

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

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**Islam is the Solution<sup>1</sup>: Jordanian Islamists and the dilemma of the 'modern women'**

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During the past decade, the issue of gender relations and women's conduct and dress has been occupying an increasingly prominent place in the discourse of Islamist movements. This article attempts to situate Arab Islamists' preoccupation with women within the legacy of colonialism and social transformations relating to gender and class.

With regard to Jordan, the author links the urgency of the issue with social transformations at the level of gender and class during recent decades, and points out that the key to understanding the prominence of the 'woman question' in Islamist thinking is the fact that the social groups which comprise the traditional constituency of the Islamists are finally experiencing for themselves the socially disruptive implications of new patterns in women's work, education and visibility. In short, the issue of women's modesty and conduct, which was more abstract as recent as one generation ago (when only upper middle and upper class women were visible in the public domain), acquires concreteness and urgency in the rapidly changing social environment.

The article also tries to show how the Islamists' framing of the social issue in cultural terms has a primal appeal, especially to those social groups most alienated from the insular world of the westernized elite and in search of 'authentic' ways of living in the modern world.

One of the most striking features of Islamist movements throughout the Arab world is their preoccupation with the 'woman question'. Although concern with women's proper place in society has been a feature of Islamic thought since the early decades of this century, Islamist discourse and activism in recent years have been addressing with more frequency and urgency the question of how a woman in contemporary society must conduct herself and what is expected of her. Not only is a growing mass of popular Islamist literature directed at and about women circulating in the Arab world, but, increasingly, regimes, for reasons of political expediency or Islamist commitment, are adopting postures and enacting legislation reflecting the new Islamist thinking on gender relations and the role of women in society.

The question that needs to be addressed here is why the gender issue is occupying an increasingly prominent place in Islamist discourse and activism, and why policies and measures pertaining to gender relations are often the first to be introduced by Islamist regimes or demanded by opposition Islamist movements. Can the prominence of this issue be explained by reference to larger structural transformations in society and in political culture?

**Jordanian Islamists and the 'Woman Question'**

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<sup>1</sup> 'Islam is the Solution' is the slogan of the pan-Arab Islamist movement, including the Muslim Brethren in Jordan. The author wishes to thank the Ford Foundation for a grant under its Middle East research Competition which made it possible to take time off from teaching to conduct field research and complete most of the writing of this article.

Contemporary Jordan provides a unique opportunity for the investigation of the questions posed above. The Islamist movement there, one of the oldest and most organized in the Arab world, is aggressively engaging society in its social and political project, and promises to be a major political force in the new era of 'democratization' ushered in by the parliamentary elections in 1989. Islamist deputies form a significant political bloc within the parliament, and many Islamists occupy influential posts within the state bureaucracy. This active involvement in society, the political process and state institutions is unique in the Arab world, with the exception of Sudan where Islamists have taken hold of the state apparatus altogether.

The largest and most organized component of the Islamist movement in Jordan is the Society of the Muslim Brethren (Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin), whose history in Jordan dates to 1945. Other Islamist groups exist in Jordan today, some more established, such as the Islamic Liberation Party, and others more recent, such as the Dar al-Qur'an, the Islamic Jihad-bayat al Maqdis, and the Arab Islamic Renewal Party. Due to their political and organizational strength, this article focuses primarily on the Muslim Brethren (hereafter referred to as the Ikhwan) and their more recent political expression, the Islamic Action Front Party founded in 1992.

Throughout the nearly fifty years of work in Jordan, the Ikhwan have remained remarkably faithful to their original vision and programme. The 'moral issue' continues to occupy a prominent place in their discourse, and they have established a formidable infrastructure of institutions and forums in virtually all aspects of life. The 'woman question', while always a component of the 'moral issue' in Ikhwan thought and practice, has acquired new urgency and importance, and is being deployed more frequently in the political discourse of the Ikhwan. It is important, however, to underline the point here that Ikhwan activism on moral issues and women's status today is not merely a continuation of old forms deployed by them since they began their mission in the 1940s. While much of the rhetoric may sound the same, Ikhwan activism today is responding to changing circumstances and new social realities.

The 'democratization' project launched by the regime in response to mounting social tensions towards the end of the 1980s catapulted into the political arena social and political forces which had been muzzled throughout the years when democratic freedoms were curtailed. The Ikhwan have seized the opportunity presented by the new atmosphere, and have begun aggressively to promote a social and political agenda which they have in fact been refining for a number of years. The relaxation of press laws has made possible a wider dissemination and propagation of this agenda, in which moral issues and the question of women figure prominently. The parliamentary forum has also been exploited extensively, as have ministerial posts when made available to them. In short, the Ikhwan embarked upon an aggressive engagement of state and society, and are making increasingly bold forays into areas which in the past they had chosen to avoid.

