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# Women, work, and Islam in Arab societies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper attempts to present varying discourses pertaining to women's work and how it is impacted by interpretations of Islam.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Current discourses from various viewpoints are presented including Muslim scholars on the one hand and active feminists on the other. Personalities are presented as being representative of the debate that has been going on pertaining to women in Arab societies.

**Findings** – Attempts that aim at categorizing Arab thought and activism into two camps, one is religious-based adverse to women's causes, and the other being secular and supportive of their causes does not present a candid depiction of the different forces.

**Research limitations/implications** – Personalities chosen represent specific case studies that, although thought to be representative, cannot realistically reflect all the multitudes of views expressed pertaining to the issues discussed. Future studies may cover other relevant personalities in the region.

**Practical implications** – Developing the status of women in Arab societies requires a major reassessment of Muslim history and traditions. The dialogue and debates going on among religious scholars and feminists should be continuously communicated, discussed and exposed. Readers and managers would benefit from understanding the complexity of issues and diversity of views presented.

**Originality/value** – This paper offers a window into the world of women's work and participation in Arab societies and how such participation is impacted by Islam, or its interpretations thereof. In addition to the English sources, this paper offers an opportunity for the reader to get a glimpse of the debate that has been going on in Arabic (especially when it comes to the little known religious discourse).

**Keywords** Women, Islam, Feminism, Design of work, Arab peninsula

**Paper type** General review

## Introduction

Arab societies are currently in a state of confusion. Problems of underdevelopment, inequity, institutional deficiencies, and illiteracy are rampant (Arab Human Development Report, 2002). Arabs seem to be in a futile search for a new identity in a world that is transforming: power structures are shifting, societal expectations are changing, and male-female relations are developing. The Arabs seem to yearn for a new identity that does not displace them from their roots, and at the same time connects them to the future; the search seems incessantly fruitless. Even non-Arabs seem to be confused about the issue. Vivid movie images mostly portray the Arab male as a primitive, fanatic, brutal, lunatic, vicious, and splendidly prosperous individual while the Arab woman is portrayed as a belly dancer or whore, a veiled submissive member of a luxurious harem, or a speechless oppressed character with no identity (Boullata, 1990). The political developments of the past few years did not help bring



about a better image. The rise of Islamic activism, end of the cold war, Huntington's "clash of civilizations" supposition, and the events of 11th September only reinforced the bewilderment and confusion.

In addressing the notion of women's participation in the business and political arenas in Arab societies, conflicting remarks are brought forward. Some refer to the role of culture and the prevailing religion in the area – Islam and interpretations of Islam – as possible reasons for such lack of participation (El-Saadawi, 1997; Mernissi, 1991). Islam, it is asserted, is not merely a set of beliefs and rituals but is also a social order that has an all-pervading influence on its followers (Weir, 2000). This essay attempts to present varying discourses pertaining to women's work and how it is impacted by interpretations of Islam. We present current discourses from various viewpoints including Muslim scholars on the one hand and active feminists on the other hand. We address the disagreements that exist in the camps of the religious scholars in their interpretations of religious texts impacting women and their work. In addition, we tackle the feminist discourse pertaining to the role of Islam, or understandings of Islam, in their participation and development.

### Women in Arab culture

Tracing the portrayals of Arabs in *National Geographic* over the course of a century, Steet (2000) concluded that this acclaimed publication had shown little change regarding its portrayal of the Arab world including Arab women. The vivid image of a typical Arab woman seems to be a veiled lady cut from social life. While this may indeed be the case in some existing Arab societies, this is not representative of early Arab societies. Despite the fact that women were denied from many rights before the advent of Islam, they were active in such areas as commerce and trade. The first convert to Islam, Khadija the wife of Muhammad the Prophet of Islam (570-632), was a thriving business-woman and at one point her husband's employer. Ahmed (1992) argues that the autonomy that Khadija had is reflective of the practices that were prevalent in some Arab societies before Islam. Women in some tribes had a certain degree of autonomy and enjoyed the right to engage in commercial activities and other arenas of social and political participation (Khreisat, 1998). Later on, Muslim women became active and played a visible role in the affairs of the young community. Some contemporary feminists consider that those exceptional roles set an interesting precedent for women's emancipation (Gettleman, 2003).

