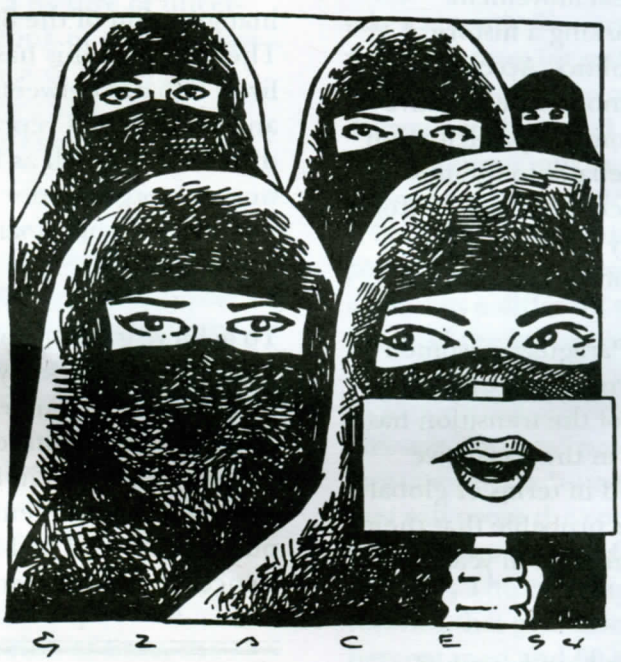
Women and Politics in the Middle East

By Sarah Graham-Brown

In the 1990s, the Western image of Middle Eastern women's role in politics is contradictory. On the one hand, Hanan al-Ashrawi appears as the sophisticated, articulate spokesperson for the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks; on the other, male politicians of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria speak of women as subordinates who should not be allowed to work outside the home, let alone participate in politics.

This contradictory image reflects broad conflicts and debates in the Middle East over the nature of society and the status of women. These conflicts arise in part from the cumulative impact of a century of intense economic change and social dislocation, generating crises that have become particularly acute over the last decade. Women have been active political players throughout this process. They have not always won their battles, but there is no doubt that they have fought them.



As early as 1911, Egyptian writer Malek Hifni Nasif stood up in an all-male nationalist congress and demanded that women have the right to be educated to whatever level they desire. Eighty years later, women have much greater access to education, and opportunities to work; in many countries they have the vote, and some positive changes have been made in the laws governing family and personal status. Yet there has been no simple, linear "progress."

Economic changes have altered expectations and patterns of family life, but not always to women's advantage. The extent and impact of economic, social and legal changes varies greatly according to social class, geographical location and ethnic or national group. Today, struggles continue unabated over who should control women's lives, in the family and in the nation.

From the first, the development of women's movements was intertwined with broader movements for political change and national independence. In Iran and Turkey, women's organizations developed rapidly after the collapse of autocratic regimes in 1906 and 1908 respectively. In the period of comparative openness which followed, women participated in political demonstrations and wrote in the press. Issues surrounding women's status, particularly education, were hotly debated, and women contributed to these debates.

A major limitation of both the independent Egyptian feminist movement and the co-opted movements of Iran and Turkey was that their work influenced only limited sections of society. The majority of women, who were poor and lived outside major cities, were scarcely touched by changes in legal status, or by new educational and employment opportunities.

For the states which emerged from colonial rule in the Middle East, the "woman question" has great symbolic importance. Women are used as symbols of "modernization," or to promote "national culture," or to stress the preservation of "traditional values." Generally speaking, however, women's movements independent of the state have been allowed little or no space to develop.

State strategies regarding women differ considerably. Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran exemplify the theocratic imposition of strict public controls over women's appearance and behavior, enforced by agents of the state.

In Lebanon, with its weak state and fragmented society, controls over women are largely enforced by community pressures. The very limited changes in personal status law in the Arab world have presented little challenge to male hegemony. Only in Tunisia and the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen were changes made to favor women.

Most "secular nationalist" states – for example, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Algeria – initiated changes affecting women's opportunities for education, health care and improved access to employment. In these states women's organizations have usually been closely linked with or part of the ruling political party structures. Their main role has been to mobilize women around the goals and tasks set by the party and the state.

Today there are more individual women's voices to be heard in the political and artistic arenas (art in the Middle East is seldom separate from politics). Yet collectively, women still have little political influence.

In contrast to Western feminist movements, political enfranchisement has not been a major priority of women's struggles in the Middle East. Turkey has been a partial exception to this rule, but it is notable that there are fewer women parliamentarians there today than there were after women first got the vote in 1934. In general, the struggle for democratic rights for men as well as women has yet to be won in most Middle Eastern countries. In this respect, access to the right to vote is less significant than the right to organize without state direction and heavy censorship of unwelcome opinions.

In the Gulf states, women do not have the vote. Women were not able to vote in Kuwaiti elections in late 1992, despite renewed demands from some Kuwaiti women, and the role which women played in the resistance to the Iraqi occupation.

The increasing importance of Islamist politics has not always prevented women from exercising the vote. Some Islamist groups have recognized the potential of women's votes to boost their own support. For example, women have not been deprived of the vote in Iran under the Islamic Republic despite the regime's highly misogynist attitudes which have pushed women out of public life and limited employment in mixed work places.