### **Why Women?**

How do we explain the prominence of the 'woman question' in the discourse and activism of the Ikhwan? We cannot address this question adequately without noting that Jordanian Islamists' preoccupation with women is shared by Islamist tendencies all over the Arab world. It might be fruitful, therefore, to start out by asking why the 'woman question', and more specifically, the issue of gender relations, has been high on the social and political agenda of Arab Islamists in recent years. An understanding of this preoccupation with gender requires an investigation of the social and historical circumstances in which Islamist movements have developed in the Arab world, particularly as these pertain to the legacy of colonialism on the one hand and social transformations relating to gender and class on the other hand.

### **The Legacy of Colonialism and Cultural Resistance**

Denis Kandiyoti (1991: 7) has noted the agreement among scholars that the historical antagonism between Islam and Christendom created an area of cultural resistance around women and the family, which came to represent the inviolable repository of Muslim identity. Colonial administrators and Christian missionaries both defined their 'civilizing' mission as involving the reform of the sexual mores and family traditions of Muslims. Thus feminism was equated with cultural imperialism, and those Muslims attempting to change the position of women were viewed as tainted with cultural inauthenticity if not outright betrayal.

Leila Ahmed (1992: 236-7) elaborates on this theme by viewing Islamist positions on women as a manifestation of this historical conflict between the Christian West and the Muslim East. Women are the centrepiece of the Islamist agenda at least in part because they were posed as central in the colonial discursive assault on Islam and Arab culture. She thus interprets the Islamist preoccupation with women as a struggle over culture, and Islamist discourse on women as a discourse of resistance: what is being resisted is the colonial and postcolonial assault on Muslim religion and culture, in which, especially in the late nineteenth century, the crusade against 'backward' practices such as the veiling of women constituted an important element. In other words, if the imperialists used the custom of veiling and the position of women in Muslim societies as proof of the inferiority of Islam and a justification for their attempt to subjugate Muslims, Islamists now invert the terms of this thesis and stress the importance of veiling and the return to indigenous practices as a form of resistance.

Pursuing the same logic, one could go further and view the Islamist preoccupation with women's dress and conduct not only as a form of resistance but also as the ultimate historical revenge: as proof of the moral bankruptcy in the West and the superiority of Muslims. There is no doubt that the West represents economic and technological superiority, and by extension, political supremacy. To the Islamists, the price of this supremacy has been moral decay in Western society. And what symbolizes moral decay more starkly than the degraded American or European women who has no respect for marriage or the family, who displays her flesh for all to see, who gives her body without resistance? In focusing on issues crucial to the Arab Muslim's value system (the centrality of family, virtue and modesty in women), the Islamists strike a responsive chord in conservative Arab society, which by and large subscribes to the Islamists' diagnosis of the causes of the ills of Western society. They also restore to Arabs a measure of pride and self-respect, and assure Muslims of their superiority on the moral plane despite their economic and political subjugation.

There is also a certain attractiveness in attributing the centrality of women's conduct and dress in Islamist thinking to psycho-political factors. One could argue that Muslim men, not being able to resist the Western economic, political and cultural onslaught, compensate for this impotence by exercising their authority in one socially uncontested domain, over the one socially vulnerable element in their midst, 'their' women.

It remains to be said, however, that interpreting the Islamist preoccupation with women as a form of cultural resistance or revenge, despite its attractiveness, does not answer the question why now, towards the end of the twentieth century, the issue has become a central one. I am suggesting that while the Islamist discourse on women is couched in the vocabulary of cultural resistance and heavily laden with the jargon of cultural authenticity, the vocabulary and jargon indirectly express concerns and issues which are engendered by the changing nature of social relations within the last few decades only, notably in the domains of gender and class. The Islamist discursive style, however, remains the most powerful vehicle, drawing as it does upon the fears, anxieties, and predispositions of a people still suffering from the direct impact of foreign economic, political and cultural hegemony.

### **Changing Gender Relations**

What are the most salient features of changes at the level of gender relations? I think one can say without much reservation that what characterizes the period after the middle of this century is the breaking down of the barriers which have kept women out of sight and therefore out of (the male) mind. While women had always been physically visible in the field and in the marketplace, they had occupied their place within a sexual division of labour which was uncontested and which upheld the patriarchal order. The entry of women into the wage labour force, the educational system, and into the public domain in general began to challenge the traditional order of things, especially as unrelated men and women were thrust into work and other situations far from the observant eye of the family.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A similar point is made by Valentine Moghadam (1993: 137), who, in explaining the context of the rise of Islamist movements notes that increasing female education and employment have slowly weakened the system of patriarchal gender relations, creating status inconsistency and anxiety on the part of the men of the petty bourgeoisie.

What can be the adequate response of fathers, brothers, and husbands to this new reality? Increasing economic need has forced men to acquiesce to women seeking employment outside the home, and state-sponsored mandatory education for women has meant that resistance to female education is no longer a viable option. Limited choices in these areas, therefore, are compensated for by ensuring that when women do go out into the sexually integrated world, they do so with the minimum of social risk. The Islamist movement, in making women's dress and conduct a cornerstone of its social agenda, expresses what individual men fear and need: fear of losing control over their women and the need to be assured that other men cannot lay a claim to them. The movement also addresses the real fears and apprehensions of a significant sector of women who are searching for new yet socially sanctioned codes of deportment in the sexually integrated world, codes which at once satisfy the needs of their men and address their own sense of vulnerability.