The immediate period after the death of the Prophet witnessed a brief tranquillity before political divisions started to surface. Despite brilliant examples of active females throughout Islamic history (Mernissi, 1993), their economic and political participation dwindled as time passed. By the early 1900s the situation had weakened to the extent where most women were prohibited from the right to get an education or share in public life (Al-Faruqi, 1987). During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the Arab world witnessed the birth of several feminist movements. Huda Sha'rawi, the most famous Arab feminist, started her movement in Egypt in 1919 which impacted other Arab countries in the 1930s and 1940s and feminist networks were set up in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

The socialist revolutions that swept through large parts of the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s emphasized the role of women in social and economic development.

The Arab woman became “the lawyer, the doctor, the engineer, the cabinet minister, the ambassador, the judge, the police officer, the paratrooper as well as the nurse, the teacher and the social worker” (Haddad, 1984, p. 146). But participation remained relatively low and differences between various Arab countries became more evident. While codes and actual practice became more relaxed in some countries like Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq, other countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia) retained strict control over women’s economic and political participation.

The combined efforts of intellectuals and feminist movements, as well as social and political developments in the past century led to fundamental changes in many Arab countries. Women’s education and right to work in traditional jobs such as medicine, teaching, and nursing has become undisputed in most of the Arab world and is allowed in religious circles. Reports on Arab human development indicate that there have been significant improvements pertaining to women’s development in the Arab world (Arab Human Development Report, 2002). Improvements in Arab female education were the fastest compared to any region and female literacy rates have expanded three-fold in the last 30 years. Despite those great efforts, female adult literacy in the Arab states in 2000 was 50 per cent and female literacy rate as a percentage of male rate was 68 per cent (Human Development Report, 2002). Again educational development has varied from one country to the other (Table I). In the United Arab Emirates, for example, in the year 2000, female literacy rate as a percentage of male rate reached 106 per cent in the year 2000 while in Yemen it was only 37 per cent.

	Adult literacy	
	Female rate (per cent of age 15 and above 2000)	Female rate as per cent of male rate 2000
Bahrain	82.6	91
Kuwait	79.7	95
United Arab Emirates	79.3	106
Qatar	83.1	103
Libya	68.2	75
Saudi Arabia	66.9	81
Lebanon	80.3	87
Oman	61.6	77
Tunisia	60.6	74
Jordan	83.9	88
Algeria	57.1	75
Syria	60.5	68
Egypt	43.8	66
Morocco	36.1	58
Comoros	48.7	77
Sudan	46.3	67
Yemen	25.2	37
Djibouti	54.4	72
Mauritania	30.1	59
Arab States	50.1	68

**Table I.** Adult literacy by gender **Source:** HDR Human Development Report (2002)

Advancements made were not paralleled by developments in social attitudes and norms. Metle (2002) indicated that Kuwaiti women are negatively impacted by the existing traditions and culture. Abdalla (1996) noted how Arabian Gulf women are locked in restrictive traditional roles. He asserted that some Arab women might have not taken a first genuine step towards equal opportunity. Mostafa (2003) uncovered significant differences between males' and females' perceptions relating to women's functioning and contributions in the Egyptian society. Women in the Arab world, in some countries more so than in others, continue to suffer from severe limitations on their participation in political, economic and social life, access to employment opportunities, high illiteracy, and wage discrimination (see Table II for an example of women's economic participation in various Arab countries). While several of these problems are common to males and females, their impact is most profound on females. The Arab Human Development Report (2002) indicated that women's political and economic participation has been unacceptably low. The gender empowerment measure (GEM) showed that the Arab region, compared to other world regions, ranked second to last, just surpassing sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, other indicators reflected significant gaps in gender equity.

