Increased Religiosity Among Women in Muslim Majority Countries

Issues Paper

(To be read in conjunction with the Annotated Bibliography)

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Terminology

This terminology draws particularly on Asma Barlas, '"Believing Women" in Islam' 2002, University of Texas Press.

QUR'AN – the word of God - the source of Truth for all Muslims and a means of realising it in action. Revealed by the Prophet Muhammed over a 23-year period in the 7th century in Arabia, first in Mecca and then in Medina.

The Qur'an is the text of the revelation it its original form, hence it is inviolate and incontrovertible. However, it can be read differently depending on the context, conditioning and culture of its readers. It can also be read differently because some Arabic words have several different meanings (polysemic) and because words in 7th century Arabia did not necessarily have the same meaning as they have today (Barlas 2002:35). When the Qur'an is read in translation it can add to the complexity – which is why translations of the Qur'an do not have the same authenticity as the original Arabic.

SUNNAH – the Prophet's practice, including his sayings, actions and his tacit approval of behaviour he knew about as noted in the Ahadith (see below). Muslims view the Prophet's Sunnah as generalisable but it is difficult to generalise them in practice insofar as they were unique to the Prophet. The idea of imitating the Prophet through a set of codified examples has proved problematic in several respects:

-   Most of the content of the Sunnah does not accurately reflect the Prophet's praxis. This was added by the early jurists of Islam who made deductions from the existing Sunnah, and also included practices from the Byzantine, Arab, Jewish and Persian cultures that they lived in. In this way, many pre-Islamic cultural practices were given elevated religious status.
-   The drafting of the Shari'ah relied upon the Sunnah to a great extent – in fact more so than on the Qur'an. As a result of the point above, Arab practices such as female circumcision and stoning to death for adultery became entrenched in the Islamic tradition.

HADITH – the authenticated sayings of the Prophet, a narrative on his life and practices. These records began to be compiled a century after his death and were completed 300 or so years later. Hadith (plural Ahadith) are categorised into three – those that are (i) reliable due to the scrupulousness of their transmitters and the historical authenticity of their context (ii) less reliable due to the 'forgetfulness' of some narrators and (iii) weak.

The hadith have several functions: they help with the interpretation of the Qur'an; they give some Qur'anic teachings specificity (e.g. they specify the number and content of daily prayers) and they also allow for coverage of issues for which the Qur'an offers no precedents. For example, the Qur'an does not specify the nature of institutions for governance but this was an important issue for jurists and political leaders after the Prophet's death. They therefore used their understanding of the Prophet's life and actions to decide how best to govern - these understandings then became incorporated into the hadith and thus became part of authenticated tradition. (Barlas 2002:43-5)

Many aspects on the hadith can be read as anti-women. This is not surprising as they reflect the prevailing notions at the time they were codified (7th – 11th centuries) - ideas and customs associated with patriarchal Mediterranean societies that saw women as defiling, unclean and intellectually inferior. Although there are only six 'anti-women' hadith (out of a total of about 70,000) that are seen as Sahih (reliable) "…it is these six that men trot out when they want to argue against sexual equality, whilst perversely ignoring the dozens of positive hadith. Interpretation and selection have therefore together provided a basis for patriarchy to claim it has religious authority." (Barlas 2002:46)

SHARI'AH refers to classical Muslim law. However, the term itself means 'definition of practice'. The Shari'ah provides guidance on how to conduct aspects of everyday life based on the Islamic model provided by the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Its content is deduced by interpreting the Qur'an through the Sunnah. "In effect, the principles of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) are derived by way of the Sunnah, hence by *limiting* the Qur'an's canonical authority" (Barlas 2002: 70). Other ways of developing the Shari'ah are consensus (*ijma'),* critical reasoning *(ijtihad*), and analogical reasoning *(qiyas).*

There remains a tension between the weight given to the Qur'an and Sunnah as sources of the Shari'ah. The Shari'ah also cannot be considered "a single logical whole" as it encompasses the diverse opinion of the four Sunni legal schools – Shafi, Maliki, Hanafi, and Hanbali, named after the four classical Islamic jurists who founded them. It is important to note that these jurists "agreed to differ…and more importantly, to accept each other's orthodoxy" (Barlas 2002: 71)

IJTIHAD refers to the process of critical reasoning when applied to religious texts. It is a time honoured traditional method for understanding the Qur'an and hadith, that reflects the fact that the Qur'an is 'an eternally evolving knowledge'. For Barlas and other Muslim feminists, as for male religious leaders, ijtihad allows 'a process of recontextualising the Qur'an through new modes of reading, none of which can exhaust its meanings'. (Barlas ibid: 60) It is through ijtihad that male religious leaders have given the Qur'an its patriarchal and anti-women interpretations; it is also ijtihad that allows Muslim feminists to revisit the texts, define previous interpretations in terms of their historical and cultural contexts and find meanings that accord with today's circumstances. The gates of ijtihad, as a source of Islamic law, are considered to have been closed early in Muslim history, although it is not clear exactly when this happened and who was responsible. Many Muslim scholars and activists are now actively calling for a revival of the practice.

1.0   Introduction

Why this paper?

1.1   This paper is written principally for DFID Social Development Advisers and others interested in gender issues in Muslim majority countries (MMCs). It takes as its starting point the importance of understanding the movement towards greater religious observance amongst Muslim women in MMCs. This observance takes diverse forms but 'veiling' (increased and changing forms of head and body covering) is the one most remarked upon by outsiders. Other visible expressions of piety include the increasing number of women praying regularly, their attendance at prayer meetings and/or study circles held in women's houses or the local mosque, and their support for religious political parties.

1.2   For development practitioners the increasing religiosity of women in Muslim societies in the 21st century raises questions.   In UK university anthropological and sociological courses in the 1970s and 1980s veiling was seen as a symbol of patriarchal oppression with male dominance legitimised through both cultural tradition and religious prescription. The veil indicated male control over a woman but also her inferiority; her sexuality was seen as the property of men, which had to be controlled to protect family honour. Islam as a religion tended to be presented in rigid and essentialist terms, as prescribing a given set of edicts on women's behaviour, edicts that were not seen – or were not presented – as open for debate or interpretation.

1.3   This explanatory framework assumed that women who veiled were either forced into doing so or acquiesced as the result of brainwashing, false consciousness, lack of education or fear. Today, a very large number of women veil - and with some ferocity (many find curiosity about veiling bizarre at best, and at worst neo-orientalist and personally intrusive). The point is that it is no longer possible to 'explain' either women's various dress codes, nor their wider interest in understanding Islam, in terms of patriarchal insistence because a large number of educated women are choosing to veil, immerse themselves in religious study and find other ways to be 'a true Muslim'. Other interpretative frameworks are needed to explain the upsurge in women's religiosity amongst all classes and across a very diverse region (West and North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, including Indonesia – as well as Europe).

1.4   Our starting point is that it is important for development policy makers and practitioners to take an interest in this upsurge in religiosity because it raises questions that touch on, even if they are not all central to, three areas of their work:

• Women's rights and gender equality
• Women as political actors (including in Islamist parties)
• Women's involvement in civil society (including religious movements)

1.5   Our intention is to introduce some of the literature on women's involvement in social and political religious movements as a way of understanding social change processes in MMCs. This paper is not making an argument for more funding, nor does it recommend alternative approaches to aid in any of the above areas. It therefore has no overt policy objective other than to argue for a

greater understanding of the internal dynamics of what is happening within MMCs – an understanding that is not distorted by current political obsessions.

