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## Gender Ideology of Islam and Women's Public Participation in North Africa

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## **Gender Ideology of Islam and Women's Public Participation in North Africa**

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### **INTRODUCTION: PITFALLS IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF "ISLAMISM"**

When "Islamism" comes into question, important factors such as the current political situation, historical background, the state of the economy, and so on, are often improperly neglected. The Western concept of "Islamism" is intrinsically antagonistic to it, because of its rivalry with modern Western civilization. No sooner was any point against Western ideas found than Western critics absorbed themselves in denouncing Islamism. As a result, "Islamism" is always dogged by negative images, such as fanatical terrorism or anti-democratic "reactionaries". Of course, nobody can deny that some part of Islamism is incompatible with the modern values which most of us believe to be universal. Most Islamists do not admit any amendment to the penalty codes clearly written in the Quran, and giving so-called "freedom of speech" to discourses slanderous to Islam is out of the question. For them, that kind of slander is equivalent to "apostasy". Furthermore, some Islamists even seek to overthrow the established government by force. So far as they dare to resort to arms against their opponents, they are clearly anti-democratic. Thus some anti-democratic aspects in Islamism are recognisable.

Despite this fact, however, one must be careful in criticizing the anti-democratic aspects of Islamism. Most existing systems of government being challenged by Islamism are autocratic, the parliament is only a nominal organ, and Western style democracy does not exist. In this situation, Islamic movements are getting wide support from people as being virtually the only power source in the pursuit of democracy. If the only force that seeks democratization is impeached for its trivial anti-democratic aspects, it is clear that the only result will be direct and indirect support for the current autocratic control. For the supporters of Islamism a trivial anti-democratic element which might remain after the establishment of the "Islamic State" is not much a problem. The problem is the thoroughly undemocratic situation confronting them now, and they dearly want to improve on that. Western critics attack every concept of Islamism that looks incompatible with "democracy", only to prevent the democratization process, while giving no consideration to the current political situation.

Another factor contributing to the reactionary image of Islamism is the suppression of women in society. Western criticism does not review the key points and restrictions of the Islamists carefully. Of course, with regard to the division of roles for men and women in society, there is no room for doubt that the majority of the male Islamists hold extremely conservative views, and from the universal perspective of equal rights for men and women, the non-denial of polygamy (multiple wives only) and exclusive divorce rights for males deserve harsh criticism. However, Islamism is not a movement to send women back to the harems of the past. With regard to women, Islamism does not encourage multiple wives and the use of exclusive divorce rights for males at any rate, and even its infamous demand for the 'segregation' of women is fundamentally different from the idea that seeks exclusion of women from public places. If anything, ultraconservatives are the exception rather than the rule.

The obstacles to the participation of women in public affairs are often due to a deeply rooted prejudice against women in Muslim societies as a whole, and more than anything else, women are fighting against this prejudice and the legacy of the patriarchy. Even female Islamists do not want to preserve those kinds of prejudices. They argue, "true Islam recognizes complete equality for women", and they protest fiercely against those men who seek to expel women from the core of the movements. The fact that these women believe that a woman's place is in the home makes it impossible to deny that they are "reactionary" from a western feminist perspective, but despite this, it is possible to see the firm will of these women to be freed from the present subjugation.

However, on this point also, Western critics' brandishing arguments from the standpoint of universal human values threaten to destroy all. They say that by forcing the veil on woman and depriving freedom of clothing of women, Islamism is reviving male domination. In this way, they ignore appeals from Islamist women for improvements in their status. They regard those women as a lunatic fringe group that is striving for male domination. To make matters worse, Western criticism reproduces the West's long-held prejudice that Islam inherently suppresses women. And this reproduction enrages even ordinary Muslims, because, even now, most Muslims will not tolerate attacks on Islam itself by non-Muslims. Thus, Western criticism that was intended to rescue Muslim women who fight against Islamism has instead led them to being branded as 'working for the enemy' and is impeding their freedom of movement. In any case, in Muslim countries, Western criticism has only produced negative results with regard to the improvement of the status of women. This is because of their extreme sensitivity to differences in the sense of values between the West and Islamism, which leads them, on the one hand, to attack other cultures without discriminating between the Islamists and ordinary Muslims, and on the other hand, to become unable to understand the fact that wish to be free from suppression is common to all humanity.