The dire situation of women in many Arab societies has initiated a heated debate and an intense intellectual exchange. What follows is an attempt to present an overview of that debate which has been going on for over 50 years involving both traditionalists and modernists within religious and secular circles. Such a synopsis

	Labour-force participation rate in economic activity (per cent)		
	Males	Females	Both
Algeria	46.9	16.7	32.0
Bahrain	62.5	20.6	44.6
Comoros	51.4	39.1	45.3
Djibouti	—	—	28.4
Egypt	51.4	22.1	37.0
Iraq	43.4	10.3	27.1
Jordan	43.8	13.4	28.9
Kuwait	49.4	24.7	37.4
Lebanon	49.6	19.1	34.0
Libya	43.0	12.9	28.6
Mauritania	52.1	39.9	46.0
Morocco	51.0	27.1	39.1
Oman	42.9	8.6	26.9
Qatar	72.0	22.0	54.9
Saudi Arabia	50.3	10.4	32.6
Somalia	49.4	37.1	43.2
Sudan	55.7	22.7	39.2
Syria	44.5	16.2	30.5
Tunisia	52.1	23.9	38.2
UAE	67.3	18.9	49.8
Yemen	45.5	17.7	31.7

Source: Arab Human Development Report (2002)

**Table II.**  
Economic activity rates

would present some of the views that have tried to explain women's lack of economic and political participation especially when it comes to the role of Islam.

### **The religious scholars (*ulama'*) discourse**

Not all Arabs are Muslims and most Muslims are not Arabs, but the role of Islam in Arab societies cannot be denied. Despite the fact that the political role of Islam eroded in the early 1900s, many Arab countries have witnessed a strong resurgence of Islam since the early 1970s (Esposito, 1994; Haddad, 1984). Islam is still a major spiritual and social force in the Arab world and its impact has been pervasive on the lives of its people. The significant role of Muslims scholars (*ulama'*) deserves special attention. The *ulama'* are not priests in the Christian sense but rather "people of knowledge" or "heirs of the Prophets" to whom people turn for guidance in their spiritual and social affairs (Black, 2001). With the emergence of Arab nationalist movements in various parts of the Arab world from the 1950s onwards, the role of the *ulama'* subsided with a general decline in religiosity. The impact of the *ulama'* in the daily life of Muslims has reintensified after the resurgence of Islamic activism from the 1970s onwards (Zaman, 2002). While the *ulama'* can include female figures, common practice shows that the vast majority of the *ulama'* are males. Many exceptions to this fact have occurred throughout Muslim history; fewer exceptions exist today.

When writing about women's issues, most *ulama'* have tended to start by discussing the status of women in the historical past (El-Sibai, 1962; Nawwabuddin, 1987). They note how the Greeks, Romans, and other civilizations dealt with women's issues. The status of women in pre-Islamic Arabia is typically presented and criticized. Muslim authors also emphasize how women in Western societies were only able to own property and enter into contracts in the 1800s. In addition, an inferior attitude towards women in several world philosophies is usually critiqued and compared to that of Islam (El-Sibai, 1962). They cite how Islam gave women spiritual, social, political, and economic rights centuries before Western societies did. Several authors make reference to great women in the history of Islam who participated to a great degree in spiritual, political, and social affairs of their societies. Al-Buti (1996), for example, narrates the story of Umm-Sharik, a female Muslim companion of the Prophet Muhammad (*sahabiyya*) who used to operate as a hotel manager (probably the first known such figure in the history of the region). Stories of women involved in trade, nursing, agriculture, crafts, and other professions are frequently brought forward (Abu-Shaqua, 1990).

The *ulama'* are unanimous in arguing that Islam addresses men and women equally pertaining to issues of faith (Turabi, 1988) and it is agreed that women are capable and required to carry out God's commands. Men and women represent two branches of a single tree and two children from the same father, Adam, and mother, Eve. Their common origin, their general human qualities, their equal accountability in relation to religious duties (with ensuing reward or punishment) and the unity of their destiny all testify to their equality (Al-Qaradawi, 1998).

Differences among the *ulama'* start to emerge when details are presented. Opinions diverge with regards to the details of female work and her participation in public life, whereas other areas of disagreement relate to the mixing of sexes in society and to women's dress. Running the risk of oversimplification of the *ulama'* attitudes, one can classify their opinions into two categories. The first group of *ulama'* represents

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the traditional view most prevalent, though not exclusively, in some Arabian Gulf countries. The second group includes modernist ulama' whose views are relatively more liberal. The terms traditionalist-modernist are used for identification purposes as both of these groups are considered to be part of mainstream Islam.

