

## The Impact of Religion on Arab Women

**Dr. Hanan Ahmad Khimish**

Assistant Professor

Department of Human Sciences

Applied Science Private University

Amman- Jordan

### Abstract

*The issue of women and their role in society occupies a position of great importance in Muslim and non-Muslim societies. Religion is one of the important factors that determines women's role in the Arab world. Arab society, in general is a conservative society that depends heavily on Islamic teachings. Thus, it is not surprising to find that discussing the status of Muslim women takes place in term of Quarnic perception rather than secularist perception. In this paper, I will discuss debates on Arab women's conditions in general, and in relation to their participation in public activities outside the house in particular. I will give general discussion about Islam and whether it harmed or improved women's position. The paper concludes that social customs and traditions prevailing in many Arab countries are the reasons behind the declining position of Muslim women more than the religion itself.*

### First: Introduction

The position of Muslim women was always a subject of debate and discussion for Muslims and others, but not many studies were written about the impact of Islamic revivalism on women. Thus, this research aims to analyze different views about Islam, and whether it improved or harmed women's conditions. It also aims to analyze debates on women's conditions in general, and in relation to their participation in public activities.

This research is using an analytical approach by presenting and comparing the different views regarding Arab women. Articles and books in Arabic and English were used in this research. My own experience and observation of other Arab Women through informal daily contacts with different types of Arab women were also useful.

During the last three decades, the Muslim world has witnessed a rising of Islamic consciousness. This Islamic resurgence is spiritual, social, economic and political in its manifestation. This resurgence has manifested itself in different settings.

The Islamic revolution in Iran, the armed struggle against Israel from Lebanon, the growing strength of Islamic groups in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, such as Hamas, Hizballah and Al Qaeda, the increasing number of veiled women in the streets of the Arab World and the opening of Islamic investments and banks are the best examples of the strength of this resurgence.

Throughout Islamic history the incidence of resurgence has been closely associated with periods of great turmoil when the very existence of Islam and Muslims was under threat <sup>(1)</sup>. Any challenges or threats to Muslims or Muslim societies make people believe that Islam is the solution to the social, political, and economic problems in Muslims societies. These beliefs create suitable atmosphere for fundamentalists to gain strength and openly declare their intentions and their aims.

In any religious context, fundamentalists involve a return to basics and to the puritanical foundations of the faith. However, the return back to the pure origins does not always mean the blind emulation of the life ways of the prophet's environment. In fact, some present day Islamic movements strive to incorporate, in various degrees, new practices and values to strengthen their viability in modern context. <sup>(2)</sup>

In the Muslim world today, there is what we can call Islamic modernists and conservatives (or fundamentalists). While the modernists seek to reform Islam and adopt it to contemporary life, the conservative cling to traditional Islamic percepts and reject Western and other influences.

In this sense, the Islamists are ultra-religious with a radical bent. The Islamic modernists are mostly represented by high ranking clerics who are usually government appointed and supported. The second group consists from the Islamist groups that represent populist Islam.

As members of the official establishment, the higher clerics tend to reinforce the legitimacy and actions of ruling elites through their interpretation of Islamic law. The fundamentalists reject the interpretive authority of the clerics and establish doctrines of radical sociopolitical change, including those related to sex segregation, and some economic measures and Quranic punishments.<sup>(3)</sup>

The issue of women and their role in the society occupies a position of great importance in the thinking of recent religious movements in the Arab World. One can say that the concern given to the issue of women is not due to the prestigious position of women in religions movements, and it is not the outcome of genuine preoccupation but that it is intended in many cases to restrict women's roles and compel them to go back to their previous state of seclusion.

The fear of possible effects of westernization on Muslim Women is the main reason for the importance of the issue of women in fundamentalist thought. Fundamentalists and some Muslim groups connect the west with corruption, imperialism and institutionalized sin. The fear is that women's public activities outside the house may lead to a similar type of the sexual freedom in the west and this will lead to corruption and chaos (Fitna) that will destroy Muslim societies. According to fundamentalists, the social order is secured when women limit themselves to their husbands and do not create (Fitna) or chaos; this would only be possible if they do not participate in public activities outside their house because whenever a man is faced with a woman, (Fitna) might occur.