The War on Terror lens: distorting, alienating, self-perpetuating

1.6   Although there have existed 'Islamic' approaches to gender issues since at least the 1970s these have remained largely invisible to western donor agencies. However, the recent resurgence of Islamic identity by women and men in many countries – itself closely linked to the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the US as the sole superpower and the US declared 'War on Terror' (read as 'War on Islam' in much of the Islamic world) – is leading western development agencies to take stock and reconsider their approaches in MMCs. Donors are acknowledging that they have had few dealings with overtly Islamic groups over the last 20-30 years and have never engaged much with political parties, least of all Islamist parties. Should they be interacting more closely with these groups, including on gender issues?

1.7   Two factors have accounted for donor hesitancy. The first is that relations between western and Muslim majority countries, traditionally a colonial one, are now being rearticulated through a War on Terror lens. Over the last decade, and particularly since 9/11, donors have been drawn into having an interest in the Islamic world – including middle income Arab countries that are not primary partners – through a very specific window – that of security. Western donor ministries are being encouraged by their foreign and defence counterparts to 'help' with security concerns by using their development budgets in ways that help ameliorate the grievances seen to underlie violence, including terrorist attacks. This inevitably leads critics in some Muslim majority countries to view development aid with even more suspicion than formerly: is this really a pro-poor project, or is it an invidious form of self-protection? And why the belief that development aid can make a difference when a change in US and EU foreign policy and narratives - literally how Islam is spoken about and portrayed by western leaders and the media - is so clearly what is needed, and would have so much more effect?

1.8   As if the terrorist issue has not muddied the waters enough there is another problem, one that springs from within the donor community itself. In line with western perceptions more generally, many donors continue to have a mental sticking point: they feel there will be no shared gender perspective with women identifying themselves in terms of their Islamic identity. This is because they continue to see manifestations of religiosity, and particularly the veil, as oppressive of women and of being rooted in Islam as a religion. There has therefore been a reluctance, perhaps even a fear, to try and understand overtly religious women's position on gender rights, lest it be impossible to find a common platform, or worse, that the two perspectives are incompatible.

1.9   Neither of these two barriers – the War on Terror narrative and the uncertainty about a common position – should stop those interested in gender issues from better understanding the different ways in which women are pursuing their rights in MMCs. This paper, and the accompanying annotated bibliography, aims to analyse different positions taken and identify sources for further reading.

Sources

1.10   The literature for this paper is mainly drawn from Muslim women scholars and activists who write from their own experience and knowledge of Islam. The accompanying annotated bibliography draws on a more comprehensive (though still highly selective) range of the work by respected scholars and activists who write on women and Islam. As our sources indicate the term 'Muslim majority country' or MMC includes countries in South Asia (e.g. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia), the Middle East and North Africa, including the horn, as well as Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. We include northern Nigeria in this designation.

Organisation of paper and annotated bibliography

1.11   The paper is organised according to the three issues mentioned above. The sections are written separately even though there are overlaps in terms of concepts used, and in terms of practice (the issues at stake do influence each other on the ground). The annotated bibliography is divided up in the same way in order to enable readers to focus on the area they are particularly interested in – given that time may preclude looking at all of them.

2.0 Women's positioning on gender rights and equality

2.1   It has hitherto been assumed, at least by western development practitioners, that women's rights are best attained through secularist liberal interpretations of equality, of the sort reflected in CEDAW type conventions. Yet what does increasing use of the veil and greater religious observances across the Islamic world signify in this context? Does it reflect a rejection of these standards? And if understanding this move to greater religiosity requires a different paradigm of rights then how does this 'Islamic' paradigm sit with the 'western' one?

2.2   A useful first step in conceptualising the different paradigms around women's rights in Muslim majority countries (MMCs) is to look at how women writers and activists from the region categorise their own and others' perspectives. Azza Karam makes a particularly useful three-fold categorisation.[1] She distinguishes (i) *secularist*s (ii) *Muslim feminists* and (iii) *Islamists*. These three perspectives exemplify the diversity of approaches to gender equality in MMCs.

Secularist perspectives

2.3   Those holding a secularist position in MMCs argue, in much the same vein as their western counterparts, that laws and practices relating to women should be based on a human rights framework and should not relate to religion (Karam 1992:13) For them religion is a private matter and should not be the basis of laws, policies or institutions. The UN Convention on Eliminating All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is a major and comprehensive reference point – it is the only international instrument that requires signatory governments to put in place laws that provide protection against discrimination against women in all fields - civil, political, economic, social, and cultural. Whilst many MMCs have signed the convention[2] there remains a huge gap between convention principles and what women experience in their everyday lives. For secularists the problem is with religion itself – CEDAW and gender equality will never be attained whilst religion – in this case Islam - influences laws and practice. The solution is therefore to take religious influence 'out' of law and policy.

2.4   In some MMC countries there is a long and deeply rooted secular tradition - in Bangladesh and Turkey for example.[3] The rise of a more pronounced Islamic

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[1] We adopt Karam's categorisation (1992:9-14). but change her terminology slightly. Like some other writers Karam uses the terms 'feminist/m' to describe all these forms of women's activism. We use it more sparingly. The debate on whether there is such a thing as 'Islamic feminism' is a long one. (See works by Margot Badran, Asma Barlas, Omaima Abou-Bakr, Nayereh Tohidi, Val Moghadam, Amina Wadud). Some writers do not use it on the basis that they see it as having a western, and therefore inappropriate and negative, connotation.

[2] MMCs that have signed and ratified CEDAW include Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, UAE, Yemen. Also Nigeria.

[3] Secularism has been part of Turkey's constitution since the proclamation of the Republic in 1923; the current AKP government is committed to secularism as the basis for state policy. At the same time it has Islamic leanings and supports the rights of covered women to enter public places (particularly universities). In Bangladesh secularism was part of the constitution only between 1971 and 1977; although subsequent secularist governments have never reinstated it as a constitutional pillar, support for a polity based on secularism has remained high, particularly amongst the intellectual NGO elite familiar to donors.

identity by men and women has been greeted with alarm by secularists; this has resulted in a noticeable - and at times antagonistic - secular-religious divide. For secularists in both countries a woman who veils cannot, by definition, be a women's rights activist. Veiling ('covering' in Turkey) indicates to secularists that women are either doing this involuntarily, or if it is a choice, then they are acquiescent in their continuing oppression. Those who veil are seen to threaten the hard-won progress made by secularists on gender equality to date.

2.5   There are, of course, exceptions to, and nuances within, this dichotomy. The main point is that women activists within MMCs do include secularists in the western sense. Indeed, with only a few exceptions donor funding has been to this group.