### **Traditional ulama' – the example of Sheikh Abdel-Aziz BinBaz**

Much of the discourse from ulama' in countries such as Saudi Arabia tends to be conservative. The ideas of the late Saudi Sheikh Abdel-Aziz BinBaz are discussed here as they have characterized a school of thought representing the *salafiah* (which literally means adherence to early Muslim orthodoxy) and he was the most influential religious scholar in Saudi Arabia. Sheikh BinBaz (1912-1999) was the Grand *mufti* of Saudi Arabia. (A mufti is the principal scholar certified by virtue of his official position to issue *fatwas* or religious edicts and interpretations.) He was also the head of the council of senior ulama'. Despite the fact that his impact was limited outside of Saudi Arabia, he was deeply respected by millions and exerted a powerful influence on the legal system in Saudi Arabia. He wrote several books on religious matters and issued thousands of fatwas, many pertaining to women (BinBaz, 1988). His ideas are shared by other many other religious scholars in Saudi Arabia, including the late Sheikh Muhammad Otheimin and the current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Asheikh.

Sheikh BinBaz's views reflect the notion that the engagement of women in "male's domains" separates them from their *fitra* (innate natures), which eventually leads to women's misery and demise. In his view, such an occurrence poses a danger to Muslim society as it leads to moral decay. He asserted that taking the woman out from her home, "her kingdom", means taking her out from her innate nature and character which God has moulded her into. He viewed the involvement of women in men's domains not only a major crime on her but also a crime against the young generation, males and females, who lose proper education, compassion, and kindness (BinBaz, 1985, 1988).

BinBaz indicated that drawing reference to early active Muslim women who used to go with men to the battlefield is a false analogy if used to conclude that women could likewise go outside their homes to work in the same domains as men. BinBaz also contended that women could work in fields that are women's domain, such as female education, nursing and medical care. So while BinBaz had no problem with women's education and work, he emphasized that this was to be done within a strict separation between men and women, as the free mixing of women and men in the work domain leads to the decay of Muslim society and its demise (BinBaz, 1985).

BinBaz's views represent a whole school of thought that is adopted and widely accepted in many areas of the Arabian Peninsula. The official position he occupied in addition to the respect given to him by temporal leaders, has given his views significant credibility. His successor as grand mufti seems to belong to the same school of thought. The strong impact of this school has made Saudi Arabia sheltered against the rising tide of increased women's participation in other Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Pejman, 2004). Women in Saudi Arabia cannot drive cars, are required to wear the head-scarf covering their hair and, in some areas, are expected to cover their faces. While they have gained increased access to education and few gender segregated job opportunities, their representation in the labour-force participation rate was barely over 10 per cent in 2002 (Arab Human Development Report, 2002).

It should be noted that Saudi Arabia represents a unique, though significant, case among Arab countries. Housing the two most holy sites for Muslims (Mecca and Medina), Saudi Arabia is symbolically the worldwide centre of attention when it comes to Islamic issues. But the case of women in Saudi Arabia is truly distinctive as this area has been the most impenetrable to outside influences (Ahmed, 1992). While the roles of women in other Arab countries have witnessed major strides toward more participation, women's development in Saudi Arabia has been relatively slower. After the war on Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003 and rising talk about the rights of women, this conservative tendency in Saudi Arabia has been criticized and attempts for more visibility for women are being initiated. The fifth Jeddah Economic Forum held in Saudi Arabia in 2004 attracted over 1,000 leaders from around the globe. However, what was most notable was the first-ever female participation in key activities. Lubna Olayan, CEO of a major financing company and one of *Fortune's* top 50 most influential women outside the US, delivered the keynote speech (Olayan, 2004). The highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia, probably in response to such tendencies, reaffirmed in the 2004 *hajj* (Muslim pilgrimage) speech that "women should be grateful to the respectful role accorded to them by Islam as mothers" (Abdul Ghafour, 2004).