According to the fundamentalist ideology, the family is the cornerstone of the social structure where men are placed in a position of leadership and responsibility while women are the source of love and kindness. The mixing of the sexes should be controlled and women decently dressed in Islamic costume to maintain dignity and avoid the possibility of temptation. Western values and mores are rejected as been alien to Islamic religion and culture. According to the fundamentalist thought, women should not compete with men, because both men and women are provided with their own rights to fulfill their duties and realize justice in the Muslim society or. Therefore, for Muslim women the idea of western feminism which is the product of foreign societies would only bring inequality of the sexes in the society and break the harmonious relationship.

It is clear that the teachings of fundamentalists aim at limiting women, restricting their scope of action and ensuring their subordination to men. While women are mostly accorded a secondary and marginal status, they are made to believe that this status is a great honor and distinction, and that women are oppressed because they want to be "equal" to men and are therefore being placed in unnatural settings and unfair situations which take away their integrity and dignity as women. In many cases, women's knowledge of the house and child-rearing has been given a higher socio-political esteem than that of women working outside their houses.

In this research, debates on women's conditions in general and in relation to their participation in public activities outside the house in particular will be discussed. Before that, the issue of the veil will be discussed because of its importance as an indicator of women's seclusion or women's participation in public activities. First, a general discussion about Islam and whether it improved or harmed women's position will be presented.

### **Aim and Importance of the research:**

The position of Muslim women was always a subject of debate and discussion for Muslims and others, but not many studies were written about the impact of Islamic revivalism on women. Thus, this research aims to analyze different views about Islam, and whether it improved or harmed women's conditions.

### **Methodology:**

This research is using an analytical approach by presenting and comparing the different views regarding Arab women. Articles and books in Arabic and English were used in this research. My own experience and observation of other Arab Women through informal daily contacts with different types of Arab women were also useful.

### **Questions of the research:**

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) To what extent does Islam influence the conditions of Arab women?

## 2) How do socio-cultural factors affect Arab Women's conditions in the Arab World?

### **Second: Women and Islam**

Religion is one of the important factors which affect the status of women in the Arab world, thus it is not surprising to find that the debates about women and the veil has taken place almost exclusively in term of Quranic Perception rather than secularist perception. Any attempts from Muslim women to discuss this subject in a secular or independent way would be deemed rebellious and a cause of anarchy and chaos in society. This is due to the fact that discussing women's subjects from a secular point of view means challenging men's authority and contesting the authority of religion itself. Any other discussion rather than the discussion in Islamic terms would be deemed blasphemous.

In addition to that many people in the Arab World discuss the position of women from the point of view of Islam because Islam claims to identify the correct mode of behavior for all people and all eventualities. Islam forms the basic core of Muslim life; Islam is not a subsidiary element in society. In Islam the individual ethical behavior prescribed in the Quran applies to the entire community, and it is the responsibility of Muslims to promote and facilitate such behavior, because as a religion of worldly as well as divine concerns, Islam is preoccupied with the regulation of conduct of Muslims in accordance with the principles of Islam. Any discussion of the position of Muslim women in a secular way would seem like accepting the ideas of the western feminist movements which are considered as corrupted movements.

Thus, it is not surprising that the discussions of the issues of Arab women are mostly in terms of Quranic prescriptions. Many educated and liberated Arab women can not discuss women's issues separately from Islam. There are always emphasis that the social traditions and local customs are the main reason behind women's sufferings rather than the religion it self. On one hand it could be true that these women are convinced of what they write, on the other hand, it could be the fear of accusations of blasphemy and apostasy.

The examples that will be given in this paper will show that the issue of women is debated almost entirely within an Islamic framework, both by the conservatives who oppose change, and by the liberals who want to see laws reformed. Conservatives and liberals, men and women alike, believe that Islam gave women rights. The difference, arise over how they define these rights. Verses of the Quran are explained and understood in different ways by the liberals and conservatives to prove their point, such as in the case of polygamy for example, where the verse in surat Al- Nissa'a "women" in the Quran is interpreted in different ways. The verse says:

"Give the orphans their property, and do not exchange the corrupt for the good; and devour not their property with your property; surely that is a great crime. If you fear that you will not act justly towards the orphans marry such women as seem good to you two three; four; but if you fear you will not be equitable, then only one".<sup>(4)</sup>

The liberal explanation of this verse is that it is not allowed to have more than one wife because it is impossible to achieve justice and equality. The conservative explanation is that polygamy is certainly allowed, and that by equality the meaning is the equality in treatment and the physical equality which is possible in many cases.

