yet these women activists set forth demands and agitate for rights that are also central for Western women's organizations, above all the rights of women to education, work, and political participation. Women activists did not appear very interested in discussing whether there is such a thing as an Islamic feminism. Knowing little about the differences that exist among women activists in the West, they assumed that feminism simply means the embrace of an essentially Western overarching idea, and that Islamist feminism implied the superimposing of a thin Islamist veneer on that concept. As a result they did not want to have anything to do with the notion. But there is a lively debate among Muslim women in academic circles on the issue—a discussion that does not appear to have seeped

down to political activists. The notion of Islamist feminism occasionally appears among scholars, though with many caveats to differentiate it sharply from Western feminism.

### **Islamist Definition of Women's Rights**

Muslim scholars and activists take issue with the notion of Islamic feminism because they regard feminists to be secularists who think of religion as an obstacle to women's rights. Rather they believe that the cause of women's rights needs to be pursued by reviving Islamic thought and promoting a new interpretation of the Quran and Sunna. They dismiss the idea that by advocating such interpretation they are rejecting an established body of Islamic law and thought, claiming instead that they are building on the contributions of previous generations using the same tools of interpretation. Some scholars also argue that there is a divergence between what Islam says about the rights and status of women and the way in which legislation and state policies in Muslim countries deal with the issue. Omaima Abu Bakr, who has made a particularly significant contribution to the debate on Islamic feminism, argued in one of her writings that injustices exercised against today's Muslim women are due to the influence of pre-Islamic ideas that "influenced religious thought and were thus incorporated and canonized."<sup>5</sup>

The views expressed by scholars are echoed by the women activists we interviewed. They advocate a viewpoint that "the interpretations of the text should move with the time." They are critical of the Western paradigm and refuse to consider it the yardstick by which to measure their progress or lack thereof. But they are also critical of the stand on women made by their own movements and ask for more representation within the higher echelons. They complain, in the words of one activist, that there is sometimes "an overprotection from the movement leadership" for women, that is, too much paternalism.

Activists are not prone to engage in lengthy theoretical debates but instead argue that there is evidence in Islamic history to support the view that women have always had a role to play in the public sphere. Many of them repeated Ayatollah Khomeini's phrase that "women represent half of the society and they are responsible for bringing up the other half" as a sign of the esteemed role assigned to women in Islam. They do not perceive themselves as lagging behind Western women because they measure their progress and achievements against a different standard. "We don't have the eternal complex of having to be equal with men," said Um Mahdi, head of the women's branch of the Organization for Supporting the Resistance, the financial arm of Hizbollah. "We seek justice not equality."

A similar view is voiced by women activists in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. They put much emphasis on “the complementarity of roles” between the sexes, but they are also aware that in practice the status of women varies from one Islamist movement to another. The social, political, and cultural setting is one important factor in shaping that status, they argue.

Although Islamic women, intellectuals and political activists alike, stress the specificity of the Islamic approach to women’s rights, they recognize that many of their concerns are similar to those of women’s rights advocates everywhere. Raising the consciousness of women about gender issues and fighting patriarchy are central for all. But where Islamist women part company is that they propose different solutions. They charge that Western feminism is excessively individualistic, anti-family, and obsessed with the irrelevant issue of homosexual rights. By contrast, Islamic activists are concerned with the entire community, which they want to be just and egalitarian within an Islamic framework, recognizing not only the intrinsic equality between men and women but also the different roles they play.

There is a third approach to women’s rights in Muslim countries that needs to be mentioned here, different from both the mainstream Western approach and the attempt of Islamists to develop a different concept of women’s rights derived from Islamic principles: The attempt by some organizations of Muslim women to show that the Western concept of women’s rights is compatible with Islam. Many of these organizations originated in the West and receive Western funding. They offer an often bitter critique of the history of Islam and its dominant interpretation and turn to the Quran and the Sunna to show, in the words of *Azza Karam*, “that the discourse of equality between men and women is valid within Islam.”<sup>6</sup> For these groups, reconciling the Western concept of women’s rights with Islam is important for instrumental reasons, because a “feminism that does not justify itself within Islam is bound to be rejected by the rest of society and is therefore self-defeating.”<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the intellectuals and activists discussed above, however, these groups do not seek to develop an original concept of women’s rights rooted in Islam.

### **Centrality of the Family**

Islamist women activists we interviewed extolled the importance of women’s roles in the public realm, but they always emphasized that such roles should go hand in hand with their roles as mothers and wives. “Women should know how to strike a balance between the two realms so that no one role comes at the expense of the other,” said *Kadija Saloum*, head of Hizbollah’s women’s branch in Beirut. These activists contend that women are different beings but insist that different in this context

does not mean inferior. Women have the same basic rights to education, employment, and political participation as men, and these rights must be recognized by the law and by society. Women must not be restricted to the home. They must be made aware of their civil and legal rights as ordained by the law of their country and by Islam.