It should be noted that the lack of female participation in the work arena cannot be solely attributed to the role of traditional ulama'. The prevailing cultural norms, which are sometimes of tribal, not religious, origin, have put pressures on women's ability to involve themselves in the economic development of their societies. Sometimes the ulama's strict understanding could be perceived as merely putting a religious impression on various long-standing traditions and practices.

### **Modernist ulama' – the example of Muhammad Al-Ghazali**

Of all the Arab ulama', Muhammad Al-Ghazali (1917-1996) was probably the most revolutionary in addressing women's concerns. His ideas are shared by other notable and influential ulama' including Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Abdel-Haleem AbuShaqua, and Hasan Turabi. Together they represent a growing modernist trend among some ulama', but Al-Ghazali was the most vocal and his ideas were probably the most penetrating. Born in Egypt in a religious environment, Al-Ghazali graduated from *Al-Azhar* (the most renowned Muslim religious university) in 1943. He taught at several universities, most notably in Algeria, where his ideas had a profound impact. He wrote lots of articles in major Arab newspapers and magazines and was featured extensively on Arab TVs in hundreds of religious programs (Al-Qaradawi, 2000).

Al-Ghazali (1990) criticized the traditions that exist in Arab societies which inhibit women's mobility. Those traditions are typically blamed on Islam, while in reality they have nothing to do with Islam. He indicated that Islam provided a significant sense of equity between the two genders. Any differences are related to the nature of the human instinct and the different roles assigned to each gender. He maintained that there are certain traditions put by people and not by God which cripple women's development, keeping them in *jahiliyah* (ignorance). This has resulted in degradation in the whole *umma* (Muslim community). Al-Ghazali severely attacked some of those in charge of religious affairs, indicating that they are mainly occupied in one thing: keeping women in prisons of ignorance and psychological defeat. He condemned the fact that women have no real political or cultural role in many Arab societies and do not even have a say

in school programs or social affairs. He asserted that women have been cut from the affairs of their communities and have been restricted to domestic service and bodily instincts (Al-Ghazali, 1989). It is no surprise then, according to Al-Ghazali, that some modern female intellectuals feel a sense of contempt for religious traditions as these are falsely accused of crushing their development and aspirations. He also called for a revolution in Islamic thinking and the refinement of false traditions attributed wrongly to Islam.

Among the issues that clearly distinguishes Al-Ghazali and his school is the issue of the woman's veil. He asserted that the headscarf that covers the woman's hair is a commandment by God but it does not – and should not – pose an impediment to her economic and political participation. He indicated, however, in no uncertain terms that the face cover, prevalent in some Muslim societies, is related to tribal and traditional norms and not to injunctions of Islam.

Al-Ghazali's criticisms of current practices in some Muslim societies often reached the verge of sarcasm. He indicated that, in the same manner that some abhorrent practices against women existed in some Western societies, other practices should be commended and emulated. He praised the worldwide women's movement aiming for social and political development and called on Muslim women to behave accordingly within the instructions of Islam. He asserted that this can be accomplished by opening the doors for political and labour participation for women in an environment, where a certain amount of mixing between the genders should be expected and accepted (Al-Ghazali, 1989, 1990).

It is evident that women's issues have occupied a sizable portion of the thinking of many ulama' since the nineteenth century. Reform in their opinion needs to be take place at several levels, most important of which is reform in the cultural and educational upbringing of Muslims. Other ulama' have indicated early on the need to change legislation but this does not seem to be an over-riding concern for the ulama' in general. This is in contrast to the Arab feminist agenda, which has been overwhelmed by the need for legal reform. It seems that the ulama' discourse is dominated by the need to show the elevated position that Islam gave to women and refuting the claims of local and international feminist movements. Statistics for rape, divorce, extra-marital affairs, sexual abuse, and suicide rates are usually presented as a sign of the moral degradation of Western societies. These are used to indicate that despite all advancements made, women are still not better off "there". However, their discourse seems to underestimate the current situation of Arab women and emphasize the virtues of the Islamic way of life. Al-Ghazali can be noted as a strong exception as his writings stress the fine features of Islam and how it treats women, while at the same time highlighting the regretful situation of Muslim and Arab women in their societies today.