It is my belief that these defects in Western criticism need to be addressed and in this paper I have concentrated on two major countries in North Africa-Algeria

and Egypt, and looked at the factors that are impeding the process of participation of women in public affairs and the current state of Islamism in these countries. The reason for choosing these two as the target of the study is that Western criticism was constructed based on information issued from these regions in the past. Both countries are in the midst of a period of tumultuous social change, and with the advancement of urbanization and poverty, and increasing numbers of educated women performing paid work, the patriarchal system is facing breakdown. The problem is that the citizens, and in particular, men's minds, cannot keep up with these developments in the situation. With the breakdown of the patriarchal system, the traditional consciousness of discrimination between men and women has been reduced somewhat, but it has been justified in the name of Islam, and as of the present, the effect is not negligible. I was wondering if Islam does not have positive aspects from the universal point of view, even though traditional Islam excludes women from public life and interprets multiple wives and exclusive divorce rights for husbands as orders from God.

## 1. THE ISLAMIC VIEW OF WOMEN

It is difficult to affirm how Islam views the status and role of women. This is because Islam lacks a religious council that decides orthodox doctrines, and there is a tendency for all kinds of statements to be asserted in the name of Islam. Here I would like to investigate the Islamic view of women using the results of the most recent research by feminists, and hopefully, this will provide a glimpse into the strategies for the liberation of women being advanced by feminist activists both within and outside Muslim society.

The Prophet Muhammad reorganized the marriage system that had been maintained in multifarious forms, and legitimized only the kind of marriage in which the woman, away from her own family, cohabits with her husband and children. (From a socio-economic point of view, this decision was interpreted as follows; as commerce developed in Mecca and male individuals accumulated assets, they began to wish to pass these onto *their own* children as inheritance. Thus, although multiple wives are allowed, the reason that multiple husbands are strictly forbidden is because of the great importance placed on being able to establish the identity of the father of a child.) Therefore, husbands were given monopoly power over their children and the sexual activities of their wives. Actually this led to their right to prohibit their wives from any contact with other men, and this might be the historical source of the segregation of women. To support and promote this, a Quranic verse, Sura 33:53, was used to order women to remain at home. Originally this verse was applied only to the wives of the Prophet, but as they became models for the Muslim woman, it began to function as a means of excluding all women from public life. This sowed the seeds of the traditional Islamic view in which the primary obligations for women were regarded as being wives and mothers.

Still, at that time, the clear sexual discrimination consciousness whereby women are regarded as inferior beings had not yet been conceived. The Quran stubbornly insisted on equality between all followers, and any discrimination between men and women was forbidden. Over time however, the principle of equality between men and women advocated by the Quran was gradually corroded. In the process of the consolidation of Islamic jurisprudence in the early Abbasid period, the Quran and the other sacred texts were interpreted by the elite Muslim men who possessed huge harems full of female slaves. As a result, women became no more than purchasable commodities or sexual objects, and there was no reason to respect the idea of equality for men and women. Islamic jurisprudence kept the Quranic verses inspiring equality for men and women aside, considering those verses warning about multiple wives and easy divorce for men as binding on the individual conscience. Subsequently, many religious scholars came to look down upon women as being inherently inferior beings to men.

When the process of formation of Islamic law is viewed from an historical perspective in this way, apparently the suppression of women in traditional Islam was an accidental and unintended result. The Quran clearly states that men and women are equal, and if it was “rightly” recognized it should have led to a reduction in the suppression of women. However, is it indeed true that the suppression of women seen in traditional Islam is simply a product of accident? While many feminists regard male Muslim thinkers who look down on women as being exceptions, and argue that contempt for women is unrelated to “true Islam”, they also consider that suppression of women is inevitable in Muslim society. According to them, the key to understanding the Islamic view of women is not the Quran, but rather the mental structure of the Muslim males that refuses to allow interaction between unrelated men and women.

Muslims are very much sensitive to unrelated women and men sharing the same space, and when Muslim men are asked why, the answer is always the same. They say that Islam regards the female body as a fragile thing, and that segregation of women is to protect them from men. On the other hand, many feminists see another answer behind this, and point out that Muslim males subconsciously fear women to be sexual assailants, and men to be sexual victims who are unable to resist the sexual charms of women. Accordingly, the Muslim male is convinced that if women and men are allowed to coexist in the same place, men will without fail yield to female temptation, and that this will result in disruption to the social and religious order. This would then lead to social chaos and the destruction of the Muslim community. Many feminists think that Muslim males fear women and their potential threat to social order so much so that they have excluded them from public places.