Islam is the dominant religion in nearly every Arab country. The Arab area includes most of the Muslim countries in the Middle East. The Quran is the source of legislative, theological and spiritual guidance for Muslims. The Quran provides Muslims with detailed guidance in their everyday problems. Together with the sayings of the Prophet, the Quran is the ultimate source of legal authority for Muslims.

The fact that the Quran is in Arabic made it easier for the Arabs to understand its meaning and abides by its rules and values earlier than many other nations whom Islam reached in a later stage.

In fact, many verses in the Quran were describing the lives of the Arabs before and after Islam as a way of delivering messages to the Muslims of how to understand the orders and rules of God and Islam. The rules of veiling, of marriage, of prohibiting alcohols for example, were stated in the Quran as a result of certain incidents that happened among the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula before Islam.

The position of women in Islam has been the subject of repeated controversy for many years. There are continuous debates on whether Islam improved or harmed women's conditions. In this respect, there are two points of view expressed by individual women at different times. The first is that Islam uses a wide perspective in evaluating women's activities in society, and that Islam sustains rather than undermines women's rights, so there are few religious obstacles to changing the status of women in Muslim countries.

Those who adopt this view (El-Sadawi, Zein Ed- Din, Saleh, and Stowasser, among others) argue that Islam, more than any other religion has developed a well integrated view of women and their proper place in society. They believe that the Quran gave women a special status which is also translated into normative and legal prescription that detail their rights and obligations in their private roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. These people emphasize that Islam gave women the right to education, the right to work, the right to inherit and the right to choose their husbands.

El- Sadawi cites a story from early Islam to show the freedom that woman had in choosing their husbands and their right to divorce. The story deals with one of the Prophet Mohammad's wives Laila Bint El-Khatim, who before marrying the Prophet went to him and said "I am Laila Bint Al-Khatim; I have come to show myself to you. Marry me" and Mohammad said "I hereby marry you". But Laila was of a jealous nature and would not have been able to stand the other wives of the prophet. So she asked him to divorce her, saying "I am a woman with a sharp tongue and can not bear your other wives. So let me free". So he said to her "I have let you free". From this story El-Sadawi reaches to the conclusion that prophet Mohammad gave his wives the right to stand up to him, rebuke him or tell him where he had gone wrong.<sup>(5)</sup>

El-Sadawi also argues that Islamic laws do not forbid women the right to seek paid employment. Islamic laws allow women to own and control property and this is a sign that they can run their own business and property. She believes that the social realities of life for many Arab women such as sexual segregation, emphasizing women's primary duties as wives and mothers, lack of formal education or job training and continuous concern over the proper behavior of women which emerge from the general socio cultural systems to Arab societies, keep many Arab women from paid employment rather than the religion itself.<sup>(6)</sup>

Saleh argues that the segregation of men and women in the Arab World does not necessarily mean the restriction of women or their subordination. In fact, she believes that men and women are seen to operate within different but complementary spheres which are equally important and necessary for the reproduction of social order. She believes that local traditions and customs in the Arab World separate men and women even more than the Quran might have intended, and that the low status of women in traditional Muslim society represents a decline from the true ideals of Islam, and that it is the result of the misunderstanding of the basic religious values.<sup>(7)</sup>

Zein- Eddin believes that Islam was a movement of social reform with particular relevance to the status of women. Before Islam women were treated as chattels, to be bought and sold and inherited. Polygamy was unlimited, and infanticide of baby girls was quite common. She emphasizes that Islam gave women a legal status with rights and duties. They were allowed to keep their father's name after marriage. Marriage became a contract between husband and wife, rather than a transaction in which the woman's guardian sold her to her future husband. Women were entitled to inherit and own property. Polygamy was restricted to a maximum of four wives; furthermore, the husband was required to be capable of treating each of his spouses equitably. The Quran says that if the husband is not certain of his capacities in this regard (given that equity of this kind is probably impossible), then he should only take one wife.<sup>(8)</sup>

Stowasser, concludes that the misinterpretation of Quran have affected the status of Muslim women negatively more than the religion it self.<sup>(9)</sup>