Muslim feminist perspectives

2.6   In contrast to the secularist position, Muslim feminists believe no meaningful change can occur in Muslim societies unless it derives its legitimacy from the Qur'an's teachings. (Barlas 2002:3). Muslim feminists see equality and social justice as at the heart of Islam; the Qur'an allows for gender equality in all spheres of life. The problem is not with this divine text – it is the Word of God – but with how it and related texts, the hadith[4] in particular, have been interpreted from the earliest times by trained religious leaders and jurists. Islamic texts, like other sacred texts, are polysemic (open to variant meanings). This has allowed different 'interpreters', from the 7th century onwards, to give meaning to words, phrases and verses according to their ideological stand and beliefs. Riffat Hassan puts the argument thus: 'The dominant, patriarchal interpretations of Islam have fostered the myth of women's inferiority in several ways. They have used sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammed (including disputed sayings) to undermine the intent and teachings of the Qur'an. They have taken Qur'anic verses out of context and read them literally, ignoring the fact that the Qur'an often uses symbolic language to portray deep truths. And they have failed to account for the overriding ethical values of the Qur'an, which stresses that human beings – women as well as men – have been designated God's *khalifah* (viceregent) on earth to establish a social order characterized by justice and compassion'. (Hassan, p.1)

2.7   In short, Muslim feminists explain the sexual inequality and oppression that women in MMCs experience largely in terms of the misogynist readings of the Qur'an and other sacred texts by (male) religious leaders who first reflected, and through their interpretations further institutionalised, the patriarchal culture of their day.[5] As Barlas notes: 'The Qur'an was revealed in/to an existing patriarchy and has been interpreted by adherents of patriarchies ever since.' (ibid 2002: xi)

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[4] The hadith are the authenticated narrative of the Prophet's life compiled after his death and used to help interpret right behaviour. According to Barlas they are particularly liable to individual/patriarchal/cultural interpretation because they were compiled over such a long period and had many authors. She remarks in an interview: 'For a believer, the Qur'an is a divine discourse and the hadith are not. Hadith are the result of human compilation and none of the people who compiled them ever claimed they were infallible….Whatever the Qur'an opens up, the hadith can shut down' (Barlas 2005:5). See annex 1 for more details.
[5] This is not to suggest that the anti-women bias in the interpretation of religious texts is the only source of women's position. As Barlas notes this has been caused by multiple factors. 'The history of Western civilization should tell us there is nothing innately Islamic about misogyny, inequality or patriarchy'. (Barlas ibid: 2).

2.8   Muslim feminists believe that since gender equality is intrinsic to Islam interpretations that suggest otherwise must be revisited and reinterpreted. The scholars who undertake this task have a difficult job: they must separate out the word of the Qur'an, itself inviolate and immutable, from the patriarchal and culturally specific interpretations given to the Qur'an and particularly to the hadith. They must use arguments grounded in a deep understanding of Islamic theology, and interpretative history from the 7th century onwards. Their books, articles and speeches therefore focus on refuting interpretations of specific verses and words that imply women are inferior by citing alternative sources that allow for a different reading of the text.

2.9   These re-interpretive projects by Muslim feminist scholars inevitably meet with resistance from the traditional religious establishment, the majority of whom deny that Islam allows for individual interpretation, least of all by women. (Karam ibid: 13) The very possibility of re-interpretation by women threatens their power base as the 'only true' interpreters of Islam. Those who undertake this task are exceptional in their courage and in their ability.[6]

2.10   It is important to emphasise that Muslim feminists do not take this religious interpretative route only for pragmatic reasons but because, as believing women, it is also the one most meaningful to them personally. However, this is not to suggest that they use only this framework; when talking to non-Muslims they may couch their ideas within a human rights/CEDAW type perspective. In this sense then they are in the middle of the three positions we are outlining: able to communicate with secularists because they are sympathetic to their goals, and potentially able to communicate with Islamists because of their knowledge of Islam.

2.11   However, this does not mean that Muslim feminist arguments currently reach the majority population in MMCs. This is despite their willingness to appear on TV and take part in debates on Islamic issues in addition to their academic writing and teaching.[7] For the most part ordinary working women with little education and no internet access continue to be exposed to the traditional, i.e. patriarchal, interpretative tradition of the religious establishment in their countries.

Islamist perspectives

2.12   The term Islamist, used alone, generally connotes political party affiliation and some activist Islamist women will indeed belong to the women's arms of political parties whose aim is to replace secular law with religious law (Shari'ah). However, we use the term more loosely here to include women activists who may share the broad aims of Islamist parties even if they are not members.

2.13   A major difference between the Muslim feminist and Islamist perspective is that Islamists do not see it as the right of women to revisit the Islamic texts and reinterpret them on the basis of theological study and contextual understanding.

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[6] Asma Barlas' book "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an is recommended for its depth of scholarship but also its readability.
[7] Asma Barlas, Omaima Abou-Bakr and Amina Wadud are three of many scholars who regularly appear in TV interviews and public debates arguing for a gender perspective to the study of religious texts. For example, see Abou-Bakr's argument in 'A Muslim Woman's Reflection on Gender'. http://www.islam21.net/pages/keyissues/key2-8.htm

They share an interest in clarifying the position of women through ijtihad[8] and spend much time studying, analysing and referring to Islamic texts to support their arguments. But there is a difference between *referring* to traditional, authoritative interpretations of religious texts and finding the one most suited to the modern day context and attempting to *re-interpret* them, thereby challenging the traditional 'right' of male Muslim leaders to do this. (Karam ibid: 12) Inevitably, by holding to the interpretations already set by established religious figures Islamist women come up with a much more conservative interpretation of women's rights than Muslim feminists.

2.14   This conservatism can be seen in Islamist approaches to gender equality. Some Islamists argue that the Qur'an does not allow for gender equality and they, as women, do not strive for it (Karam ibid: 10). They see it as a western concept that has bought nothing good for western women, condemned as they are to struggle for equality with men, and to fail. They argue that it is not necessary or even desirable to 'equal' men in their various endeavours as they have different but complementary roles in life. This stand on equality makes it difficult to bring Islamist, Muslim feminist and secularist women onto a common platform, including in international women's rights forums.[9]

2.15   In some MMCs two factors particularly distinguish Islamist women. The first is that most wear some form of veil. For Islamist women the veil is 'an indisputable religious obligation' whereas for Muslim feminists it is a matter of personal choice and conviction (Karam ibid: 12). A second differentiating factor is that of class. The majority of ordinary women who support an Islamist position tend, in many MMCs, to be from lower middle class backgrounds, and although educated themselves, to have parents with primary or minimal education. They may be first generation migrants to a town or city.[10] They, like their male counterparts, are therefore an upwardly mobile group who nonetheless face significant frustrations in dealing with town or city life. Their overall conservatism and indeed their propensity to veil must be seen in this light.

A note on this categorisation

2.16   Like all categorisations this one is imperfect on several counts; for one thing, many women may see themselves as being somewhere in between two perspectives, others will not self-identify in terms of the labels. There are also significant differences of perspective *within* each of these categories. But the model, though imperfect, is helpful. It makes the obvious point that women in MMCs argue for rights within quite different conceptual frameworks and in many MMCs it is the secularist/human rights perspective that carries least weight. Using it to argue for women's rights is therefore not an option if the intention is to win over a majority audience within the country or region.

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[8] Ijtihad: independent enquiry into the textual sources, particularly the Qur'an and hadith, in order to identify an interpretation of the religious texts that are appropriate to the conditions of life at the time. (Karam ibid:252)
[9] The term eventually promoted by MMCs in the run up to the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 was equity rather than equality. This was on the basis that the word equity was seen to affirm equal women's *access* to rights – but these could be different rights to those of men. (Karam ibid: 6) This compromise on the word 'equality' has occurred in other contexts, discussed later.
[10] These findings on the backgrounds of women who follow the Islamist 'trend' are based on a study from Egypt reported by Leila Ahmed (1992:222). They also hold for the same group of women in Turkey.

What about collaboration?