### **Feminist discourse**

Most ulama' receive traditional education in local religious schools which mainly concentrate on issues of religious interpretation and jurisprudence. For example, Al-Azhar religious university of Egypt, has been criticized by some as offering education that concentrates on memorizing texts of tradition and jurisprudence courses without "ever really thinking about their relevance to the world today" (Hammond, 1998). The most notable feminists in the Arab world have been educated in different educational systems or in the west and accordingly have differed remarkably

from the ulama' (especially the traditionalist ulama') in their assessment of women's situation. It is accordingly important to see how Arab feminists have expressed themselves. Arab women have conveyed their ideas, needs, and aspirations in a wide variety of fields: they were elected to parliaments and caused occasional uproars, they have organized conferences, written petitions, and participated in demonstrations, and they have authored novels, short stories, autobiographies, scholarly articles and books. In all of that, they have agreed on the necessity to change their societies and uplift the ways women are treated but beyond that agreement, "Arab women do not speak in one voice" (Boullata, 1990, p. 19). Some see in the male elite a common enemy; others perceive that both men and women suffer from the same underdevelopment and injustice in their societies. Some blame the all-encompassing power of religion or the conventional understanding of religious texts; others look at religion as the way for improvement and recovery. Some blame the existing internal power structures for the derailment of women's development; others see problems more as a result of unremitting imperialist political interference that divert attention from the real issues.

We give below two examples of Arab feminists that seem to offer contrasting views representative of many of the different perspectives of women and work in their societies. The first is Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist writer and anthropologist; the second is Heba Ra'uf, an Egyptian intellectual and activist.

### **Fatima Mernissi**

In her writings, Mernissi analyzes male-female dynamics, sexuality, Islamic societies, women's liberation in Muslim countries, Islamic history and its impact on women's issues, and the role of the state in developing or impeding equality. She argues that there are those who have vested interests in blocking women's rights in Muslim societies (Mernissi, 1991). She criticizes the frame of mind that denies women their full enjoyment of human rights labelling people of such mentality as being ignorant of their past, ignorant of their Islamic history, and ignorant of the scholarship of Islam. She remarks that "if women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite" (Mernissi, 1991, p. ix). Other writings of Mernissi seem to offer a different position. In her comparisons of the Western Christian experience with the Islamic one, she contends that in the former, sexuality itself was attacked as a degrading animal behaviour. In Islam, she asserts, the subject of attack and fear is not the act of sexuality but the woman herself as "... a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential" (Mernissi, 1987, p. 44).

Mernissi (1993) distinguishes between Islam *risala* (the divine message) and political Islam. While Islam *risala* represents the ideal recorded in the *Qur'an*, political Islam refers to the Islamic practice of those with vested interests. Mernissi asserts that "Islam uses space as a device for sexual control" (Mernissi, 1987, p. xvi). She questions the male mentality that is "dishonoured" if a female member of their family works outside the home. In the male mind "space" is divided into an economic productive arena (public and male) and a domestic sphere (private and female) and these two areas cannot mix. Mernissi moves on to question reasons behind the refusal of the Arab male to understand the economic dimension of females. She identifies several historical reasons behind the failure to recognize such a role and asserts that a selective memory

by Arab leadership results in oppressive and anti-egalitarian policies. To Mernissi, this is carefully done in an effort to exploit working women.

Even when a woman is able to get out of the private (female) arena into the public (male) sphere, she continues to be exploited. Mernissi (1987) recounts the situation of the working woman in Morocco who is subjugated in the office in the same manner a daughter or a wife is subjugated at home. The office worker is totally dependent on her male boss; he has control over her salary and advancement. It is not surprising that the male boss would “confuse” her for his wife because of the privileges and rights assigned to him as a bureaucrat and as a “man” and may accordingly extend his control to her body. As women have been entering in greater numbers into the public (male) arenas, more anxiety and apprehension can be found among men who are not used to sharing their bounties with members of the other sex.

Mernissi (1987) also asserts, on the other hand, that the liberation of women is mostly an economic issue. The relationship between women’s liberation and economic development is shown by the parallels in the circumstances of the two sexes as they both suffer from exploitation and dispossession. She asserts that – over and above the general exploitation everybody has been exposed to – Islamic societies have developed institutions that attempt to contain women and control their power.

