

Women living under muslim laws  
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين  
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

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## DOSSIER 5-6

December 1988 – May 1989

### **Women, Religion and Social Change in Pakistan: A Proposed Framework for Research - Draft An International Centre for Ethnic Studies Project (1988-89)**

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The research project on Women, Religion and Social Change in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka currently being undertaken by ICES provides a unique opportunity to explore the cross-cultural dimensions of continuing tradition and the process of change as these relate to women and in this the role of religion. A grey area of uncertainty, prejudice, and very little research, the role of religion in determining the possible for individual actors, particularly women, has rarely received the attention it deserves. Religion has normally been ignored by development planners and those concerned with women's development as a personal matter beyond planning, and its rituals beliefs and superstitions have often been dismissed as anachronisms that "would disappear with modernization and science."

Especially in ex-colonial states, religiously defined or religiously coloured practices and beliefs are an everyday reality for most people and are not viewed as anachronistic. Together, they provide an essential worldview and a reference for self-identity that is underscored by the experience of colonization and subsequent post-independence developments. Nor should it be presumed that religion is uni-dimensional or fixed in time. Most religions are divided into sub-sects.

Within one sub-group religious attitudes and practices vary with ethnic and class identity, and with time, these undergo changes. Any one of these factors may impede or facilitate positive changes for women.

#### **Some Conceptual Issues:**

To examine the dynamism between religious continuity and social change thus requires some clarity about the factors under consideration. In our view, social change is the concrete expression of people's adaptation to structural and material changes in the means, organization and relations of production. Adaptation to structural/material changes is filtered through people's worldview in which religion plays a greater or lesser role depending on past history and social grouping. At the same time the 'world view filter' is neither static nor monolithic, but varies with time and social grouping.

Once social changes have taken place, these have a momentum of their own. In turn, these influence structural organisation and material conditions, necessitating further social changes, re-filtered through the worldview. In responding to structural or social changes, the worldview itself undergoes modifications. In fact it is the ability of religions to continuously re-interpret traditions in the light of altered circumstances that allows religious continuity.

Equally important is the need to recognize that religion operates at different levels and, for analytical purposes, to distinguish between religion as faith, as an embodiment of social customs, as a mobilizing force in the political arena and, linked to all of these, religion as a means of self-identity and identification of one's environment. In this, we would posit that religion as faith undergoes the least changes but, insofar as it provides its adherents with a means of self-identity, is a starting point. This identity takes on material shape as a body of beliefs and behavioural patterns that order community life.

In translating identity into tangible norms and customs, factors other than faith intervene. Pre-existing social structures and power relations play a major role in determining social customs and religious practices. Consequently, social customs having nothing to do with a given religion and possibly in contradiction with the religious scripture are practiced by communities as supposedly religious norms. (As for instance the practise of dowry amongst Muslims in Pakistan or their refusal to grant females their due inheritance.). Religion as an ideology is normally used to legitimize existing structures and relations but can also be used to challenge these. In the first instance, religion will be used by ruling elites, in the second by emerging political groups or movements. (See Tiger and Levy: 77)

(Iran is the most striking example of the second instance.) Clearly then, religion does not always fulfil the same needs of different social classes/groups, and, in looking at women, religion, and social change, class identities will have to be kept in focus.

In the context of South Asia, such differences have been underscored by the experience of colonization. Speaking of the Muslim world, Kandiyoti says: "(Religion) provides believers with a consistent vantage point from which to view and interpret the world - a vantage point which may at times be successfully appropriated as their own by social forces intent on control of the state and radical change... It is easily possible to demonstrate that Islam has taken on the attributes of a 'defensive' ideology, an ideology of cultural reproduction under conditions of real or perceived threat. The failure of most Muslim states to generate ideologies capable of realistically coping with social change and their histories of colonization, or at least dependence vis-à-vis the West has meant that they relied on Islam not only as the only coherent ideologies at their disposal but also as a symbol of their cultural identity and integrity. This has had extremely serious repercussions for women... (Since) the control of women became the last bastion of cultural identity to be tenaciously defended." pp 3-4).