But transformations at the level of gender relations do not provide a full explanation of the Islamist preoccupation with women's conduct and dress. We must ask why now, that is, since the 1980s, has the issue of women's social role, dress and public conduct become more urgent, given that trends in women's employment and education has been established before that?

### **Gender and Class**

The answer, I believe, lies in the change in the class composition of the female labour force and of females in the educational system, particularly at the secondary and post-secondary levels. It is obvious that the steady increase in women's employment and education has meant a change in the class profile of the female labour force and of women enrolled in the higher levels of the educational system. What this means is that now more than ever, women in the public domain are not predominantly members of upper and upper middle-class urban families, but rather the wives and daughters of men from the middle and lower middle classes, mostly in the major urban centres but also in smaller regional towns. What do these women do? Apart from the large force of young unmarried students who go out daily to school and university, they are mostly teachers, secretaries, and receptionists, and increasingly, professional and technical workers.<sup>3</sup>

The point, then, is that as long as the size of the female labour force was negligible and as long as many women who worked or were in the public domain still came from the 'privileged' classes and only daughters of the well-to-do went to university, this was not a societal concern but rather a matter that involved individual families and men. The private anxieties which this situation created for individual men and antagonisms at the level of relations within the family were not generalized and remained within the confines of a class isolated from the rest of society. This class's isolation from society was reinforced and maintained partly by the dress and comportment of its women. Concerned with being and appearing 'modern', the women of this class wholeheartedly adopted Western fashions in dress, and set their own terms of conduct in public.

The Islamist preoccupation with women and their dress and deportment, I argue, came at a later stage, and as a direct response to the change in gender relations within the context of larger changes at the level of class, and specifically, in the class composition of the female waged labour force and in post-secondary educational institutions. When middle and lower middle class women in large numbers are thrust into the public domain, this becomes a societal issue, and the question of how women are expected to conduct themselves in public becomes a socially relevant one. In addition, when women's work and education begin to impinge on the patriarchal order on a wide scale, the response becomes generalized and relevant to wider sectors of society.

In short, it can be argued that the reason Islamists are making an issue of women's dress and conduct is that the new patterns of women's work and education have extended to and taken root in their own traditional constituency, that of the middle and lower middle class. As such, the issue of women's modesty and conduct, which was more abstract one or two generations earlier acquires concreteness and urgency in the rapidly changing social environment.

### **Class Struggle and Class Resentment**

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<sup>3</sup> ILO data for the 1980s for selected Arab countries show that the highest proportion of the female labour force outside of agriculture and animal husbandry is found in professional, technical and related work; in clerical and related jobs, and in services. See Moghadam (1993: 51).

So far we have located the Islamist concern with women within the domain where culture, gender, and class intersect. At the heart of this culture-gender-class complex lies a sentiment that I argue the Islamist discourse on women draws upon, amplifies, and exploits. This sentiment or predisposition is the resentment which the women and men of the middle and lower middle classes feel towards the 'modernized' westernized upper class and those emulating them. It finds expression in many ways, one of which is in rendering upper-class 'westernized' women the embodiment of all that is at once corrupt and beyond reach.

While the West can be blamed for being the original source of cultural invasion, the more immediate and concrete carriers of moral decay are those 'modern' Arab women who have adopted the values and lifestyles of the West. And what better symbolizes these values and lifestyles than teenage girls and society women cavorting about in flashy Mercedes cars (the vehicle of choice for the upper and aspiring middle classes), the nightclub, the sporting club, and above all, the dress and conduct of upper-class women? Even a casual acquaintance with the Arab city today will convince one how the private and public behaviour of the privileged and those emulating them, and especially the women, can be construed as effrontery and arrogance by those below. Therefore, the choice of women as targets of Islamization agendas becomes more intelligible in the context of class resentment, especially when there is a real danger that the values of the upper classes will trickle down to the middle classes, as they inexorably seem to be doing.

Deniz Kandiyoti (1991: 8) has noted that Islamic authenticity can be evoked to articulate a wide array of disaffections, from imperialist domination to class antagonism. This opens up the possibility of expressing such antagonisms in moral and cultural terms, with images of women's purity exercising a powerful mobilizing influence, as in the case of the populist discourse of the Khomeini regime in Iran which singles out westernized elite women as the most dangerous bearers of moral decay.

Hisham Sharabi (1988: 135-9) has gone even further to suggest that Arab 'neopatriarchal bourgeois fundamentalism', which has flourished in the uprooted petty commodity producers and distributors and proletarianized small bourgeoisie, is an objective expression of class struggle, even though as a political consciousness it rejects the idea of class and class struggle. However, Sharabi provides little support for this provocative thesis, and does not touch upon the Islamist preoccupation with women's dress and conduct as one arena in which this class struggle is waged and elaborated.