### Heba Ra’uf

Heba Ra’uf (born 1965) is a member of the teaching faculty at Cairo University. She has written extensively in several newspapers and magazines. At the same time she edits a web-based magazine called *Hawwa’ wa Adam* (Eve and Adam). Like Mernissi, Ra’uf stresses the importance of new interpretations of the *Qur’an* and *Sunna* (traditions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad). She makes a point of agreeing with some of Mernissi’s results while disagreeing with her methodology (El-Saadawi, 1997). Ra’uf argues that the advancement of women’s causes in Arab and Muslim societies requires a revival of Islamic thought and a renewal within Islamic jurisprudence. She criticizes the feminist approach of using a legal approach to women’s problems; that is, framing women’s problems as part of a negative legal environment while at the same time neglecting the crisis in the family. Concentrating on changes in the laws in many Arab countries, some Arab feminists have neglected the sorry state of social institutions. In the same manner she strongly criticizes efforts that merely mimic Western feminism.

Ra’uf observes in her dress the Muslim veil. This raises the question of the impact of the veil on women’s work and mobility. On the one hand, some feminists like the famous Nawal El-Saadawi, severely criticize the veil: “veiling and nakedness are two sides of the same coin. Both mean women are bodies without mind . . .” (El-Saadawi, 1997, p. 140). Ra’uf sees it as a means of liberation not oppression: “the veil neutralizes women’s sexuality in the public sphere, making clear that they are citizens – not sexual objects” (Polter, 1997).

Ra’uf acknowledges women’s place in the public sphere, a place traditionally assigned to males in society. She challenges any separation between the public and private spheres (El-Gawhary, 1994). While refusing the public-private dichotomy, she refuses the priority axiom advanced by the ulama’, i.e. priority given to the home. She emphasizes that women’s work and role should encompass both the private and the public. They are interrelated: “Breaking the dichotomy would give housewives more social esteem and would encourage working women to fulfil their psychological need to

be good mothers and wives” (El-Gawhary, 1994, p. 27) Ra’uf asserts that the Islamic values which govern the public sphere would govern the private sphere as well. For example, the concept of *shura* (consultation) – which is mainly understood as a political (public) concept and tool in Islam, is a value that also governs the private family relations. Accordingly, families and the relations within them should be based on *shura*.

Ra’uf asserts that while Islam gave men and women similar rights and responsibilities, any remaining differences relate to their nature. In this regard, her discourse resembles that of Al-Ghazali. She asserts that women have a role to play in both the private and the public sphere. Each woman should be given the choice between different roles at different stages of her life. The role of social institutions is to provide the opportunity for her to contribute in all spheres of life whether at home with her family, or in the political and economic arenas. Accordingly, she affirms that qualified women in a Muslim society should be allowed to public functions in the same manner that qualified men are allowed to such functions. Accordingly she stresses that women are entitled to occupy the positions of heads of states or judges. This is an issue which has been the centre of heated debate in Egypt and some other countries as well over the past few years.

### **Implications and conclusion**

Table III presents a summary of the main ideas that have been highlighted in this paper. Such discourses have significantly impacted women and their work in different Arab societies. The feminist discourse and activism since the early 1900s has been contributing to an increased – albeit insufficient – work participation. In countries such as Lebanon and Egypt, the existence of a very expressive feminist movement together with an environment of relative openness has led to increased women participation in the work arena. It is suggested here that the strict religious understanding given by some scholars, in such countries as Saudi Arabia, could be understood as an unconscious attempt to provide a religious justification for various cultural norms and practices. The prevailing cultural practices, justified by a conservative religious understanding, has led to significantly low women’s economic involvement. Nevertheless, the increasing modernist or reformist trend in Islamic thinking, with the openness facilitated by innovation in communications channels such as the internet and satellite broadcasting, is bringing new potential to increased women participation in work and other aspects of life.