On the other hand, there are also feminists who think that the view of women in traditional Islam is nothing more than a constructed ideology in quest of the patriarchal social system. According to these feminists, all concepts of gender relationships are merely a culture determined by the social structure, and as society

changes, so to do these concepts. Accordingly, they believe the social structure should be focused. The suppression of women is not a characteristic phenomenon of Muslim society, but something that has been witnessed all over the world from ancient times to the present. Therefore those feminists believe that the suppression originated from the patriarchal system that normally exists in agricultural and nomad societies. In those societies, as the family constitutes the basic production unit, extended family systems based on male kinship developed. While the public authority was monopolized by the assembly of male family heads, all resources and authority within the family were concentrated in the hands of the leader of the household, and other members of the family were forced into absolute subjugation. Despite being the major source of labor, the work of female family members was not evaluated fairly, and they were regarded as little more than a kind of movable asset. In other words, it can be said that the patriarchal society was maintained through the exploitation of women. In these societies, women were also expected to reproduce and raise large numbers of children as a labor resource, since without children the patriarchal system could not continue. It is also possible to understand the evolution of a value system that placed high importance on female chastity in order to uphold the honor of the entire family and to protect the purity of the father's bloodline. In short, societies based on extended patriarchal families were thoroughly dependent on women, and whether or not social order could be maintained depended on whether or not women could be controlled. Therefore, this structure could in no way fail to influence the concepts restricting the relations between men and women, and traditional Islam is no exception. Muslims adopted the concept of gender discrimination which justified the patriarchal system, and in the name of Islam, they continued to preach inequality between men and women. To maintain the patriarchal system, women were deprived of the consciousness that they were being suppressed.

The arguments presented above are typical of those given by feminists. The variety and complexity are clear with only a glance to their discourses. Actually, the search for 'the Islamic view' of women could be problematic. In reality, 'Muslim societies' are diversified, and the degree of suppression of women depends on region and class. Considering the Islamic view of women without taking this variety into consideration might well endorse the same prejudice that Islam suppresses women on principle. Also, overestimation of the role of Islam might estimate the other causes of suppression too lightly.

Why are many feminists pursuing the Islamic view of women though aware of this criticism? The answer is that they would like to prove traditional female subjugation is not the only correct interpretation of "Orders from God". Even today, for many Muslims, traditional Islam is the absolute truth. This is the biggest mental obstacle to the liberation of women, and the academic efforts of feminist researchers are aimed at creating a cornerstone for female liberation. Muslim women can escape from the yoke of traditional Islam when that is proved to be "distorted" from "true Islam", whatever the cause of the distortion might be: it

could be the peculiar understanding of the Abbasid ruling class, or Muslim men's subconscious fear of women, or the necessity to maintain the patriarchal system. This is a strategy completely consonant with the purpose of the "conscious" Muslim women who wish to achieve gender equality based on a new interpretation of Islam, without deviating from their path of Islamic faith.

## **2. SCARS FROM THE EUROPEAN 'ATTACK'**

As a matter of fact, this type of criticism raised by the feminists is not original. As for the issue of women only, discourse to claim that "true Islam" has been distorted, has existed for 100 years. After the 19th century, Muslim thinkers, faced with the overwhelming power of modern Western civilization, began to ask themselves if something has been mistaken in the history of Islam. Muslims believed that they had been promised prosperity if they followed the will of God, and the fact that they had been defeated by the heretics could not be explained within the framework of Islamic thought. Why had Muslim countries fallen behind Western ones that embraced Christianity? Their conclusion was that, without a doubt, this was a punishment being imposed on Muslims for deviating from the teachings of God, and here was born the tide of Islamic reform. In order to break away from the state of distortion, the true cause of the decline and subjugation of Muslim society, Muslim intellectuals took a fresh look at the Quran and the other sacred texts to try to discover the "true Islam".