Where nationalist struggles have been intense, violent and prolonged – for example, in Algeria and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – the outcomes of women's participation in political life have been more complex. Some women have risked their lives, and many have been imprisoned and tortured. Although women suffering from these ordeals have sometimes been praised as heroic, fears and suspicions about their sexual vulnerability have often created painful problems in returning to ordinary life.

The Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) in the occupied territories, which began in December 1987, has mobilized more women than ever before, young and old, in refugee camps, towns and even isolated villages. Heightened violence by Israeli occupation forces has not spared women. While to some observers this situation has brought real changes in attitudes toward women's political activism, others argue that this has been at the expense of attention to women's own demands. As one of the leaders of the women's movement, Amal Hreishe, put it, the changes for women have been "superficial, not profound."

The state and political movements have not been the only factors influencing women's status. During the past century, most countries in the region have suffered major wars, political repression, and dispossession of national or ethnic groups. The patriarchal organization of family and society has altered to cope with rapidly changing conditions.

In the Middle East, as in other developing regions and with the possible exception of the Persian Gulf states, the size of households has shrunk: no longer do several generations live under the same roof. This thinning out of the extended family has affected some of the mechanisms of male authority over women.

There has been a growing awareness among activist women in the Middle East that even where women enjoy greater legal rights (for example, in Turkey or Tunisia) or improved rights to education and employment (as in Egypt, Syria and Iraq), male control of women's personal lives and sexual behavior is little changed. This is highly controversial terrain.

Women who challenge patriarchal norms of virginity at marriage, male sexual freedom compared with control of women's sexuality, and, in some regions, genital mutilation, risk accusations of betraying their culture, their religion and even their own sex. In the view of many, to challenge these norms is to accept Western norms of sexual and personal behavior. This is despite the fact that many women who are critical of their own culture are also critical of the West and its attitudes toward the Middle East.

While some of the ideas advanced on the politics of personal life may have been "seeded" from the West, their expression is shaped by the region's specific political and social context. Most women who regard themselves as feminists or campaigners for women's rights are acutely aware that they may be regarded as promoting ideas associated with cultures which have challenged and tried to subvert their own.

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A prominent trend in the 1980s was the revival or creation of Islamist movements in most countries of the region. These have gained numerous women adherents, including many college graduates. These groups are far from homogeneous in their political stances, but have fairly similar views on the "woman question." They have played an influential role in setting the tone of the debate in the 1980s, often putting their critics on the defensive. Their strong condemnations, not only of the encroachment of Western values in the Middle East but also of the "corruption" of indigenous moral values has challenged exponents of women's rights in a more secular tradition.

Most Islamist groups stress the importance of male authority and emphasize the primacy of women's roles as wife and mother. They stress sexual purity and control, and the danger of

losing it, as a justification for increased male supervision of women and for insisting on self-control by women themselves.

Women activists working within Islamist groups clearly have to tread a fine line between political commitment and the pressure to prioritize the roles of wife and mother. The tension is not always resolved.

The issue of women's dress has recently become the most visible symbolic sign of the struggle over women's identity. "Covering up," which has become much more prevalent in urban society during the 1980s, can range from covering hair and throat and wearing modest clothes to full veiling and the wearing of gloves.

The importance ascribed to dress codes also reflects a broader concern over women's social and political roles, and how these are symbolized. Many people in the region–not only Islamists and their sympathizers–regard this as a significant issue.

Some women argue that "modest dress" frees women to move around the streets and the workplace without harassment by men. Opponents argue that it is another form of male control and male definition of women's space. They further argue that it stigmatizes those who do not conform and denies women the freedom to decide on their own appearance: personal morality should not be confused with external conformity to norms of dress. One consequence of this visual divide has been to put considerable pressure on young women to adopt modest dress, and many do so, for a variety of reasons which may have little to do with adherence to an Islamist group or even with personal piety.

While some feminists view Islam, and indeed all the major monotheistic religions, as incompatible with women's emancipation or liberation, the majority of Middle Eastern women activists seek some kind of accommodation with religious belief, because of its critical role in indigenous culture. Some women have sought in the earliest days of Islam a model of women's role in society which differs from those which have evolved since.

This has been a largely speculative and even polemical exercise, though historical research has helped revise ideas about women's roles in Middle Eastern societies. Stereotypes of the passivity of Middle Eastern women in the face of oppression are embedded in most histories of the region, written by Western and Middle Eastern male historians. Women and their concerns frequently have been omitted entirely form the historical record. Recent efforts to recoup this hidden history of women have challenged these assumptions and revealed a far more complex picture.

Recent historical work has shown that women often played active roles, and on occasion resisted oppression, both by the state and their menfolk. Some studies also suggest a considerable difference between the way women actually behaved and the prescriptive writings on "proper" female behavior which have come down to us from religious scholars and other male writers.

At the present time many Middle Eastern societies are going through particularly intense political and cultural identity crises, generally coupled with severe economic dislocation. In these circumstances, women's symbolic roles tend to take on added significance, and to the detriment of the women themselves.

Women as activists and participants in political and social movements in the Middle East, continue to struggle as they negotiate and renegotiate the way they present themselves at home, in the workplace and in the larger political arenas of neighborhood and nation.

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