Kandiyoti raises a number of important points. To begin with, the procedure of adapting to social change delineated above allows men to adapt to changed circumstances while maintaining some social and psychological continuity by making the private sphere of life and women the repositories of cultural identity. The same process that facilitates change for men thus imposes artificial restrictions on women. The more pressing and rapid the changes taking place, the greater will be the desire to maintain stability in the home. (As a rider we would add that the increasing loss of control in the outside world reinforces this tendency. See Mumtaz and Shaheed - 88).

Further, she underlines the fact that the beneficiaries and losers of the changing socio-economic orders do not necessarily share the same world view. Religion provides a useful vehicle through which the losers can express their alienation and antagonism vis-à-vis the ruling elites who, in ex-colonial states, are condemned not for being exploiters but for being Westernized. Alternatively, religion can be the vehicle adopted by an emerging class that, having gained economic status, is making a bid for political power. The shifting patterns of political development therefore cannot be ignored. For instance, if pre-independence India saw the emergence of a traditionalist movement among the Muslim in the North, the movement found material support from Muslim weavers who were the worst hit by the colonial policies promoting British textile mills. (Alavi: 87) Having achieved independence, there has been little scope for traditionalists in Pakistan, and they have now given way to the emerging "fundamentalists", who can more appropriately be called obscurantists and who are more notable for their opportunistic manoeuvring than an unrelenting stand on fundamental principles. Although the most consistent stand of fundamentalist men is their position on women, even this has been modified in response to political exigencies.

Kandiyoti provides yet another pointer, which is that the same political process affects religious communities differently. If Islam is characterized by its "defensiveness" then, conversely, during the colonial period Christianity was far from defensive. The linkage to colonial power facilitated the acceptance of British norms and customs amongst the Christian community and allowed Christian women to participate in social changes such as education and employment to a greater extent and faster than either Hindus or Muslims. After the departure of the British at independence, and in a predominantly Muslim Pakistan, Christianity is far more defensive. Its adherents are now assuming norms and customs that are rooted not in Christianity but in the South Asian Muslim environment in which they have to operate. The specificity of religious communities is also highlighted by the position of the Parsees in Pakistan.

The community arrived in India on the condition that its members would not undertake any conversions. Having kept this promise, the Parsees enjoy a unique position. A well-educated and economically affluent community, the Parsees are not associated with colonial power nor are they large enough to pose a serious political/economic threat. And, it should be added, they have always maintained a low political profile. The very distinctiveness of the Parsee community, combined with the visible profile of Parsee women in "modern" occupations, makes them an interesting case study for Pakistan.

With respect to the Muslim majority (90-95%) it is clear that, on the whole, smaller changes have been allowed in order to maintain more basic institutions. This is most obvious in the case of allopathic medicine and education on the one hand, and the institution of *purdah* on the other. As an essential pillar of the Muslim patriarchal system in South Asia, *purdah* had to be maintained. (See Shaheed: 85 & 88). However, once 'modern' education and allopathic medicine were accepted by Muslim Indians, they faced a dilemma. Without allowing women access to medical and other education, the benefits of these could only be made available to Muslim women through the intermediary of men. To rectify this situation, *purdah* schools and hospitals were created giving an impetus to female employment, firstly of non-Muslim and later of Muslim women. As a result, women in India became doctors and gained positions of eminence in education at a time when this was still rare elsewhere. As Woodsmall noted, it seemed as if "the very lack of social equality in the East thus has been the major factor in promoting professional equality" (Woodsmall: 83, p. 244). An unplanned consequence was that the acceptance of women's employment as doctors and in education paved the way for women entering other professions.