The second view concerning the position of women in Islam states that the teachings of the Quran have imposed severe Limitations on the public participation of women in society. Furthermore, it argues that Islamic law which governs family behavior in most Muslim countries does not provide for the principle of sex equality within the family. The inequalities include inequality in inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody, and serving as witnesses. Those who adopt this view such as (Abdan and Sedghi in Iglitzin, among others) Argue that a Muslim woman has had to adjust her behavior to a religious and legal endorsement of patriarchy and polygamy; to the unilateral power of her husband in divorce; to the granting of custody rights to the father of minor children in the event of divorce; to the husbands right to restrict a rebellious wife to the conjugal home; to the unequal rights of female inheritance, where the female gets half the amount of the male and to the unequal weight given to women's legal testimony in court, where two women's testimony is equivalent to that of one man.<sup>(10)</sup>

Concerning the effect of religion on the status of Muslim women, one can say that Muslim or Arab women are not exceptional. Sexual inequality is not a feature exclusive to Arab society; it is found in all parts of the world.

In fact, many aspects of Judaism and Christianity relating to women's and men's position are similar to those of Islam. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religions share the view that women were solely responsible for the fall of man, and each of these religions continues to view women the descendent of Eve, as a source of danger. In fact, the doctrines of all major religions justified and sanctified the patriarchal family and society, and perpetuated the double standard of morality on which patriarchy is based, such as the sexual permissiveness and fidelity of females.<sup>(11)</sup>

In many cases Islamic teachings were intended to provide practical and logical ideas taking into consideration the welfare of the society. But there were misleading interpretation of Islam that has affected women's status negatively. Al-Hibri states that there are many people in the Muslim World who believe that Islam as it is practiced today is utterly patriarchal, but that true Islam is not. She upholds the position that Islam is not only different from patriarchy, but that through the historical process of cooptation, patriarchy was able to devour Islam and quickly make it its own after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Historical accounts point to the fact that women in the early days of Islam played an active role in the social and political life of the community.<sup>(12)</sup>

In reviewing the above discussion, one can not deny that Islam affected women's position, and restricted their role in life in many ways. Local traditions and social customs which are decisive in many Arab societies have also affected women's position negatively perhaps more than the religion itself. The Quran is full of verses specifying the equality of men and women in religious duties, rights and obligations. If we examine the idea of polygamy for example, we can see that the Quran allowed men four wives, on condition that they treat them with equity, but also stated that they could not do that, thus, stated that it is better to marry only one.

Many Muslim people believe that the system of limited polygamy can be seen to have its uses which may be in the interests of both women and men.<sup>(13)</sup>

These people believe that the permission given by the Quran for polygamy arose out of particular circumstances where polygamy may become necessary in order to avoid more serious social and moral evils, such as in the case of wars where there are large numbers of widows whose husbands have been killed and they have been left alone without any income or care or protection for themselves or their children. There are other reasons for having another wife, such as if the wife is chronically sick or disabled, or if the wife is unable to have children while the husband very much wants them. Instead of divorcing the wife, leaving her without income especially if she is not educated or does not have any body else to support her, she can continue on staying in her house and have all her rights, even if her husband married another woman.<sup>(14)</sup>

These justifications may seem illogical to many people, and the subject of polygamy tend to cause controversy in Muslim societies, especially among women and liberal people. Women in villages and women who come from poor back grounds have no options when it comes to polygamy and sharing their husbands with other women, while educated financially independent women who in choosing between the two options of divorce or sharing their husbands with other women, would choose divorce. This could be attributed to many factors: such as the fact that these women feel that they will lose their dignity and pride if they accept this position. In addition to that, working women do not feel that they have to accept this situation because they are financially independent and can support themselves, so they can stand for themselves

It is noticeable that despite the fact that Islam allowed polygamy, this phenomenon is disappearing due to difficult economic conditions in many Arab and Muslim societies as polygamy is directly connected with the financial ability to spend on more than one wife, and the ability to provide separate residence for them. It is difficult to provide these conditions in many Arab and Muslim countries that are facing difficult economic conditions, such as Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Jordan, Pakistan, Indonesia and many other countries.

Anyway, we can conclude that polygamy is the exception, for a man could have up to four wives according to Islamic law only if he could be absolutely just towards all wives as. This justice requires total impartiality, something that the Quran specified as impossible.

Nevertheless, it is important to put rules under which polygamy will be allowable, since it is not acceptable to prohibit it altogether because it is permissible according to the Quran, for example it may be laid down that polygamy will be allowed only if a person shows sufficient cause for it, and satisfies the authorities that he will be able to bear the additional economic burden. Many Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Egypt adopted reforms regulating polygamy. For example, in Syria and Iraq court consent is required for polygamy, and in Egypt, a woman can put a special clause in the marriage contract regarding polygamy. Tunisia was the only Arab country which abolished polygamy.