Leila Ahmed's (1992: 225) analysis of the appeal of Islamism, especially to women, places the Islamist project within this context, however. She views the process of Islamization as marking a broad demographic change which has led to the rise of a vocabulary of dress and social being defined from below, by the middle classes, rather than by the formerly culturally dominant upper and middle classes. Her observation that the criticism by the older generation of urban middle-class feminists of the new generation of women and their adoption of the hijab is yet another version of the class warfare, (1992: 225) highlights the point made earlier that the Islamist preoccupation with women goes beyond the issue of cultural authenticity and touches upon those changing class and gender relations.

### **Jordanian Islamists and the Dilemma of the Visible Women**

In January 1991, five Islamist deputies in the newly-elected parliament received portfolios in the government. Barely one month later the Minister of Social Development Yusif al-Azm circulated an internal memorandum instructing Ministry staff to reallocate office space so as to separate men and women employees. In April, Muhammad 'Akaylah, the Minister of Education, issued a directive forbidding fathers from attending the annual 'School Activity Day' events at their daughters' schools. Earlier, the Minister had banned the employment of male sports instructors in girls' schools, and had stipulated that school outings must be segregated. Also in a move that irritated veteran women employees in his ministry, he announced to the Education Committee at the Ministry that he would not tolerate immodest women (those not wearing Islamic dress) in his Ministry.<sup>4</sup> In March, Islamist deputies presented memoranda to the ministers of Higher Education

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<sup>4</sup> Haifa' Abu-Ghazala, then General Director of Public and Cultural Relations at the Ministry of Education, interview with author, Amman, 31 December 1991.

and Education demanding that coeducation in schools, community colleges, and universities be banned.<sup>5</sup>

It was clear that the Islamists in Jordan were preparing the ground for the politicization of the issue of women's dress and conduct, that is, removing it from the domain of personal choice and into that of public scrutiny and policy. How do we interpret this?

I believe that the key to understanding the Ikhwan's increased militancy on the gender issue lies in the fact that the social groups which make up the constituency of the Ikhwan are finally experiencing for themselves the social implications of certain socio-economic trends which have been underway in Jordan for the past few decades. Specifically, they are caught up in social dilemmas arising from the increased labour force participation of women, and from the steady gains being made in female education, particularly at the higher levels. As women from these largely conservative milieux are being thrust into the public domain in increasing numbers, the questions about women's place in society which may have troubled only a few one generation earlier acquire increased urgency now.

### **The Ikhwan Constituency**

What is the character of the Ikhwan constituency, and what is the social milieu in which the Ikhwan have developed in recent years? Aside from Amnon Cohen's (1982) now classic and dated work on political organizations in the West Bank under Jordanian rule,<sup>6</sup> no recent study of the Ikhwan has provided a social profile of their constituency. This constituency includes not only actual, 'card-carrying' members of the Ikhwan, but also the large mass of individuals who are employed by their institutions; attend their meetings, events, and rallies; send their children to their schools and youth centres; lobby and vote for Ikhwan slates in elections; buy and circulate their publications; support their 'mission' (da'wa) financially or otherwise, and generally identify with their social and political agenda.

### **Activists**

Students, middle-class professionals, and employees in the civil service and the private sector (such as teachers, school principals, and clerks) constitute the critical core of Ikhwan activism in Jordan today. Student activism targets youth in schools, colleges, and universities, as well as drawing them into activities in mosques and youth centres. Islamists have recently won control of the Preparatory Assembly of the General Federation of Jordanian Students, in addition to having a strong presence in many student 'clubs' at the departmental and faculty level at Jordan and Yarmuk Universities. Young professionals such as engineers, physicians, pharmacists, and lawyers, many of them recent graduates of Jordanian and other Arab universities, and other educated semi-professionals, form another important core of Ikhwan activism. They have been behind the great successes of Ikhwan and Ikhwan-led lists in recent elections for the physicians', pharmacists', lawyers', engineers', agricultural engineers', and nurses' associations.

A recent study (Hurani et al. 1993) of the newly-formed Islamic Action Front Party (IAFP), which was founded at the initiative of the Ikhwan and with a majority of Ikhwan members, provides a social and occupational profile of the leadership and what may be called the activist core of the Ikhwan. The IAFP was recognized as a legal party in December 1992, following the legalization of parties in Jordan in the same year.