Up until the end of the 19th century, Muslim intellectuals advocating improved status for women mostly belonged to such Islamic reformist groups. During this time, various verses in the Quran that warned of the difficulty of treating multiple wives and men's easy use of exclusive divorce rights were brought under the spotlight, and new points of view stating that improved status for women was the very essence of "true Islam" were developed. In addition, those intellectuals severely criticized the Muslim history of neglecting education for women and suppressing their intrinsic rights. In Egypt, some nationalists had high praise for education for women as a factor in ending the British occupation, and thought of women as playing an extremely important role in bringing up future generations. Although these discourses were restricted to an assessment of the role of women in raising sons, and did not extend recognition of women's public participation from the human rights perspective, they greatly contributed to persuading the people that women also had the right to be educated.

For the intelligentsia, at any rate, the traditional Islam that suppressed women now stood at a crossroads, and they felt that its surrender to the new interpretation of Islam was imminent. However, the reality was not so easy as expected. The main obstacle existed in the social structure of that time. As long as Muslim society maintained a strong patriarchal system, there was no reason for the male Muslims in control of society to repudiate traditional Islam's suppression of women. Muslim intellectuals were shocked by the impact of modern Western civilization, and were

intent on reviving "true Islam", but as long as their work was concerned with improving the status of women, they would receive no support from the general public.

Their ideas were clearly far ahead of their time, but it is possible that this type of limitation derived from social structure will vanish in time, with the destruction of the patriarchal system. On the other hand, another criticism of traditional Islam in the modern age has left decisive and longstanding obstacles for the pursuit of freedom by Muslim women. This is a result of 'attacks' from Europe.

The prejudice that views Islam as inherently suppressive with respect to women became commonplace in Europe before modern times, and was fully exploited as a basis for justifying European colonization and administration over Muslim societies after the 19th century. The colonialists severely criticized polygamy, the exclusive divorce rights for males, and the veil that Muslim women had to wear as indicative of the backwardness of Islamic civilization. The West saw themselves as "liberators" that would bring progress to Muslim society, and justified their colonial rule as 'righteous'. Their argument was clearly deceitful, considering the fact that Western societies at that time were also extremely discriminatory towards women. Notwithstanding that fact, the colonialists continued to advocate the absolute superiority of European civilization, and argued that unless Muslims dissociated themselves from the intrinsically backward Islam, Muslim society would make no progress, and clearly demanded Muslims to abandon their faith. It was tragic for the later feminist movements that such a kind of colonial discourse, denying Islam itself, mainly argued on the status of women. Muslim nationalists were enraged at the colonialists' insistence that Islam should be abandoned and that Western culture should be adopted. For the traditional *petit bourgeois* and the middle and lower classes who had been damaged by colonial rule, the culture of the colonialists was detestable, and never worth adopting. As a result, the issue of female liberation could no longer escape from the deep suspicion of being an imperialist plot. Muslim nationalists suspected that Europe's intention to westernize Muslim women in the name of progress was nothing more than an attempt to destroy Muslim culture. They were afraid that if the women who form the basis of the family were corrupted, the family would be destroyed, and the Muslim identity would be lost. Then the Muslim countries with least resistance could easily put under foreign control. As they thought in this way, their conclusion was clear: Muslim women must live by their own values of Islam and not follow those of the West, and that "liberation" (which is equivalent to westernization) had to be strongly resisted. As a result, before the issue of the human rights of women was addressed, the issue of female liberation was caught up in the framework of the clash of values between Islam and modern Western civilization.

The conceptual framework that the lifestyle of women is the symbol of Islamic values was born at that point, and has become stronger through the last hundred years. In other words, as far as the woman issue goes, Islamism is a movement which has adopted the above mentioned framework, and completely rejected the

westernization of women as a corruption. Contemporary Islamic movements defend several elements of traditional Islam such as polygamy and exclusive male divorce rights that were the subject of severe criticism from Europe, and try to prevent moral decadence in society, by asking women to wear the veil or prohibiting unrelated men and women from mixing in public. To the supporters of this movement, women and the family were most important issues relating to the essence of Islam itself.

The background idea that it was necessary to guard against imperialistic plots is the same today as it was 100 years ago.

### **3. THE PROCESS OF FEMALE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN EGYPT AND ALGERIA**

Discussions in Egypt regarding the liberation of women at the beginning of the 20th century were completely dominated by a group of nationalists critical of the westernization of women. However, their argument did not sway the Western inclination of Egyptian women, in particular those from the upper classes. In contrast to the lower classes who had been damaged by the British occupation and were suffering economically, the local Egyptian ruling class had benefited from the colonial system and they themselves chose the path of westernization, recommending 'modern' education and a western lifestyle for their girls. The public participation of women in Egypt basically began with those of the upper and upper middle classes.