2.17   Do women holding different perspectives collaborate? This happens but there are often difficulties. This is partly because the issues that bring women together - laws that discriminate against them – tend to be in the area of Family Law, the area most prone to patriarchal interpretation. Thus getting a joint position on an issue like inheritance rights is difficult. Whilst secularists and Muslim feminists might agree – albeit using different frameworks – that women and men should have equal inheritance rights Islamist women are more likely to accept the traditional Shari'ah injunction that women receive approximately half what men receive, on the basis that it is men, and not women, who are responsible for providing for the family.[11]

2.18   Even on an issue like female genital mutilation (FGM), which most activist women oppose, it has proved difficult to get a united front at critical moments. This lack of unity partly accounts for late action on FGM in Egypt. When women failed to unite against FGM in 1994 the government, faced with Muslim men and religious leaders who did not oppose the practice, passed a milder law, restricting the practice to doctors, thereby continuing its legality (Karam ibid: 173). It was banned in 1997 after the death of a young girl but ad hoc enforcement means it remains common.[12]

2.19   One of the most hotly debated topics amongst activist women in many MMCs is the right of women to interpret Islamic texts. Saska Weiringa traces the history of how women's right to interpret Islamic texts took hold in Indonesia. Although spearheaded by Muslim feminists in the early 1990s it was gradually taken up by more conservative but mass-based Islamist groups and today there is a lively debate on this issue. Nonetheless, Weiringa notes there are still 'far reaching differences between these individual scholars (i.e. Muslim feminists) and the various groups (i.e. Islamists)' (Wieringa 2005:7).

2.20   Another area where collaboration is problematic is when a country or region needs to present its position on gender equality in international forums (see discussion on the lead up the 1995 Beijing conference footnoted earlier). Joy Ezeilo gives an example of her personal involvement in building a common platform in Nigeria: 'I was actively involved in the effort to pressure the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva to pass a resolution concerning equal inheritance rights for men and women. Initially our advocacy materials bore the inscription 'women's equal rights to equal inheritance'… That changed, however, when our Muslim sisters in the struggle from Asia and Africa informed us that equal rights to equal inheritance would not fly under Islamic law and culture. They also noted that we would lose their support if we continued to use equality language… we reluctantly but sensibly dropped a demand for equal inheritance and argued instead for a general right to inheritance' (Ezeilo 2006:41). She notes that this compromise meant, in effect, aiming for women to get half a loaf before

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[11] Amina Wadud argues that the 'two to one' formula is just one of many proportional divisions between men and women referenced in the Qur'an. She says it is necessary to look at the full extent of Qur'anic provision around inheritance, including at verses that pay attention to the circumstances of the deceased and of those who inherit. Overall she argues, all combinations of redistribution need to be taken into account 'for the equitable distribution of inheritance' (Wadud, 1999:87).

[12] Research by UNICEF in 2005 found that 96% of Egyptian women aged 15-49 who had ever been married reported they had been circumcised. The Guardian, 30/6/2007

insisting on a full share. She concludes that this 'may be the only option for feminists working in societies that live under Islamic law or Shari'ah'. Muslim feminists might disagree with this - their approach would surely be to challenge the interpretation of Islamic texts that purported to differentiate between women and men in the first place. But, as we have noted, the Muslim feminist voice is still a minority one and Ezeilo's observations hold for many MMCs.

Positions on veiling[13]

2.21   As noted previously, secularist women in MMCs do not veil (unless it is essential for their protection or a legal requirement) and see any form of veiling worn for religious reasons as intrinsically oppressive. In this they follow the position on the veil by western secularists and former colonial powers. In contrast Islamist women see the veil as an essential aspect of their identity – it is both a sign of their religious piety and an expression of their membership of a global community. For a politicised minority it is also a political statement – a repudiation of everything colonial, hegemonic and Western (Ahmed 1992: 235).

2.22   The Muslim feminist approach is that veiling is a matter of personal choice. But this does not fully convey the discussions that Muslim feminists have about the veil. Certainly within some countries the trend towards veiling is completely understandable to Muslim feminists, given the group of women that it involves – urban women from lower middle class backgrounds that are the first generation in their families to have a full education. It is first and foremost an expression of religious belief but it also has practical benefits. As Leila Ahmed notes, it gives women the freedom to operate in comfort and with the approval of family members in sexually mixed environments (universities, work places, public transport). In this sense it is enormously liberating. According to the type of covering used, its fabric, colour and how it is worn, it can also be a fashion statement, like any other form of dress. Ahmed argues that Islamic dress is also 'democratising' in the sense that formerly dress codes were always defined by the elite whereas the emerging predominance of Islamic dress is evident of 'a vocabulary of dress and social being, defined from below, by the emergent middle classes'. Seen from this perspective Islamic dress is not a return to traditional dress (many veiling styles are new and not traditional at all) but the adoption of a modern form of dress, 'with modifications to make it acceptable to the wearer's notions of propriety' (Ahmed ibid: 224-5).

2.23   What Ahmed and others worry about is not veiling per se but the symbolic message it may send to hard line Islamist parties. She says that widespread veiling may lend '…support and strength to Islamist political forces which, if successful in realising their objectives would institute authoritarian theocratic states that would undoubtedly have a devastatingly negative impact on women' (Ahmed ibid: 231). Her concern is compounded by research findings that show many young women (veiled and unveiled) are actually vague about the content of Islamic law, and think '…that Islam is fundamentally just and that justice must inhere somewhere in its laws' so they don't consider what has actually happened when Islamist political leaders have come to power and forcibly implemented a version of Shari'ah that has treated women brutally (Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation programme in Pakistan; post-revolutionary Iran.) In short, veiling per se is *not* the

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[13] We use the term veiling as shorthand – what is being discussed here is the adoption of Islamic dress. The form this takes varies: it may refer to a form of head covering only (a headscarf), head and shoulder covering (hejab), a head and face covering (niqab), plus various forms of long coat. Alternatively, a single garment like the chador or burqa.

problem – the problem is that women who veil tend to be also those that trust that social justice will inevitably come with an Islamist regime. Ahmed argues that this is naïve: Islam does indeed allow for social justice and gender equality but conservative religious forces cannot be relied upon to implement the law in this way. In their hands Islam, like any religion, can be used to justify laws and practices that are deeply discriminatory, and harmful to women.

Summary points

- The secularist approach to gender equality does exist within MMCs and tends to be brought to the fore when communicating with western countries and donors. However, it does not necessarily have wide appeal in MMCs; it is often seen as a foreign imposition;
- Women throughout the Islamic world want social justice for themselves and others; the majority fervently believe that Islam can deliver this;
- There is a major distinction between a) those who believe that patriarchal and cultural interpretations of Islamic texts have led to women's inferior status, and must therefore be revisited and reinterpreted, and b) those who believe that these interpretations imply women are different, not inferior, so religious texts are not in need of reinterpretation;
- It is often difficult for women to unite as a political lobby for women's rights in MMCs, given these differences in perspective;
- The greatly increased propensity of women to veil today is a new phenomenon; its significance must be understood with reference to the social and economic background of those veiling; what they are saying about their identity as Muslims but also about their aspirations as modern women who want to work and travel in a way that makes them feel comfortable and gains them respect not approbation.

3.0 Women and Islamist political parties

3.1   Islamist political parties – those that believe that Islamic law, the Shari'ah, should replace secular law - have come to the fore in many MMCs. The liberal secularist view is that these parties are taking the cause of women 'backwards'. This section analyses what the literature says about women's support for, and membership of, Islamist parties and implicitly raises questions for DFID's political systems and state building work.

3.2   So far no Islamist parties have been elected to form a government unless one counts Turkey.[14]   As mentioned, we do not categorise the AKP Turkish governing party as 'Islamist' as it is committed to retaining secularism as a constitutional principle.[15] For our purposes here we refer to parties like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh, the Party for Justice and Development in Morocco and Islamist parties in Pakistan, Yemen, Indonesia and Jordan that have contested elections.