The composition of the 353-member Founding Assembly and the 120-member Shura (Consultative) Council of the party is a good indicator of the kinds of individuals carrying the Islamist message in Jordan today. Several relevant facts emerge from the study:

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<sup>5</sup> These measures received a great deal of publicity in the local press, and instigated a lively debate (and much satire in the non-Islamist press) on coeducation and sexual segregation in the workplace.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen devotes a chapter of his book to Muslim Brethren activities in the West Bank. He notes that the Ikhwan appear to have drawn their membership from all sectors of the population, with the urban self-employed (merchants and property-owners) predominating. Students and teachers played an important role in disseminating Ikhwan ideology, but professionals—in contrast to their strong presence in Ikhwan ranks in Egypt at the time—did not seem to have been an important element of the constituency, given that they tended to have a more westernized or radical world-view (Cohen 1982: 163-5)

## WLUML Dossier 20 July 1998

1. Half of the members of the Founding Assembly and over 40 per cent of those in the Shura Council are employees in the state sector. Since only a small percentage of these individuals are in administrative posts, we can assume that the majority (with the exception of the university professors) are middle and lower-level employees such as teachers, office workers, and the like;
2. Well over a third of the members of both bodies are in occupations whose entry requires high levels of education (the occupations listed are university professor, physician, lawyer, engineer, pharmacist, administrator, and journalist);
3. Over one quarter of the members of the Founding Assembly and at least 22 per cent of the members of the Shura Council are found in education-related occupations as university professors, teachers, school principals, educational supervisors, administrators, and the like;
4. Businessmen, merchants and contractors constitute a small proportion of the membership of the Founding Assembly (10 per cent) and Shura Council (9 per cent). While they may be important financial backers of the Ikhwan, they apparently have no significant role as activists or grassroots leaders. Farmers and other rural occupations are hardly represented in the two bodies;
5. The members of the Founding Assembly of the IAFP are characterized by relative youth: over 44 per cent are between the ages of 25 and 40, while 30 per cent are between the ages of 41 and 50.<sup>7</sup> The Shura Council and Executive Office, on the other hand, are dominated by older individuals (in the Shura Council, 25.8 percent are 25-40, 66.7 per cent 41-60, and 7.5 per cent over 61; only one member of the Executive Office is under 40, the average age in that body being 52);
6. Whereas women constitute just over 3 per cent of the membership of the Founding Assembly, they did not manage to win any seats in the Shura Council. Women's participation, as expected, does not manifest itself at the national institutional level, but rather in the more informal network of charitable and other grassroots organizations at the community level.

Based on the foregoing data, we can conclude that the leadership and the middle-level activist core of the Ikhwan in Jordan today are comprised of highly to moderately educated middle class men of relative youth. If we add to the middle-level cadres the hundreds of Islamist activist students and 'unionists' (that is, individuals organizing the many Islamic blocs and slates in professional and semi-professional associations), the picture that emerges is of predominantly young, educated, middle-class men (and some women) associated with national institutions such as government ministries and departments, universities and community colleges, professional associations, the parliament, and above all, the emerging network of Islamist organizations.

The social groups targeted by Islamist organizations, either those sponsored by the Ikhwan or influenced by them (such as colleges and mosques supervised by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, the Awqaf), are by and large the middle and lower strata in the main urban centres, including residents of Palestinian refugee camps. The major Ikhwan umbrella organization in Jordan is the Charitable Association of the Islamic Centre (Jam'iyat al-Markaz al-Islami al-Khayriyya), which supervises an expanding network of schools and kindergartens, youth centres, Qur'an study schools, and charitable organizations, as well as its major institution, the Islamic Hospital in Amman.

If we look at education and culture, there is a wide and growing variety of institutions and organizations, all of which cater to a conservative, middle and lower middle class constituency. The Islamic Community College in Zarqa' is a major educational institution, one of whose main attractions is that it has separate facilities for men and women. The College also offers extension courses, in both traditional areas (knitting and sewing) for women and the more modern fields of computer programming, word processing, and business administration for both women and men.

The last decade has also seen the proliferation of Islamic schools and kindergartens, such as the Dar al-Arqam and Dar al-Aqsa Islamic School systems, which, while following the state-supervised curriculum, provide extra-curricular religious education as well as providing an 'Islamic' environment for both students and teachers. These schools are located in the poorer sections of Amman such as Jabal al-Ashrafiyyah, Jabal al-Zuhur, Jabal al-Nazif, al-Rashid, and Nazzal.

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<sup>7</sup> The political parties law promulgated in 1992 stipulated that founding members of parties must be at least 25 years of age.

Aside from institutions that provide formal education, there is, in Jordan today, a rapidly expanding network of community-based Islamic committees and associations providing Islamic instruction. Many of these take the form of Dar al-Qur'an (Houses of Qur'an, or Qur'an instruction schools) attached to local mosques. Youth clubs and Islamic cultural centres are also active in the field of religious instruction, and hold classes throughout the year as well as during the summer school holiday. The most well-known is the Yarmuk Sporting, Cultural and Social Club, located in Jabbal al-Nusha, another poor area of Amman. It sponsors a wide variety of sports, religious and social activities, in addition to housing the most famous of a new genre of Islamic choral groups, the Yarmuk Club Troupe for Islamic Singing.