Concerning inheritance, and according to Islam, a woman's share of inheritance is half the share given to a man. This may, if taken in isolation from other legislations, appear to be unfair; however, it must be remembered that according to the Quran, men are charged with the maintenance of all the women and children in their family, and men have to pay dowries to women, therefore, their necessary obligation of expenditure are far higher than those of women. A woman is under no obligation to share her property or income with her husband.<sup>(15)</sup> Men must support their wives or even their parents and their kin, while women do not have to support their husbands or even their parents if they have brothers. So this explains men's double share. Islamic law may not be observed in many cases concerning women's inheritance. In many cases Arab women are not permitted by their kin men, mainly brothers to inherit their share of inheritance, especially land from their father's estate. Their brothers put pressures on them to renounce their rights in their father's inheritance of land; otherwise, they are threatened or treated as outcast by their kin men. In return, they receive periodic gifts and moral support, which makes them less completely dependent on their husbands and above all they will earn the approval of the society in which they live in and in which most women are expected to do the same<sup>(16)</sup>.

This idea of men supporting kin is so deeply rooted in Arab societies, because even though women have the right to inherit according to Islam and the laws of most Arab countries, women in rural areas still prefer to give their share of the inheritance (mainly land) to their kin men, mainly brothers. However, it is noticeable that this phenomenon is disappearing in big cities where women can stand for their rights and refuse family pressures regarding their inheritance. This could be due to the fact that women in the cities are more aware of their rights, and are ready to fight for them despite the consequences.

Concerning the role of Islam on women's participation in economic activities Islam did not explicitly prohibit women from working, but it directed them towards professions where there would be less contact with the other sex<sup>(17)</sup>. In this context it is necessary to mention that in many cases social customs and traditions play a controversial role regarding this issue more than the religion itself. Many families in the contemporary Arab World do not allow their daughters to work not because of strict adherence to religious beliefs but rather because of strong social norms and traditions This is obvious in the cases of men who do not observe Muslim practices such as praying or fasting, or men who drink alcohols which is prohibited in Islam, but they insist on preventing their women kin from going out of the house without their permission or allowing them to work. This issue will be discussed thoroughly later in this research

### ***Third: The Issue of Hijab***

Hijab or veil is a striking symbol of heightened Islamic consciousness, involving a return to the fundamentals of Islam. Veiling is considered by Muslim fundamentalists, men and women as an evidence of women's virtue and obedience to God.

As a result of this, another side which consists from liberal educated men and women began to grow. Despite the fact that these people did not attack Islam, they were against the veil and what it could imply, such as the seclusion of women and depriving women from their rights, such as their right to education, work and participating in public life. These people believe that the veil is the first step to limit women's movements and restrict their participation in social, cultural economic activities. These two groups have created a suitable atmosphere for debating the subject of women.

It is noticeable that although the veil was not abolished in the Arab world, it is no longer forced on them except in few cases such as in Saudi Arabia, where no woman can go outside her home without veiling because she will be verbally abused by a special group of men who are appointed by the government and whose task is to insure the application of the Muslim Law in public. It is true that in the Arab World today there are many educated middle and upper class women who are veiling themselves, but it is mostly their own choice, or as a result of family pressure. Wearing the veil does not necessarily mean seclusion, for it may be worn by students or by women going to work. In fact, and contrary to what many people may think, many young educated women in the Arab World do not think of the veil as an obstacle to continuing their higher education in universities or working outside the house even though these are not sex segregated.

The phenomenon of returning to the veil may look anti-feminist, but to many veiled women, wearing the veil is a sort of feminism in reverse with political and moral backgrounds. The political aspect stems from their beliefs in rejecting the west and all it has to offer. Also, the veil is seen as a mean by which to bridge the gap between the otherwise separate male and female domains, but a holy, sanctioned and acceptable mean by which to broaden and further their political, social and cultural space<sup>(18)</sup>.

Haleh Afshar noted that there are similarities between the claims of veiled women of liberation through Islam, and some of the arguments presented by Western feminists. Veiled women argue that the veil create a private female space for all women in all places. By the single act of covering themselves, women cease to be sex symbols<sup>(19)</sup>. On the other hand, there are some people who consider the veil an instrument of patriarchal subjugation<sup>(20)</sup>.