3.3   In the Western media many of these parties have been presented as 'extremist', on the basis that some *have* used violence, and that for many western commentators, there is no such thing as a 'moderate Islamist' (Hamzawy 2005:1). Political extremism is merged with social extremism, i.e. the belief that they will introduce Shari'ah law if they come to power and this will oppress women. This merging of religious identity, political project, military strategy and the oppression of women has been capitalised upon by some MMC governments that emphasise the 'Islamist threat' in order to bolster Western support for their less than democratic regimes.[16] Yet, as Ali Abunimah notes, the violence used by Hamas and Hizbollah has more in common with other nationalist movements facing foreign occupation – such as the IRA - than any driving 'Islamist' ideology. And like the IRA their tactics have changed as they have entered the political process (Abunimah 2007:2).

3.4   Within development circles there is a more nuanced approach to Islamist parties due to an appreciation that many have come to prominence, and have popular support, because they have filled major gaps in service provision (health, education, credit, justice).   They are also seen as being stronger on anti-corruption than many secular governments. There is also an awareness that they are organising for the long term, to come to power through democratic means. This is a plus (democracy is good) but also a concern (suppose they do get elected?). And again the question: what would this do for women's rights? The short answer to this question after reviewing the literature is that it will depend on

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[14] The Turkish AKP (Justice and Development Party) took 47% of the vote in the 2007 election.

[15] The recent attack by the hard line secularist opposition (the army + judiciary) to take the party to court on the basis that it was unconstitutional to allow women to wear their headscarves in public institutions was a political ploy that failed (Barkey 2008:2). Had the case been won it would have seen the banning of the party and the fall of the government – this is interesting as it shows the lengths secularist parties will go to get rid of an Islamic leaning government – *even one that has been democratically elected and has a significant majority in parliament.*

[16] As Amr Hamzawy puts it: 'Arab regimes have long invoked the nightmare of anti-Western fanatics taking power through the ballot box to frighten the United States and Europe into implicitly supporting these regimes' repressive measures towards Islamist movements'. (2005:5)

the party and the political moment, as their manifestos and practices are different and evolving. It is this nuance that we seek to explore in this section.

Women's involvement in Islamist parties – what do we know?

3.5   For a long time parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizbollah have paid close attention to the role women can play in furthering their political goals and agendas (Abdellatif and Ottaway 2007:5). From their inception they set up women's branches and engaged women in electioneering, aware of women's valuable political and social capital. However, based on interviews with women and men in both these parties Abdellatif and Ottaway conclude that they have not encouraged women to participate in the mainstream business of the party and become leaders.   This is true for other Islamist parties like Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat from now on) in Bangladesh.   It has never once fielded a women candidate for a direct election in all of its 65 year history (Rice 2004:18)[17]. Some women activist supporters have got fed up with this and are pushing hard for greater influence. Islamist women members '… want to be seen as potential leaders, not just as dedicated organisational foot soldiers, and in many countries they are pushing the leadership of their movement for change' (Abdellatif and Ottaway ibid: 1).

3.6   As women push for organisational change within Islamist parties some are also pushing for a clearer party position on women's rights.   However, the propensity of Islamist parties to change their position on women seems more gradual than their decision to formally engage in democratic politics.   As Amr Hamzawy notes, although Islamist parties are being gradually drawn into the democratic process and can see the wisdom of competing peacefully for shares of political power, the majority still hold 'discriminatory, illiberal views on key sociocultural issues', including the status of women (Hamzawy ibid: 3.) However, there is evidence that change is coming, if gradually, even amongst the most patriarchal of organisations. We consider below how positions have evolved in one Islamist party (Jamaat in Bangladesh) and one Islamist movement (the Muslim Brotherhood) below. To skip these two case studies go to 3.15.

Evolving positions on women's rights

(i) Jamaat-e-Islami (Bangladesh)

3.7   The year 1996 was a turning point for Jamaat according to Elora Shehabuddin Rice. It had gained only three parliamentary seats in the election despite its long history as an organisation.[18] According to Rice, Jamaat began to realise its position on women's rights may have had something to do with its electoral failure – particularly given that it operated in a world populated by NGOs espousing women's empowerment in a secular sense. But in 1996 it still had no policy position on women and told Rice in an interview that the 'problems of women' would be solved simply by the establishment of an Islamic state (Rice ibid: 7). The official Jamaat position at that time was that women should observe

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[17] Even the AKP in Turkey – not an 'Islamist' party in the sense discussed here - has only one woman Cabinet minister and she has the token job of 'Women's Affairs'. (Barkey 2007:2)

[18] Jamaat was founded in pre-independence India in 1941. It come out of the 1972 war of independence with a notorious reputation – its leaders had opposed independence, and had allegedly collaborated with the West Pakistan army; it was seen as responsible for mass murders and rapes (Rice 2004:5). By 1996 it had had 25 years to recover but it *still* only got 3 seats. The question it inevitably asked was 'Why?'

strict purdah and undertake outside activities only if her domestic obligations were fulfilled; a woman's most important role was transmitting Islamic values to her children. But this was the late 1990s when millions of Bangladeshi women were working in garment factories alongside men. The Islamist position sounded out of date, and implicitly made women out to be 'bad Muslims' for working and mixing with men. This made it easy for secularist NGOs and the Awami League (as the most avowedly secular of the two main parties) to present themselves as the only true champions of women's rights and to gain votes as a result (Rice ibid: 8).

3.8   After 1996 there was a noticeable shift in the Jamaat position. The party began to emphasise its commitment to increasing job opportunities for women and stopping violence against them. It even adopted Grameen Bank type approaches to outreach, with Jamaat women members visiting slums, shanty towns and distant villages to reach large numbers of very poor women (Rice ibid: 12). In the 2002 election its electoral gains improved somewhat – it won 17 seats as a junior partner in the BNP government. How it will fare in the December 2008 election is not known at the time of writing. There is a general agreement that Jamaat needs to go a lot further towards bringing women into its organisation, including as candidates, and to ensure its policies acknowledge women's needs and experiences. It is not there yet but it is moving.

3.9   Is Bangladesh typical? What about other Islamists movements? Although the Bangladesh context is highly specific, not least because of its well established democratic and secular tradition, Islamist parties in other countries show similar signs of evolving their policies towards women.

(ii) The Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt)

3.10   Unlike Jamaat in Bangladesh, which was a minority member of the last coalition government, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is a mass movement that has been banned from contesting elections for much of its 90 year history. Because of the ban its members run as independents and in the 2005 elections in Egypt MB members took 88 seats, making it the largest opposition group. It is anticipated that the ban will be lifted soon and in anticipation of this the MB has prepared a draft party platform. It is worth looking at this latest document to see how the positioning of the MB on women's rights has changed over time.

3.11   When the Muslim Brotherhood was created in 1928 its founder wrote that the 'problem of women' must be addressed in a way that combined the 'progressive and the protective'. By today's standards the protective element dominated with calls for 'a campaign against ostentation in dress and loose behavior', 'segregation of male and female students', 'a separate curriculum for girls' and private meetings between men and women 'to be counted as a crime unless within the permitted degrees of relationship...'.[19] In short purdah was the answer to the problem of women.