This is not just theory. Women activists in Islamist organizations are organizing programs to teach women about their rights. For example, the Hizbollah women's organization Al-Hayaat Al-Nisaayia organizes courses at its branch offices to teach women their legal rights under the Lebanese constitution and in Islam. In private conversations and in their teaching, Hizbollah's women recognize that women's rights are often violated but also stress that Islam is in no way the cause of the injustices inflicted upon women in its name. Rather, the prevalent cultural and social norms are the main culprits behind women's inferior status.

## Organizations in Flux

The interviews we conducted, particularly with women in Hizbollah and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, indicate that women's organizations in both are changing rapidly. Both started off as part of the movement's charity arm, engaging in social and community service and outreach, but have evolved a great deal since then. As women gained more experience in these movements, they began asking more complex and challenging questions and putting pressure on the leadership to change some practices. This does not mean that the women are highly critical of their organizations. Indeed, in the interviews they tended to blame factors outside the organization. Muslim Brotherhood members constantly referred to political oppression in Egypt as the main reason why the politics and organizational structures of the movement, including that of the women's organization, are not more progressive. Hizbollah women leaders, for their part, saw social and cultural norms as the main reason why the party did not include female candidates in its lists for the parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, the interviewees indicated that women feel that they are not yet fully included.

As a result, Islamist movements are under internal pressure to provide broader representation for women. The question of why women are not included on the electoral lists of Hizbollah's parliamentary elections has been debated hotly within the women's organization and the movement itself. Although women were not openly expressing dissatisfaction with the leadership in these debates but rather stating that they were putting forward a legitimate political demand, their criticism was implicit. This is particularly true since the official position of the leaders is that there are no religious or structural obstacles to nominating women candidates.

Women in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood have gone a little further in their demands, asking not only for better representation for women but also for the full integration of the women's organization into the main body of the movement.

It is clear from these interviews that women are pushing for change within the Islamist movements. However, it is also clear that they feel the movements, probably more inadvertently than by design, have offered a space where they have started organizing, analyzing, and challenging the social norms and cultural values that undermine their position, and, more tentatively, demanding changes within the movements themselves.

## Research Agenda

There is much discussion and much ferment among women in the Islamist movements about the status and rights of women in the society at large as well as their position in the movements to which they contribute time and effort. What makes the debates taking place particularly remarkable is that these women are facing the typical challenges encountered historically—and today—by women in all societies and in all political movements, but they are trying to provide a different set of answers rooted in Islam or more broadly in an Islamic framework—the expression of choice in the more liberal parts of the Islamist movements.

While the issue of the status of women in Arab countries has received much attention both in the Arab world and in the West, the debates and changes taking place on this issue in the Islamist movements have received little attention. Yet the issue is important. As we pointed out earlier, Islamist movements are able to reach women that the better-known and often Western-supported women's NGOs fail to reach. It is thus important to understand whether these Islamist organizations are indeed contributing to improving the status of women in the region, or whether they are an instrument of their oppression, as rival NGOs contend. The organizations are also interesting because they are trying to develop a concept of women's rights independent of the Western legacy. It is not clear whether they will be able to do so—the concept of simultaneous equality among the genders and separation of their roles comes uncomfortably close to the idea of “separate but equal” that has underpinned race segregation and discrimination in the United States and afflicted minorities in other countries. At the same time, the development of a language on women's rights that cannot be dismissed as a Western imposition is important to those who believe that the status of women in the Arab world needs improvement but who are also concerned that an anti-Western reaction will play against change.

There is still much we do not know about the status of women in today's Islamist politics. To what degree do women participate in the various activities of the movements, such as organizing protests or elections, recruiting new members, raising funds, or socializing the young politically? How serious are the structural obstacles to progress toward broader representation in the movements' higher echelons? What are the prospects for improving the status of women within each movement? To what extent are women succeeding in developing a coherent, compelling Islamic model of women's rights? Can their ideas affect the position of women in the Arab world?

Given the importance of the issue and the lack of information about it, the Carnegie Middle East Center is starting a project to examine in some detail the evolution of Islamist women's organizations in the countries of the Middle East. This paper outlines the major issues that have emerged from a preliminary investigation. Further research on the women in specific Islamist movements will add depth to the analysis and undoubtedly uncover new questions.



## Notes

- 1 Marieme Hélie-Lucas “Veil-s”, op-ed, Women Living Under Muslim Law website ([www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org)), July 5, 2006.
- 2 United Nations Development Program, *Arab Human Development Report, Empowerment of Arab Women, 207*, United Nations Development Program, 2005.
- 3 Azza Karam, *Women, Islamism, and the State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 222.
- 4 Mervat Hatem, “Gender and Islamism in the 1990s,” *Middle East Report*, Vol. 222 (Spring 2002), 44–47.
- 5 Omaima Abu Bakr, “Islamic Feminism: What Is in a Name?” *Middle East Women’s Studies Review* (Winter/Spring 2001).
- 6 Karam, *Women, Islamism, and the State*.
- 7 Karam, *Women, Islamism, and the State*.



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