The word "veil" is used to refer to a wide variety of head and face coverings. Hijab and scarf are also used to refer to the head covering. Today, there are various types of Hijab, the first consists from head cover that covers the hair, ears and neck, and it is worn with a long loose gown this is the type of Islamic costume that Islam and advocate, and it is worn by conservative and old women in the Arab world. The second is burqa or niqab that covers the face or most of the face except for a slit or a hole for the eyes, this costume is less common than the first in most Arab countries, but it is common in Saudi Arabia and some Gulf countries. The third consists of head covering that can be worn with modern western style clothes. The first and the second are known as the religious Hijab, while the third is known as the social Hijab. The social Hijab is mainly worn by younger women in schools, universities and work places. Wearing this Hijab is connected to social requirements in many cases rather than to religious beliefs. Many young women wear Hijab because they will not be allowed by their families to enroll in universities or go outside their houses without head covering.

Marriage and its importance in Arab society, is one of the reasons which motivate young women to wear the head covering. Wearing the head covering is an indication of modesty and high moral principles, which will encourage men to propose to them.

It is noticeable that Arab women who adopt any type of Hijab come from all classes. The Quran states that the veil is essential for modesty to protect women from molestation "Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest that is purer for them, Allah is aware of what they do, and tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display off their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands"<sup>(21)</sup>. Thus, one can say that the principle aim of hijab according to Islam is to hide that which men find sexually attractive.

Al-Tabari A Muslim theologian and a collector of Hadith (the sayings of prophet) interprets this as an order to believing women to lower their gaze so as not to look at what God has forbidden them to look at, and to preserve their private parts from the glances of him who has no right to glance at them, by veiling them with garments.

The issue of the veil and women's rights in Islam caused controversial debates in the Arab world in the last three decades. No one can deny that the veil and what it means is a significant sign of the Islamic revival. Many people consider that veiling has a broader meaning than covering the head and the body, Dr. Leila Sa'ad Eddin a woman scholar believes in this idea:-

"Veiling means more than just wearing modest clothing. It is a protection for women, it should prevent them from adopting certain attitudes, such as mixing with foreign men outside the house and with foreign men inside their house, even if they are accompanied by their husbands women should meet and sit separately"<sup>(22)</sup>

On the other hand, there are other scholars who believe that the purpose of the veil is to protect men and not women, and to save the values of the society. Sha'rawi, a Muslim theologian and a prominent religious figure, believes that God ordered women to veil to protect men and to maintain honorable social relations. He believes that men need to be protected because watching the uncovered bodies of women, raise men's sexual desires and cause stress and frustration to young people who are unable to marry as a result of economic difficulties<sup>(23)</sup>.

Accordingly, Afshar believes that fundamentalists such as Mottahari insist that women should wear the veil, because of the fear of the sexuality of women, thus, the veil is mainly to protect the man not the woman<sup>(24)</sup>.

Despite the difference in explaining the reason behind veiling, the purpose according to these people is the same. Protecting women and men is mainly to prevent social chaos (Fitna) in the society.

Concerning the effect of the veil on women's participation in public activities, there are some like Sa'ad Eddin, as we have seen, who believes that veiling means more than covering the body, and that it could imply seclusion. Others like Dr. Nuseir and like Ghazzali, among others believe that veiling does not impede their participation in public life. Dr. Nuseir, a professor of philosophy in Egypt emphasizes this point as follows:

"God has asked us to wear the Islamic dress. The veil enables women to move freely, and it gives them confidence in dealing with other people. The veil does not prevent women from working outside the house, on the contrary, it helps women to move freely, and it creates respect amongst other people towards veiled women especially amongst men. Veiling is also important in public because men do not usually harass women if they are veiled"<sup>(25)</sup>.

Thus, Nuseir thinks that veiling gives women a sort of power and confidence to enter men's world and participate in the activities of the society. It seems as though the veil has made it possible for some women to interact with their male co-workers or classmates without the sexual connotation such interaction usually carry.

#### ***Fourth: Islam and Women's Participation in Economic Activities***

Concerning the role of Islam on women's participation in economic activities, Islam did not explicitly prohibit women from working, but it emphasized on their role as wives and mothers, ordering them not to go outside their house unless it is necessary such as going to the mosque or doctor <sup>(26)</sup>. Islam also directs women towards professions where there would be less contact with the other sex (Lemu and Heern <sup>(27)</sup>).