### **Changing Patterns in Women's Work and Education**

I have tried to show in the preceding pages that Ikhwan activists and activities are concentrated primarily in the middle and poorer strata of urban society. The middle strata have expanded significantly over the last twenty years due to the effects of labour migration to the Gulf, the expansion of the state bureaucracy and the educational system, and the increase in the size of the private service sector. Women became increasingly visible and significant in the process of the creation and expansion of the middle strata, and as such became a presence which could not be ignored by the strata of whose growth they were a part. For the very expansion of the state bureaucracy and the educational system, for example, meant an increase in the number of young women going to school and university and the incorporation of increasing numbers of women into the civil service as teachers, school principals, typists, and clerks, that is, women of the middle classes, women from families for whom work and education for adult or teenage women had not been a pattern even a decade or two earlier. This emerging reality had many consequences, the most important of which was the problematic of reconciling traditional conceptions of women's place and function in society with changing necessities and realities. The Islamists, sons of the new middle classes, stepped in with their own solutions to these dilemmas, and made them the cornerstone of their activism and political work.

### **What is the magnitude of the change in women's labour force participation and education?**

#### **Employment**

Data on women's employment in Jordan as those on women's work elsewhere in the Arab world, are largely inadequate, partly because of the ambiguous definition of what constitutes 'work' for women.<sup>8</sup> For our purposes, however, we are interested in broad trends in women's work for wages outside the home, that is mainly in a workplace not controlled by the household or part of its economy.

Available data on the Jordanian labour force show an increase in women's participation in the labour force in recent decades. Data supplied from one source (al-Khasawna 1989: 12) indicate a female labour force participation of almost 12 per cent in 1987, up from 7 per cent in 1979 and 6 per cent in 1969. Another source (Shakhatra 1990: 38) puts the figures at 3 per cent for 1952, 7.5 per cent for 1979, and 9.5 per cent in 1987.<sup>9</sup> Since non-Jordanian women constitute part of the female labour force in Jordan, statistics for Jordanian women in the labour force would be a more accurate indicator: the percentage rose from almost 6 per cent in 1969 to 7 per cent in 1979, increasing to 10 per cent in 1987 (the total number of Jordanian women in the labour force was 15 thousand in 1969, 28.5 thousand in 1979, and close to 52 thousand in 1987).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A discussion of these problems is found in Moghadam 1993: 34-5.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Planning (1986:5) figures are close: 7.7 per cent in 1979, steadily rising to reach 12.5 per cent in 1985.

<sup>10</sup> See Khasawna 1989: 12. Other data reported indicate that women's labour force participation reached 12 per cent or possibly 16.9 per cent in the early 1980s. See Shami and Taminian 1990: 2.

Looking at a breakdown of the various sectors where women work, we find, according to data from the 1979 census, that 83.5 per cent of working women are employed in the 'personal and public' services sector, 6.6 per cent in industry, and 4.4 per cent in finance and assurance. Sixty-five per cent of working women are employed in the public sector, where they constitute 32.7 per cent of those employed there. More than half of them are employed in education, while the other half work in administrative and secretarial jobs.<sup>11</sup>

It has been noted (Khamash 1990: 28) that women in the public sector are characterized by a high degree of educational attainment: in 1987, women with more than 12 years of education constituted 71.4 per cent of all women employed in this sector, of whom a full 40 per cent had post-secondary diplomas and 29 per cent bachelors' degrees.

A recent study (Shakhatra 1990: 42-4) on the characteristics of the female labour force in Jordan has indicated that education, and particularly secondary and post-secondary education, is the most significant factor in increasing women's participation in the labour force. This study found that rates of labour force participation for women with less than 10 years of education ranges from 2 to 7.1 per cent, while it rises to 25.8 per cent for those with 10-12 years of education, to 76.8 per cent for those with 13-14 years of education, dropping to 69.3 per cent for those with 15 or more years of study.

It is difficult to make any definitive statements about the class background of working women in Jordan, since the national surveys which are the source of most of the data do not incorporate social indicators which would help in assessing the social character of the female labour force.<sup>12</sup> However, we can assume at the least that with the increasing labour force participation of women over the last two decades, the social composition of women in the labour force, especially in 'white-collar' occupations, has become more diversified. It has been noted (Shami and Taminian 1990: 58) that the rapid increase in two-year community colleges in Jordan is evidence of the growing need in the public sector for teachers, clerical workers and typists. It would be safe to assume that female graduates of these colleges and hence the women who work in these 'white-collar' occupations are drawn mainly from the middle and lower middle classes. Data from a 1985 survey of five 'squatter' areas near Amman (Shami and Taminian 1990: 52) show that even lower class women are finding their way in these occupations: close to 34 per cent of employed women were classified as 'skilled employees' and 'health workers', that is, clerical workers and teachers, and nurses and midwives. The remaining were employed as seamstresses (24.7 per cent), janitors (27.8 per cent), unskilled workers (5 per cent), sellers (7.1 per cent), and factory workers (0.5 per cent). What is significant from these data is not only that lower class women are entering the skilled female labour force, but that employment in almost all of the other occupations mentioned above entails work in the public domain.