3.12   As one might expect, the Muslim Brotherhood has changed with the times – although it is difficult to be sure about how far. Acknowledging that women now work outside the home its policy paper on women 'The Role of Muslim Women in an Islamic Society'[20] uses ijtihad (Islamic textual interpretation) to make the case

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[19] 'Toward the Light' in Five Tracts of Hasan al-Banna, translated by Charles Wendell, Berkeley 1978:126ff.
[20] To download the MB policy: www.jannah.org/sisters/ikhwom.html

for women's rights to work, vote, be elected, and occupy public and governmental posts. However, as with Jamaat in Bangladesh, this is no more than an acknowledgement of reality. The really important issues for women - their rights around marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance and the right of women to confer citizenship to their children – are not mentioned, either in this paper or in the draft party platform. Whilst the MB accepts women's rights 'within an Islamic framework' it gives no indication of what this means.

3.13   Nor does it explicitly define its stance on Shari'ah, the interpretation of which will also affect women's rights if the MB comes to power. As Hamzawy argues, references to Shari'ah in the draft party platform need to be much more precise because of the nature of the Shari'ah, which '…is not a code, a simple written document that everyone can consult. It is a body of rules and interpretations developed over a period of thirteen centuries by different schools of jurisprudence…the Brotherhood could put to rest many fears by being clearer about the principles it considers central.…'   (Hamzawy, Ottaway and Brown 2007:6).

3.14   Perhaps the issue for the Muslim Brotherhood, unlike Jamaat, is that its success at the polls in 2005 makes it feel it does not see the need to court the women's vote as it clearly has a proportion of this already. On the other hand there may be internal divisions that make a clear policy on women's rights difficult to agree. In the meantime, women themselves are angling for greater representation within party structures rather than being confined to the 'women's arm' of the movement where they have no power to argue policy positions.

Is change just window dressing?

3.15   So do these two case studies indicate that the evolution of Islamist positions on women is just a ploy to bring in the women's vote? And when there are enough of these then the party does not need to evolve its position further? What would happen if either of the above parties came to power? Would they 'revert' to their most conservative and oppressive positions vis a vis women?

3.16   This is difficult to answer and the literature gives few clues. Undoubtedly all Islamist parties contain some highly conservative forces but also those that want to present the party as a modern party, sympathetic to women's concerns and open to interpreting the religious texts in a way that gives women what they want: a party that allows them to show their religious faith but also provides them with social justice. The question is whether Islamist parties are able to get this balance right. If they are then there is a very good chance of them capturing and maintaining women's support – not so much that of the elite who may remain suspicious of their ultimate intentions, but of ordinary women who want to do right by Islam but also have their rights as women respected by their families and by the state.

Summary points

- Islamist parties are evolving their democratic credentials and their positions on women – though the latter more slowly;
- Islamist parties have moved from a 'purdah' position to one that supports women as economic and political actors. But they are dragging their feet on women's personal and family rights – the power base of the religious establishment;
- There are significant differences of view on women's rights within Islamist parties but they are difficult for outsiders to see;
- Parties are out for votes; women are a critical constituency; evolving policies in line with what the majority of ordinary women feel comfortable with (Muslim identity + social justice) makes electoral sense;
- This *may* mean that parties will have reduced chances of winning parliamentary seats if there is a fear that conservative elements hold sway, and the party will 'regress' towards hard-line interpretations of Islam if it comes to power;
- It follows: having entered the democratic process Islamist parties have an incentive to come over as politically *and* socially 'moderate', not as hard liners;
- For donors: understanding the internal dynamics of Islamist parties is important as they may form future governments. Understanding their stand on gender issues is also critical. Donors can give non-interfering support (e.g. supporting opportunities for Islamist and non-Islamist women to build alliances; funding projects that interpret religious texts in ways that uphold women's rights; supporting women's struggles to become elected political representatives).[21]

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[21] See 'Breaking the Stereotype: Yemeni female candidates in elections'. This publication, in Arabic and English, is funded by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. With the ultimate aim of increasing the number of women representatives in parliament and local councils it documents the experiences of Yemeni women that ran in national and local elections from 1993-2006.

4.0 Women, Islam and civil society

4.1 International development assistance has played a huge role in building the capacity of civil society in the countries it supports. Assistance has mainly been to secular or Christian organisations on the basis that these espouse familiar and shared values. Civil society has also been defined in ways that make sense to the poverty mission; thus, the emphasis has been on funding organised groups that can help fill government gaps – in health, education and credit services – and that can reach populations, normally the poorest or least accessible, that government can't or won't. Increasingly NGOs have also been used in the good governance agenda – to help inform ordinary people about their rights and to encourage them to make demands on the state system, thereby building a citizen-state relationship.[22]

4.2 What has often been missing – because it has no immediately obvious relevance to the aid delivery project – is a focus on indigenous social movements that don't want or don't need western donor funding. And in Muslim majority countries such movements include those that are Islamic in their form and purpose. Such movements pass the aid effort like ships in the night. Yet indigenous social movements are important to understand: they can be important local drivers and reflectors of social change; they can also morph into political movements with national, regional or global significance.

4.3 This section looks at just one example of a social movement. This is the women's study circle or piety movement: groups of women meeting regularly in one another's houses or in the local mosque to read the Qur'an and hadith and be instructed in the significance of the Islamic texts by women (sometimes men) religious teachers. Religious classes for women in MMCs are not a new phenomenon, but their proliferation in the last decade has been dramatic.[23] In some ways, attendance at religious classes is a parallel phenomenon to increased veiling. Like veiling, study circles need to be understood from within their current social context rather than with reference to what they signified a generation ago. Thus we explore them as 'new' phenomena even though they continue a past tradition.

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[22] In MMC countries that have been not major recipients of western donor funds (most Arab countries) women's movements have not been NGO-ised – or at least not until recently. In tracing the history of Arab women's movements Islah Jad notes that they emerged in the first half of the twentieth century when Arab women formed organisations to enhance women's participation in battles for independence and also to 'advance' women in the realms of education, political participation and cultural life (Jad 2004:2) These movements involved large numbers of women that had a cause to defend or a mission to implement and were based on the mobilising energy of core cadres (such as the women's committees that sustained the first Palestinian Intifada). Only more recently has NGOisation (as Jad calls it) come to the fore – partly a result of increased US funding for civil society organisations in Arab countries, including women's NGOs, in an effort to 'democratise' and contain authoritarian states. These new NGOs are quite differently structured to the mass movements of the past and although their function is seen positively in some quarters in others there is a fear that they constitute a 'new and growing form of dependency on the West' (Jad ibid: 1).
[23] Even by 1995 study circles were being held in all Cairo neighbourhoods according to Mahmood. This coverage is extraordinary considering that Cairo is a city of some 16m people (2006 figures). We could not get equivalent data for other urban centres in MMCs, but presume this varies.

4.4   Saba Mahmood's account of religious study classes in Cairo is our primary reference material for this section. We have chosen her work because of its comprehensive ethnographic analysis but also because of her approach.[24] It is not Mahmood's intention either to find a 'redeemable element' in what, for many, constitute an illiberal and socially conservative movement, i.e. to look for aspects that would make them more palatable to liberal sensibilities (Mahmood 2005:5). Rather she focuses on what they say about conceptions of the self, moral agency and politics and asks her readers to do the same, thereby discouraging the tendency to assess the movements from a given normative position - liberalist, secularist, feminist etc.

Study circles – a piety movement

4.5   The content of study circle classes follow a fairly similar pattern regardless of country. The teacher provides a commentary in either colloquial Arabic, or the language of participants, on selected passages from the Qur'an and hadith. The aim is to instruct women attendees about how they can live their everyday lives in accordance with Islam. All the women Mahmood talked to, teachers and attendees, felt that piety had gone out of religious practice, which had become formulaic; they wanted to bring the spirit of Islam into their lives and have it regulate their daily routine and their thoughts. In the words of one teacher '…the difficult question that confronts us today as Muslims is how to make our daily lives congruent with our religion while at the same time moving with the world…. For me, proselytization means doing it from within ordinary acts and practicalities and translating worship into everyday practices so that these are always directed toward God' (Mahmood ibid: 46).