On a different plane, a similar pattern is visible. Inspired by other communities, Muslim Indians slowly started mobilizing Muslim women in the nationalist struggles. Though mobilization was not intended to promote female emancipation as such, the fact that women left their homes, addressed meetings and carried out political and social work did break the taboos constraining "respectable" Muslim women (i.e. the non-working class minority) to remain strictly within the confines of the household's *zenana* section. The legitimation of this type of work later facilitated women leaving their homes for other purposes. Here we would like to emphasise that the cultural norms followed and aspired to by a community in general are usually dictated or guided by those practiced by the dominant classes. Yet, paradoxically, because society is constantly in a state of flux, there are situations where upwardly mobile classes are adopting various customs at the very time that the upper classes are discarding them. Specifically in the case of Pakistan one can see this happening with *purdah*-norms. Today, the all-encompassing *burqa* has virtually disappeared amongst the urban upper class in Punjab and in Karachi, yet this is now being adopted by the newly upwardly mobile middle class.

The adoption of the *burqa* may be for two reasons: either as an easily recognizable status symbol that distinguishes the wearers from the poorer classes they have left, or because it is the only condition under which these women can leave their homes. Both reasons are important and though they may act in concert have different implications. The *burqa* itself is a relatively new innovation of the 19th century, which allowed women of the affluent classes to break the isolation of strict home confinement. The association with the upper classes gave the *burqa* its social prestige. Over time, with the acceptance of women's expanded space, the need for this "portable

seclusion" amongst urban affluent families may have disappeared. But it is possible that for other women, access to education and employment may be only, or more easily, available if they wear a heavy veil. The question that needs to be answered is whether the adoption of a physical veil enhances or reduces the scope for social change for women and the circumstances leading to one or the other.

In her new introduction to *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi makes a very revealing statement (Mernissi: 87). She says that one has to differentiate between what people do (reality) from what they say (how they identify themselves). In Pakistan, the dissonance between action and verbalization is clearly demonstrated in the case of the "fundamentalists", particularly the women. While calling for strict gender segregation, fundamentalist women have steadily moved away from supporting female seclusion. In the last ten years the fundamentalist call for women to stay in the home except for emergencies has given way to demanding segregated work places to allow millions of women to get employment in 'Islamic' conditions. This radical change has taken place so gradually that it has been completely over-looked until now. (Mumtaz and Shaheed: 88).

This supports the contention that fundamentalism is a dynamic force and that the rise of such movements is related to the bewildering pace of change being experienced in today's countries of the South. In the absence of any other ideology that would enable people most affected to deal with such changes and their histories of colonization, religion is used to fill the vacuum. This has also been recorded in the Malaysian context by Zainah Anwar, in a study on Islamic revivalism amongst students. (Anwar: 87).

In the case of Pakistan, the rise of fundamentalism cannot be isolated from the role of Zia's government over the past decade. There is no doubt that his well-orchestrated and widely publicized campaigns for the "Islamization" of society have given a new, and unprecedented, impetus to the fundamentalist/obscurantist lobbies. If Zia used Islam as an obvious ploy to legitimize his illegal seizure of power and subsequent self-perpetuation at the head of an authoritarian and undemocratic rule, it is equally true that, backed by the entire state apparatus, his decade-long Islamization has given credibility to the fundamentalists' argument and promoted their cause in a country where they have never enjoyed popular support (as seen from the consistently poor results of religiously defined political parties in any type of election). The position taken by those holding state power also influences the role religion as culture plays at any given time - though religion as culture exists independently of the state machinery allowing for its political use - underlining the political use of religion.

For Pakistan, the question of religious identity is perhaps more easily used for political purposes than elsewhere because it is one of only two countries to have achieved statehood on the basis of this single identity. Unfortunately, in the intervening years Pakistan has failed to develop a national identity uniting the smaller nationalities it comprises and remains a state-nation. (see Rashid: 85 and Shaheed: 87). After independence:

"In jockeying for power, the political elites, of whom the fundamentalists were never a part, used the latter's views to bolster their own relative positions, and in the bargain gave currency to fundamentalist arguments. The most important casualty of this internal tussle for power and the manipulations it entailed was the democratic process and, consequently, the chances of evolving a Pakistani national identity." (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1988: p.5)