In this respect, we find Muslim scholars adopt different points of view concerning women's participation as we will see from the following discussion. Sha'rawi believes that women are weak and fragile creatures and are unable to bear responsibilities of hard work:

"A woman's cells contain certain chemicals which give her softness, and give her tenderness, where as in man these cells contain chemicals which give him roughness, and give him perseverance for his mission"<sup>(28)</sup>.

In his argument, Sha'rawi concentrated on the physical weakness of women from his point of view rather than resorting to religious discussion. This does not mean that Sha'rawi idea is absolutely separate from the point of view of Islam.

The division of work in Islam between the man and the woman is in line with the man's nature and the woman's nature. Islam has given two different roles for the man and the woman. According to Islam the highest authority in the family life is given to the man because the man in Islam is financially responsible for the maintenance of the family, the wife and the children. Also, according to Islam the man by nature makes a better leader than a woman. Islam believes that the man is physically stronger than the woman and is mentally more mature than the woman; this explains the fact that the testimony of one man equals the testimony of two women. Thus, the religious mode is the dominants mode.

It is noticeable that the religious mode is more significant and dominant in most discussions about women and their role because in this case the religious discussion is unquestionable. Although Sha'rawi attempted to resort to the physical facts rather than Islam, the religious factor was still very strong in his discussion. Accordingly Elwan also shares a similar view and puts it as follows:

"Let us ask ourselves honestly does the society need a police woman, a taxi driver, a prime minister or a minister. Can a woman do a job that only men are able to do because of their physical strength? Women are soft creatures who are fit to do certain jobs that will not expose them to men, also, even if women work, they should not compete with men and cause unemployment problems. Thus, men should be given the priority in any available jobs."

Elwan concludes his argument by emphasizing that women's work especially in mixed places hinders or delays marriages and cause corruption in the society because men will be able to get what they (want) from women without the social and legal duties and obligation of marriage<sup>(29)</sup>.

Muslim scholars claim that the dictates of the Quran were made the basis of interpretation. One of the most important verses in the Quran that deals with women's status is in Al Nissa'a sura "women" verse 34 which reads:

"Men are in charge of their women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). Good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded <sup>(30)</sup>."



Al- Tabri Comments on this Quranic verse as follows:

"Men are in charge of their women with respect to disciplining (or chastising) them, and to providing them with restrictive guidance concerning their duties toward God and themselves (i.e. the men); by virtue of that by which God has given excellence (or preference) to the men over their wives. i.e. the payment of their dowers to them, spending of their wealth on them, and providing for them in full. This is how God has given excellence to (the women), and hence (the men) have come to be in charge of (the women) and hold authority over them in those of their matters with which God has entrusted them."

Al- Tabri believes that God gave authority to men over their women in the family setting, with the obligation to provide for their women by way of material support. Thus, the superiority of men implies no natural superiority on the part of men, nor any inherent inferiority of women, because it is a purely economic arrangement dictated by natural necessities<sup>(31)</sup> The Quran however, accords a slight superiority to men in general by saying that men are a degree superior to women. This superiority of men relates both the domestic and political fields. In domestic life, final authority must rest with the one sex or the other and it is the man. In the political field also final decisions should rest with men in general, because men are by nature gifted. Dr Musa a theologian at Al-Azhar University in Cairo stresses on the moral side of women's participation in political activities especially in parliamentary elections:

"Not many women are able to participate in parliamentary elections because of what the elections may involve such as mixing with electors, colleagues and the men in power. Women participating in elections will face humiliation, loss of dignity, and will be far from religious values"<sup>(32)</sup>.

It is clear from the above that Musa objects to women's participation in political activities not because of their capabilities but rather because of their fear of corruption and deteriorating morals and values. Dr. Abu Al- Rub a woman doctor, and a believer as she implies wrote in the daily Al- Rai Jordanian newspaper after the results of the 1989 elections in Jordan showed that women did not win any seats, declaring her happiness and satisfaction that women did not win:

"I congratulate every Muslim woman in our society for not winning the elections.

All we want is to stay in our houses and look after our husbands and children, because this is the only way to achieve happiness in the earth and in heaven. I am very pleased to find a high percent of electors, amongst them women, who refused to elect women because they know that women have a more honorable and important role than to be a member of parliament"<sup>(33)</sup>.