4.6   How each study class runs and its atmosphere depends on the teacher and the background of participants. Mahmood notes that in a middle class neighbourhood of Cairo the teacher, when asked a specific question about how women should conduct themselves in a particular social situation, would spell out several jurists' opinions on the subject without providing a specific recommendation. She therefore trained her audience in 'interpretive practice', i.e. the need for participants to make individual choices about the right path to follow (Mahmood ibid: 85). She compares this with the classes held in working class neighbourhoods where teachers would employ a more rhetorical style, with graphic descriptions of God's wrath and the tortures of hell that would rain down on those that went astray. Lessons in these neighbourhoods tended to be noisy and participative with frank questions put to the teacher about incest, sexual problems and neighbourhood skirmishes. 'The atmosphere is charged with intense energy and excitement, with women often shouting their questions to the da'iyat (teacher) arguing with positions they regard as erroneous, and protesting when the lessons finished sooner than scheduled' (Mahmood ibid: 92).

4.7   The organisation of study classes and whom they involve differs by country. In some counties the target group is largely middle class: for example, in Sana'a in Yemen, classes (called nadwas) tend to bring together middle class women rather than the poorest although the latter are not excluded (Clarke 2004). The same is true for Pakistan where the study circle phenomenon had a rather

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[24] All these movements – and the state's responses to them - must be understood in context and this particular study is a reflection of the movement in Egypt in the 1990s. However, our own experience (in Pakistan and London) indicate that her analysis has generic significance, even if the external form of what she describes differs by country (e.g. in Egypt classes are mosque not home based).

unusual genesis. As Sadaf Ahmad explains, the past decade has seen large numbers of Pakistani women turning towards Islam via Al-Huda, an Islamic school for women created in Islamabad in 1994 (Ahmad, 2008: 63-80). The school began by running a full-time one-year diploma courses for women on a range of Islamic subjects. It was extraordinarily successful. A range of courses now meet the needs of many different women: housewives with children, young girls, college students, working women and so on. When they graduate alumni set up study circles in their homes and neighbourhoods thereby massively extending the reach of Al-Huda. Meanwhile the energetic founder of the movement makes adept use of the television, internet and the print media to get her message of piety 'out there'.

4.8   Study circle classes, and the more general phenomenon of women's interest in getting beyond ritual practices (dress, praying, fasting etc.) and wanting to live out Islamic principles in their everyday lives, raise interesting questions. Are these movements of social change? In identifying what they are it is useful to start with what they are not.

4.9   Study circle classes are *not* a forum for contesting patriarchal interpretations of Islam. The teachers are not Muslim feminist scholars but women who have had some formal theological training (often not a lot) or who have taken it upon themselves to become well versed in the Qur'an and hadith and have been given the authority to hold classes by the local mosque committee (in some countries a government licence is required). The classes are not about conceptual issues like gender equality but focus on practice – what you should and shouldn't do in particular situations. In this sense they are part of the wider Islamic 'revivalist' movement that includes a thriving industry in tape-recorded sermons, religious debates on TV and religious lessons on radio. All of these media efforts, like the study circle classes, seek to engage ordinary people with classical commentaries on the religious texts to guide their everyday behaviour (Mahmood ibid: 80).

4.10   Nor are study circles about confronting the established political order in any sense; they are not trying to bring about changes in political institutions. Currently classes do not function as organising or recruiting venues for Islamist political parties, although they may provide gradualist entry points in some countries (this is discussed in the annotated bibliography). Indeed, Mahmood notes that in Egypt Islamist parties have criticised the study circle movement for its lack of socio-political content (Mahmood ibid: 52). And finally, study circle classes should not be seen as related to religious schools or madrassas. The latter are part of the education system (government or private) and have a formal curriculum. This is not the case with study classes that are run for adult women, often in their homes, and focus not on learning to recite the Qur'an in its entirety but on interpreting its spirit to guide everyday behaviour.

4.11   Even if the movement appears to have no political objectives it is seen to have political potential. Its 'transformative power' is recognised in several MMCs. Hence there have been efforts to bring it under state control. In Egypt this takes the form of a legal requirement for all study centre teachers to undergo a two-year training programme run by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in order to qualify for a state licence. Those found teaching without a licence are liable to a fine and imprisonment. Government surveillance of mosque lessons has increased so that now government officials can be seen sitting at the back recording the teaching and discussion (Mahmood ibid: 75). All the mosques where Mahmood conducted her research have had their lessons closed down for certain periods. The

government response to protests against these regulations is that this is a means of weeding out 'extremist elements' and preventing them from propagating their ideas. It is worth noting that Mahmood reports no instance of finding extremist thought or instruction in any of the study classes she visited throughout her lengthy study.

What does the piety movement signify?

4.12   The question raised by women's study circles for donors is basically 'What do they signify?' This translates into three questions, each of which reflects an effort to explain the phenomenon in familiar terms.

   • Do study circle classes signify an invidious form of *religious indoctrination*, a way of instructing women in conservative interpretations of Islam, in order to maintain their 'obedience' to patriarchy and the power of leaders, be they political or religious?
   • Are they a nascent *political identity movement*, capable of becoming a political force given sufficient organisation? Might they be future antagonists against a corrupt, undemocratic or impious state? Or could they be organised into an overt anti-western mass movement?
   • Do they afford *empowerment* at a local level? Do they give women confidence, particularly less educated women, and allow them to become more authoritative actors vis a vis their husbands and fathers? I.e. do they increase women's agency in their homes and communities?

4.13   As noted earlier, there is no evidence to suggest that study classes constitute a plot by religious establishments. In fact, the mere proliferation of study circles, the fact that they often take place in private spaces (homes), and are led by women for women make them difficult to regulate or control – either by the religious establishment or the state. Nor is there evidence of study circles 'turning political' although the potential is there. So far however it seems that women who attend classes do not automatically vote for Islamist parties for the reasons given in the previous section.

4.14   Do study circles allow for a form of empowerment? Mahmood was concerned not to use explanatory frameworks derived from normative positions (secularist, western, developmental, feminist) so she purposively avoids trying to explain the movement in these terms. Nor does she report instances of women saying they felt their knowledge 'helped them' in discussions with their families. However, study circle participants frequently asked teachers to give them religious guidance about everyday family, sexual and neighbourhood problems. The fact that they are gaining knowledge about addressing these issues from the highest source (Islamic texts) *and* that they are receiving instruction in a form of reasoning that will make sense to, and be respected by, male family members cannot help but increase their sense of confidence and their ability to be heard. Our own sense is that these classes are very important empowerment mechanisms for women, at least in terms of their intra-familial and neighbourhood relations.

Summary points

- The donor focus on NGOs as the main constituents of civil society overlooks movements that reflect, and are themselves influencing, social change;
- Millions of women in MMCs now attend religious study circles. This is a new experience for most women - in previous generations women had very little access to religious training;
- Study circles need to be seen first and foremost as a piety movement; their adherents' main purpose is to get beyond formulaic manifestations of Islam and let religion guide their everyday actions and thoughts;
- As far as we can ascertain they do not encourage women to critique patriarchal readings of the texts;
- There is little evidence to suggest study circles are politicised – although they may provide a link to Islamist parties in the longer term;
- However, our hypothesis is that these study circles can be enormously empowering for women in a personal and familial sense rather than a political sense. They give women an alternative means of gaining respect and authority within their households and immediate communities - an empowerment route most have not had before.