### Education

As with other states in the region, Jordan has realized significant gains in female education. Data supplied by UNESCO (1990: 3-95, 3-176, 3-264) for a 13-year period (1975-1988) illustrate this achievement, showing that the most significant increase has occurred at the post-secondary level. So while over this period there was a 2 per cent increase in the proportion of females at the elementary level (from 46 to 48 per cent) and a 7 percent increase for the remainder of the school cycle (from 41 to 48 per cent), the increase in the proportion of females at the post-secondary level reached 16 per cent (from 33 to 49 per cent). A closer examination of the data reveals that the increase in the proportion of female students was larger (24 per cent) in non-university post-secondary institutions, presumably community colleges and vocational training institutes, which have proliferated greatly over the past decade.

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<sup>11</sup> See Khasawna 1989: 14. More recent data reported by Khamash (1990: 28) also confirm that women form a significant component of the labour force in the public sector, but the share for 1987 is set at 26.5 per cent, that is, less than the 32.7 per cent reported above. It is unlikely that this reflects an actual drop in the proportion of women employed in the public sector, and is most likely attributable to problems in the collection and interpretation of data.

<sup>12</sup> Other shortcomings of national survey data on employed women, among them the one mentioned here, are discussed in Shami and Taminian 1990: 66.

A closer look at non-university higher education shows a higher percentage of females there than at the two state-run universities in Jordan, the University of Jordan and Yarmuk University.<sup>13</sup> So while the percentage of women students at the universities was just under 39 per cent, it rose to over 57 per cent at colleges run by the Ministry of Education, to 51.4 per cent at UNWRA-operated colleges (which accept only refugee students), and 45.2 per cent at privately-owned community colleges.<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the colleges and community colleges in Jordan today, both private and those run by the state, are not considered 'elite' schools, but rather as second options for those unable to attend the two universities. Even the University of Jordan, the top Jordanian school, is not the first choice for the sons and daughters of the upper and upper-middle classes, who prefer to send their children abroad, often to the USA.

The previous discussion can be summarized by saying that while gains in girls' (school) education had been established in earlier decades, significant advances in higher education for women were being made beginning with the early 1980s. One can also assume, given the increase in enrolment at the post-high school level and the proliferation of vocational and community colleges in the past decade, that the social background of the student body has become increasingly diversified. Thus it is expected that female students at Jordanian universities, community college and other post-secondary training institutions come increasingly from social strata that one generation ago did not educate their daughters.

Data from the survey of squatter areas in Amman (Shami and Taminian 1990: 57) support these assumptions. There, more than half of the girls under the age of twenty had completed secondary school, and 34 per cent of twenty-year-old women were still studying. This shows that even among the urban poor, women's education, and one would assume their employment thereafter, are viewed as desirable or at least as a necessity, especially under the pressure of continuing increases in the cost of living.

What can be concluded from these trends in women's employment and education? At the very least, we can say that increasing numbers of women leave home every day, for the most part into situations where they have some degree of contact with unrelated men. An increasing proportion of these women are from the middle and lower middle classes, for whom opportunities for education and employment have opened up significantly in the past two decades. What is significant here is that these women, in contrast to educated and working women of two or three decades ago, come from families which have neither the means nor the inclination to be part of the 'modern' lifestyle pioneered by the upper and middle classes. As women, they are worlds removed from the construct of the 'modern woman' which the upper and middle classes fashioned in the 1960s and 1970s, a construct which remained uncontested as long as women from social milieu for which that kind of modernity was not a consideration had not yet invaded the public domain. Once this began to happen, women (and men) from the lower reaches of society found the model of the modern, westernized woman untenable for them, on material, social, and moral grounds.

At the same time, however, these women and their families are caught up in dilemmas which are modern, for which traditional culture—their own culture—does not have ready and easy prescriptions. The Islamist project comes at this critical juncture, at a time when an 'authentic', 'indigenous', and alternative mode of being is most needed. The Islamists, with their prescriptions for women's conduct and dress, have seized the cultural initiative in a previously uncontested domain, and have wrested authority from the culturally dominant classes in the matter of dress codes and codes of conduct for women. In fact, the Islamist project is even more ambitious: while Islamists are openly defying the cultural hegemony of the westernized elites, they are at the same time engaged in an alternative, counter-cultural enterprise, that is, to reconstruct an 'Islamic' culture opposed both to western culture and to important aspects of traditional Arab culture.

### Women and Cultural Authenticity

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<sup>13</sup> The third, Mu'ta University, does not admit women.

<sup>14</sup> See Ministry of Planning 1986: 3.

I have so far tried to show why the issue of gender relations and women's conduct and dress is becoming increasingly prominent in the discourse and activism of the Ikhwan in Jordan. I have attempted to link the urgency of the issue with social transformations at the level of gender and class during recent decades, and have pointed out that the key to understanding the prominence of the 'woman question' in Islamist thinking is the fact that the social groups which comprise the traditional constituency of the Islamists are finally experiencing for themselves the socially disruptive implications of new patterns in women's work and education and visibility in general. In short, they seek new solutions to new dilemmas in their own midst, and the Islamist 'solution' is the main contender in a field of diminishing options.