As a result, ethnic identities have become increasingly important in deciding the parameters of people's lives, at the same time that Zia's Islamization campaign has sharpened sectarian divisions. The impact of intensified sub-state identities on women is an uncharted area in Pakistan that needs to be explored. Even a surface appraisal shows that the impact is not uniform. Whereas Pathans (of the North West Frontier Province) decided that in certain constituencies no women would cast a vote in the 1985 and 1987 elections both in the Frontier *and* in the far-off metropolis of Karachi, the recent Sindhi nationalist movement has given birth to wide-spread women's organizations, activating huge numbers of Sindhi women on political and social issues including those affecting women. The latest manifestation of this process is the Muhajur Quami Mahaz, representing the second and third generation of those

who migrated from India at independence. The MQM held a mammoth women's meeting recently, so far unequalled in size.

**Proposed Framework for Pakistan:**

The study on women, religion and social change being proposed for 1988- 89 cannot cover all the points mentioned above. Nevertheless it should be designed to allow some insights into these and devised with the following in mind.

1. Religion has a multiple role in society:

- it provides adherents with both self-identity and a worldview
- it gives shape to (and justifies) social customs and norms. -it mediates between changing material/structural circumstances and people's lives.
- it is a powerful mobilizing force in the political arena.

2. However, religion is not the only intervening factor, and class and ethnic identity also play important roles in governing women's lives and the possibility of social change.

3. Past histories affect a community's behaviour, influencing the reaction of both sub-sects and religious communities to social change. Some reactions may facilitate positive change for women while others obstruct this.

4. Religious minorities are both influenced by and influence society at large, and to understand women, religion and social change, even small minority communities should be examined.

5. The rise of Muslim fundamentalism in Pakistan has to be seen as a dynamic force responding to social change. The role of state-power in promoting or opposing fundamentalist movements also needs to be kept in view.

6. The great level of social change has taken place in the urban environment where - not coincidentally - the fundamentalist movement has the greatest support-base. Urban centres thus occupy a primary position in determining both social change and the possibilities for women.

With this in mind it is proposed that the research project for Pakistan be based in the two largest cities where it is presumed that the greatest scope for social change exists. As the largest urban and industrial centre of the country, Karachi (Sind) is unique in that its population has a representation of all the ethnic and religious diversity of Pakistan. It also has the largest concentration of Parsees. In Karachi, the research project would cover:

- a. The Parsees as a separate community, to examine the manner in which social change is experienced by women. Unlike Islam, Zoroastrianism does not appear to restrict women and therefore provides a useful point of comparison, since on the other hand the community has to operate in the same over-all environment.
- b. The ethnic pot-pourri of Karachi also provides a rare opportunity to study the interaction of ethnicity and religion as these relate to social change in the midst of the most rapidly changing environment of the country. As many of the communities also include recent rural migrants it will allow some exploration of the tensions and pressures that bear upon recent migrants and the extent to which religion and ethnic cohesiveness play a role in the adjustment process.

Lahore, a very old city, is the cultural and political centre of Punjab, and also plays an important national role in religion, culture and politics. At the same time it is the second largest industrial centre. In Lahore the study will focus on Islam and its sub-sects and the rise of fundamentalism. Additionally, the Punjabi Christian community will be studied mainly in Lahore. Here the study proposes to cover:

a. Muslim women sub-divided by the Shia-Sunni Sects and by social grouping. Social groups to be followed would be:

- Professional educated working women of old middle/upper class where greatest change has taken place for women.
- Fundamentalist women, where it is suspected that the most recent changes have/are taking place.
- Working class women in different neighbourhoods
- A class-section of housewives-least exposed to outside environment.

b. Christian women will be seen generationally (as will the Muslims) but concentration will be on:

- Upper class Christian and origins
- Lower class-caste converts to Christianity.

With a view to examining the historical influence of Christians on Muslim women, and subsequently the more current impact of rising Muslim fundamentalism on the Christian minority.

August 1988.

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**WLUML Dossier 5-6 December 1988/May 1989**

Reprint 1983.