The recent history of Arab women and their participation in public life has witnessed fundamental changes in the past few decades. The potential role of women has undergone major developments in varying degrees in different parts of the Arab world. There are lots of divisions between some feminists and some ulama’ but obviously also among the ulama’ themselves and among feminists themselves. The attempt to divide Arab activism into two camps, one being religious-based adverse to women’s causes, and the other secular and supportive of their causes is, not only too simplistic, but does not present an honest portrayal of the varying forces. Among religious circles, heated debates and disagreements have been going on and are far from being settled. The same can be found among feminists. Some feminists call for more participation based purely on secular standards that emulate other global secular movements, while others find no problem in actively seeking more participation from a religious standpoint.

<p><i>Ulama' discourse</i> Traditional ulama' (e.g. Binbaz – Saudi Arabia)</p>	<p>Satisfaction with women staying at home and devoting their lives to their families Women can work in certain “female” jobs only Engagement of women in “male’s domains” should not permitted Strict separation between men and women should be observed Face veil is a must</p>
<p>Modernist ulama' (e.g. Al-Ghazali – Egypt)</p>	<p>Dismayed by the situation of women in Arab societies and the lack of their economic and political participation Women’s work and participation should be encouraged and welcomed The veil that covers the hair is required but it does not pose an impediment to women’s work participation A certain amount of mixing between the genders should be expected and accepted</p>
<p><i>Feminist discourse</i> Mernissi (Morocco)</p>	<p>Islamic societies have developed institutions that attempt to contain women and control their power “Male elite” refuses to understand the economic dimension of females and exploits them in work situations Prevailing Muslim thinking uses space as a device for sexual control and exploitation</p>
<p>Ra’uf (Egypt)</p>	<p>Advancement of women’s causes requires a revival of Islamic thought and a renewal within Islamic jurisprudence The veil (headscarf) is a means of liberation not oppression as it neutralizes women’s sexuality in the public sphere Women have a role to play in both the private (family) and the public (economic and political) spheres Each woman should be given the choice between different roles at different stages of her life</p>

**Table III.**  
Ulama’ discourse vs  
feminist discourse

Within the Arab and Muslim world there has been a rebirth of groups acting for women’s rights based on the reinterpretation of religious texts. These groups cannot be inevitably classified as “Islamist groups” as they do not necessarily have a political agenda based on Islam. After all, with the exception of few feminists, most women rights activists in the Arab world do not have an anti-Islam stand. They would assert that the women’s movement in the Arab world should not, and cannot, be an anti-religious movement. In addition and as Al-Faruqi (1987) suggests, feminist movements in Muslim societies should not work for women’s interests alone. Human development in the Arab world suffers and it is best for all groups in the society to elevate the status of everybody starting with women but not ending there.

There is a growing, through not conclusive, trend in the religious discourse that asserts that women’s work is not anti-Islamic. In doing this, a major reassessment of the Muslim history and traditions is being presented, sometimes by Muslim scholars, and other times by Arab feminists. To elevate the status of women in all the regions requires a process where such views are continuously communicated, discussed and exposed. This is a practice that is already happening but its impact still varies from one region to the other. While this may have proven to be a rewarding task, some feminists fear that an over-involvement in such an exercise may beat the whole

purpose of the feminist movement. Moghadam (2002) indicates that an excessive concern about reinterpreting Islamic texts could lead to stale focus on theological arguments rather than socio-economic and political issues. The risk is that women's causes will gain lots of victories on the academic and intellectual fronts with no parallel developments on the ground.

Some authors have indicated that, after the last global developments, Western feminism will most likely confront its Eastern counterpart and the result will surely change our definition of feminism itself (McElroy, 2003). While the rejection of religion has deep roots within some Western feminist circles, its Eastern counterpart manifested in Islamic feminism have a tendency to be more at ease with religious traditions. Fathia El-Assaale, an Arab feminist and political activist scriptwriter, indicates that she is suspicious of feminist movements that regard men as oppressors which in effect generates hostility between the two sexes. Other leading Arab feminists openly express a similar sentiment (Abou El-Magd, 1999). Continuous struggles are definitely still needed but the opportunity should be given to indigenous culture-sensitive movements to express themselves. Failure to do this may lead to the suffering of the very people we are trying to help.

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