Framing the issue in cultural and moral terms, as the Islamists have done, is a mode of address with a strong, if not primal, appeal in a society attempting to construct and invent new social arrangements in response to the inexorable march of social and economic change. The form of address is particularly appealing to those social groups most alienated and divorced—materially and socially—from the insular world of the westernized elite and in search of more 'authentic' ways of living than those presented by the upper class. As such, the 'cultural authenticity' framework elaborated by Islamists merits attention especially since the Ikhwan in Jordan, as Islamists everywhere, are engaged in a social and cultural project aimed at reconstructing from disparate elements from Islamic and Arab social history—a new Islamic 'counter-culture' that would replace and suppress the dominant culture in both its traditional and 'modern' elements.

One of the features of the Islamist discourse on culture, as has been widely noted, is seeing behind the moral ills of contemporary Muslim society the hand of a modern-day crusade in which the West and world Jewry are conspiring to weaken the Muslim people. In the case of Jordan, the century-old confrontation with Zionism provides the most immediate and concrete embodiment of the external threat. While imperialism, orientalism, and Christian proselytizing (al-tabshir) are blamed for denigrating Muslims and corrupting Muslim society, world Jewry, with their presumed control over international finance and politics are singled out for their insidious design to spread moral corruption over the world and among the Muslims in particular. In the words of Ziad Abu-Ghanima, a prominent Ikhwan ideologue:

The Jews, as the Holy Qur'an has depicted them, are both corrupt and corrupting today. Today, Jewish corruption is eating away quietly at the Arab body. But when relations between Jews and Arabs are normalized, this will become a licensed corruption, and the Jews will be at liberty to spread their moral corruption. Most sex films and depraved magazines are owned by Jews, so it is they who control the manufacture of sex and prostitution in the world at large.<sup>15</sup>

While Abu Ghanima posits an abstract Jewish world, what in fact he is drawing upon and invoking is the concrete and often intimate knowledge that his constituency (a large part of which is composed of displaced Palestinian refugees) has of the embodiment of that world just next door, Israel. What almost everyone in this constituency shares is a common perception of how Israeli forms of dress, conduct, and consumption have filtered into Palestinians' lives in the Occupied Territories, and worse still, have deformed the cultural identity of Palestinians living within the Jewish state. Palestinians in Palestine have become victims of this cultural onslaught by virtue of their having to live under the yoke of occupation; Arab states which contemplate voluntary normalization of relations with Israel must beware of the grave consequences of doing so.

How do women figure in this cultural confrontation? First, it is clear from Islamist writings that moral corruption is reduced in essence to the relaxation or abandonment of traditional mores relating to the interaction between women and men on the one hand, and to the improper dress, appearance and conduct of women on the other. Second, and this is also clear from Islamist writings, women bear the brunt of the burden in the war against cultural contamination. It is they (and through them the rest of society) who are targeted by the alien designs; if they want to rescue their society and their culture from falling into depravity, they must return to God and to their religion.

These two themes are found in many Islamist writings. Here is one example from the women's page of the Ikhwan newspaper:

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<sup>15</sup> These views were expressed in a seminar to discuss normalization of relations with Israel through the current peace negotiations, and was reported in the *Ikhwan* newspaper *Al-Ribat* (58 (1992): 11).

## WLUML Dossier 20 July 1998

This is a vicious, many-sided battle we are waging (against the Jews and Hebrew civilization), and you, my sister, must rise to the occasion ... This is a war ...being waged against a nation (umma)... whose women look up to Khadija, 'A'isha, Fatima and Asma'<sup>16</sup> as models... My sister, if you avoid the path of God you will contribute to the success of the conspiracy, and you will be an obstacle to the liberation of Palestine... How can God's victory prevail when women adorn themselves openly and mix with men, and when defiance of God's law continues day and night? The enemy relies on you, my sister, to strike at this nation from within, as if the stabs we receive from the outside were not enough. We do not presume that you would accept this. (al-Ribat 45 (1991))

In the Jordanian context, the connection between moral reform and fighting the alien invader is made more potent and concrete by constant invocation of an ethos born of the century-long struggle against Zionism. This ethos of suffering, sacrifice, and struggle has been invested with such sacredness and inviolability that any act detracting from the struggle is considered tantamount to sacrilege if not treason. Women's purity steps into this formula as an important cornerstone of the ethos of suffering, sacrifice, and struggle: women's preoccupation with trivia and fashion, at a time of sacrifice and struggle is an insult to the fighters for liberation; and women, by their immodest dress and conduct, are unwittingly aiding the enemy in their design to corrupt the nation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Khadija and 'A'isha were wives of the Prophet Muhammad, Fatima his daughter, and Asma' the sister of 'A'isha and the daughter of Abu-Bakr, a Companion of the Prophet. These and other women's lives are held up by modern Islamists as models for women to emulate.

<sup>17</sup> A very similar campaign was waged by Palestinian Islamists in the Occupied Territories in the first two years of the uprising. There, women were urged (and in many cases, forced) to adopt Islamic dress, for among other reasons, to honour the martyrs. For a discussion of the 'nationalization' of Islamic dress in Palestine, see Hammami 1990: 24-28.

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