Concluding remarks on this paper

The social, political and economic contexts within which women live in MMCs are in a constant process of change. Their increased literacy, access to information and communication technologies, as well as to wage-earning work, and their appropriation of religious knowledge from previously closed, male-dominated circles means that Muslim women are constructing their own modernity. This symbolises a break from many traditional practices as well as from Western conceptions of progress and equality.

As noted in the introduction, the aim of this paper has been to stimulate interest around the changing contexts of women in MMCs that we think many SDAs will know about and are interested in, but may not be fully aware of. We also hope the paper and accompanying bibliography will stimulate policy and practical discussions amongst a wider group, at a country level and in the UK, including with other HMG departments, about women's struggles for gender rights in Muslim majority countries.

Annex 1. The evidence base for increasing religiosity

This paper and the accompanying annotated bibliography present the rise in Islamic religiosity – the self-expression of personal faith - as a given phenomenon. So too do those whose work we reference. Merhan Kamrava, editing a reader on 'new voices' of Islam expresses the views of MMC writers on Islam when he says:

> 'Beginning in the 1970s and lasting up to the present day, levels of religiosity have risen in depth and intensity among the Muslim masses all over the world. Observers of Islamic societies today cannot help but be impressed by the depth and the degree to which Islam has re-emerged as an integral part of the average person's identity. This is especially the case amongst the very urban classes who looked for definitions of the self in largely non-religious terms a mere two or three decades ago…. Whatever its cause and genesis, religiosity has seen a steady resurgence throughout the cultures and societies of Muslim lands'. (Kamrava 2006:5)

For those living or working in MMCs, or making regular visits over the last 20 years, signs of increased religiosity are readily evident. The most visible is women's increased use of the veil and in particular types of veil that indicate religious faith not cultural tradition. Other changes in religious practice affecting one or both sexes include increased mosque attendance, a greater proportion of people praying five times a day, a larger number fasting in Ramadan and increased attendance by women at religious study circle meetings. However, getting quantitative, country based data on these and other religious trends is difficult.

There are two problems with measuring religiosity. The first is that religious practice is not always a reliable indicator of personal volition or heart-felt belief. Thus, for example, the fact that 100% of women veil in Iran and in Taliban controlled areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan reflects the mandatory nature of veiling in these contexts. Similarly the radical changes in women's dress in a country like Somalia must be seen as a response to the conflict – by wearing trousers (not a Somali tradition) during the civil war women sought to protect themselves from violence and particularly rape. The protective forms of dress gradually became symbols of respectability, and, supported by the religious establishment, religiosity.[25] And to take a quite different example: the number of parents opting to send their children to religious schools may be due to their own religiosity but it may also be to do with their poverty (madrassahs provide board and lodging) or the poor quality of education they receive in their local state school.

The second difficulty is the data itself. There are hundreds of small-scale studies on aspects of religiosity, many carried out by universities in MMCs. Many of these are at one point in time – although some indicate trends. We can find no volume that brings even a fraction of these together and links their analyses. This makes it difficult to provide quantitative evidence for our basic statement that religiosity is increasing in the Islamic world – even though the evidence is reflected in many individual studies.

What we can do is list the indicators that different studies are using to measure aspects of religiosity. Some of the indicators are specific to women's religiosity but most relate to the phenomenon more generally.

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[25] See Cawo Mohamed Abdi for a detailed analysis of how the civil war and continuing violence transformed women's dress codes in Somalia - which then became institutionalised as a symbol of religiosity. Abdi 2007:18183-207

Indicators used in MMCs to assess increasing religiosity (and our comments)

- The increase in veiling by women (lots of small studies, all showing a rise in numbers adopting Islamic dress. The increasing number of Islamic dress shop outlets in any one country, and their sales turnovers, is a proxy indicator);
- The increase in the number of mosques in the last 1-2 decades (there have been huge increases in most MMCs; also rates of mosque attendance, e.g. at the Friday prayer)
- The number of religious study circles for women (discussed in this paper);
- The number of madrassahs and the actual number of children attending (International Crisis Group reports give data for some countries);
- The number of higher learning institutions specialising in religious teaching; the number of students registered in famous mosque-universities and their affiliates (all report significant increases: Kamrava notes there are now over 1m students affiliated to al-Azhar University – ibid:5);
- The number who define themselves as Muslim first and their nationality second (more commonly surveyed in countries where Muslims are minorities – but also in some MMCs, e.g. over 70% of Muslims in Malaysia self-defined as Muslim first in a recent survey);[26]
- The number that say they want Shari'ah law (many national surveys, not co-ordinated, nor is it always clear what respondents understand by Shari'ah);
- The number of Islamic banks/investment companies and investment trends;
- The number of those applying to go on the Hajj (countries have quotas so it is necessary to look at the number of years it is now necessary to wait until permission is granted. Thus, for example it is currently 3 years in Malaysia);[27]
- The number of religious bookstores in a town; the publication and sale of religious books and videos;
- The amount of space in national newspapers devoted to answering questions about religion from readers (easy to assess on an individual paper basis);
- The number of television and radio broadcasts dedicated to Islamic teaching and debate (viewing rates are also important);
- The number of internet sites and blogs on Islam (e.g. the number of personal videos made about Islam on YouTube; the number of hits on Islamic religious sites).

Whatever the issues measured the general finding on Islamic religiosity is that the *trend is upwards*. The interesting question is the reasons people themselves give for this, given that it may mean changing very fundamental aspects of their lives. Again, although there are many small studies that ask this question we could find none that analysed overall findings and tried to account for similarities and differences between and within countries, let alone by other factors, for example, gender or ethnicity.

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[26] This study by Patricia Martinez at the University of Malaysia is one example of a host of small scale studies on religiosity in MMCs. It was picked up and reported by Women living under Muslim laws. See 'Malaysia: increasing religiosity in Malaysia causes a stir'. WMUML website.
[27] Reported in 'Malaysia: increasing religiosity in Malaysia causes a stir'. WMUML website.

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Annex 3. Questions which could form the basis of a reading pack or discussion session during an SDA reading week

As part of our TOR we were asked to suggest questions that might stimulate discussions around the issues discussed in this paper and the annotated bibliography. There is no right answer to any of the questions below – they are suggested solely as examples of the *sort of questions* that might form the basis of a discussion session or a reading pack. The best questions however, will be those that participants will raise themselves.

1. 'There is no gender equality in Islam'. How would you respond to this statement?

2. How might someone having a secularist, Muslim feminist and Islamist approach respectively view the issue of polygny? What sources of evidence might each use to support their position?

3. Why do you think the subject of veiling so exercises non-Muslims?

4. You are at an international conference on women and Islam. You want to make the point that collaboration *is* possible between secularists and Muslim feminists on women's rights (the debate going on at the time is polarising these positions). What issues would you choose to illustrate they can agree? (And on which issues is finding common ground likely to be more difficult?)

5. What impact do you think the increasing influence of religious parties over officially secularist governments has had on the status of women in MMCs? Give examples.

6. What conditions do you think need to be in place for Islamist parties to encourage: a) the political participation of women; and b) to address discrimination against women in areas of family law, e.g. divorce, inheritance, custody of children etc.?

7. What is your understanding of study circles? Can they be called social movements? Are they indoctrinating, empowering or both? What possibilities do you see for them morphing into political movements?