It is clear from the above that fundamentalists see motherhood as a sacred duty and one of the essential responsibilities of women. The many verses of the Quran commanding motherhood explain this:

"We have enjoined man to respect his parents; his mother bears him with fainting after while his weaning takes two years. Thank me as well as your parents; towards me lies the goal"<sup>(34)</sup>.

Thus, taking care of the parents is part of fulfilling the religious duties of Muslims. Motherhood is of special importance to Muslims. The numerous numbers of Quranic verses which command the believers to love and respect their mothers are the clear evidence on this. Thus, many of the restrictions on women's roles and duties, as we have seen from the previous discussion (Abu- al Rub) arise out of the different social responsibilities of either sex. Elwan and Musa, on the other hand believe that women should not participate in public activities because they are naturally not as gifted or as strong as men, thus their rights and duties should also differ from those of men.

It is clear from the above discussion that some people have ascribed different roles for men and women. Men are to take public decision decisively in difficult situation and to participate in the political and economic activities of the society. Women on the other hand, are to keep out of the public, and their major task is to look after their husbands and children. These scholars have linked these restrictions with the teachings of the Quran and Islamic law (Sharia) because they know that this will legitimize their discussion. However, the teachings of the Quran are general in nature and capable of varying interpretations with regard to the rights and responsibilities of men and women. Balkhair for example, believes that Islam did not prohibit women from working but that it stressed more on women's roles as wives and mothers, she believes that once they finished raising their children, women are allowed to participate in the activities of the society on the condition that the job suits women in accordance with Islamic values, such as working in places that will not involve direct contact with men, and do abide by the Islamic dress (Hijab)<sup>(35)</sup>.

There is no decree in Islam which forbids women to seek a job. Many people in the Muslim world who favor woman's right to work for her living and earn money base themselves on a quotation from the Quran which reads as:

Do not be condescending and talk much of your kindness because Allah has preferred you to others. Men have the right to what they can earn by their efforts, and women have the right to what they earn also<sup>(36)</sup>.

This quotation from the Quran indicates that the Quran allows women to work and to earn their living, since it has given them the same right as men to what they earn. Those people who are in favor of women's right to work, argue also that the verse, "settle down in your home and do not make up as did the women of early Jahiliya times," is not meant to apply to ordinary women, but it applies to the wives of the prophet.

Baydoun, a Lebanese scholar also believes that Islam does not prevent women from participating in public activities:

"Islam allows women to go outside their houses to pray study and attain to their daily needs outside the house"<sup>(37)</sup>.

Baydoun based her argument on the saying of Um-Alrabee, one of the Muslim women contemporaries of the prophet who said "we used to go with the prophet to the battles. We used to give water to the men, serve them, and give medical aid to the wounded". According to Baydoun, this is clear evidence that women are allowed to go outside their houses, and to participate in the public activities of the society.

It is noticeable from the above discussion that the debates on women's role were based on Islamic teachings. We have noticed that those who argued against women's participation in public activities have based their argument on the verses of the Quran which order women to stay in their houses. Those who argued in favor of women's participation in public activities have also based their argument on Islam. This shows that these people are aware of a particular oppression of women, and they actively seek to correct this oppression by returning to the teachings of Islam.

It is also noticeable that the argument of women writers did not concentrate on the weakness of women physically or mentally, they rather concentrated on the importance of women's role as mothers and wives. This argument was also expressed by many feminists in the west.

The argument, of men, on the other hand generally concentrated on women as physically and mentally weak creatures, who are not capable of performing men's jobs.

**We can conclude** that religion is one of the important factors which determines women's role in the Arab world. Arab society, in general is a conservative society that depends heavily on Islamic traditions and teachings. The idea of sex-segregation in Islam is one of the strongest factors that hinder women from participating in public activities. The rising of religious movements in the Arab world in the last 30 years has increased this trend. These movements have high lightened and intensified already existing Islamic tendencies. Although this Islamic awakening was mainly political in nature, it has had a social effect, especially where it applies to the conduct of women.

In many cases, interpretation of Quranic verses and theological literature has affected women's status in negative ways. Conservative and narrow minded Muslim theologians give negative perception of women and their role in their writings and television programs, these people appeal to different people in Arab societies from illiterate to intellectuals so they have strong effect on various people in Arab societies. In many Arab countries there are differences between the Quranic norms on women's status and the actual behavior. Many people think that traditions and social customs they have been forced to observe are part of Islamic teachings.

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