In the 1890s, the existence of many female students and female specialists was reported, though their number was small. It became commonplace to see women on the street, and some women even appeared without the veil, as western-style clothing came into wide use. In the 20th century the number of such women began to increase, and in 1923, the first women's movement, the Egyptian Feminist Union, was founded. This organization advocated the necessity of education for women in accordance with the reformist thought developed since the previous century, and petitioned the government to prohibit polygamy, men's easy use of exclusive divorce rights, and early marriages for girls. In addition, they were engaged in grassroots activities, such as providing economic support and medical care for widows, and occupational training for underprivileged women.

These types of activities being conducted by women themselves were a breath of fresh air for society as a whole. However, the feminist movement at this stage had a defect that should not be ignored. That is the fact that the movement was restricted to the upper and upper middle classes, and therefore, was almost entirely unconcerned with the issues of the political participation or employment of women. These upper and upper middle class women had no economic reason to engage in paid labor. They were busy managing and controlling a large number of servants for their housekeeping. The feminist groups made a contribution to the elevation of the status of women in the home, including revision of the marriage laws, but the

opportunities for educated women to work outside were as restricted as ever.

Under these conditions, every time the problem of unemployment arises, the argument that 'a woman's place is in the home' was strengthened. In addition, pressure from families that believed that girls of a good family should not engage in paid work also proved to be an obstacle to women with the ambition of working outside. Even among the ruling-class males who desired westernization, there remained strong psychological resistance to the idea of women going out to work. The breakthrough that accelerated female participation in the labor market came with the *coup d'état* of 1952 when Gamal Abd al-Nasser seized power, and introduced a policy of industrialization to replace imports. Nasser's intention for Egypt was to get rid of European economic control, and his supreme order was self-sufficiency in industrial goods. To achieve this end, he introduced a planned economy and public sector companies, and suddenly a huge and unprecedented workplace became available to women. Since then, the government and the public sectors have continued to be the largest employers of women in Egypt. Facing the strong leadership of the Nasser government, men's psychological resistance to women working outside the home, and the subconscious fear of Muslim men with regard to men and women mixing in public were powerless. In addition, Nasser declared equality between men and women, made coeducation commonplace, and guaranteed jobs for university graduates. It was this job guarantee that made middle and lower-class women understand the benefits of education. With the strong support of the state, the number of female wage earners increased in leaps and bounds.

In the 1970s, Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, adopted an 'Open Door Policy' that saw a further increase in the number of working women. The Egyptians, having come into contact with high-quality Western products, wished to acquire them despite their high price, and as a result, dual income families became commonplace. In addition, due to the chronic inflation that has continued since the 1980s, the income generated by working wives has become indispensable in lower middle class and lower class families. But a serious problem has arisen from these changes. Although they acknowledged paid work for women, Egyptian males were not free from the patriarchal view of the roles of men and women, and they would make no contribution to housework. For this reason, in lower middle class and lower class families without the financial resources to employ a maid, wives suffer from a double workload. In the cities nuclear families are now the norm, so women there cannot expect the assistance of other female family members, and government policies are still behind the times in this respect. The breakup of the large extended family through urbanization and industrialization, on the one hand, weakened the patriarchal system and the associated suppression of women, but on the other hand, brought about unexpected suffering for working women.

Women from lower middle class and lower class families face other problems as well. Women of these classes must show themselves to uphold the traditional ideal of 'family first' or be subjected to criticism from their neighbours as being

immoral. For these women, the veil is a symbol of upholding traditional virtue. In addition, husbands are subject to extreme stress now that their wives are contributing to the support of the family, because even now, men who cannot independently support their families are ridiculed as being unmanly. Having a wife who works outside is tantamount to a husband announcing to the world that he is incapable, and in many cases the frustrated husbands excessively demonstrate their authority over their wives. Furthermore, traffic jams holding up commuting women and gender discrimination with regard to employment and promotion have also weakened the ambition of women to work outside. In contrast to the westernized women of the upper classes who can run businesses supported by their husbands' circles of friends and leave their housework to a maid, women from the lower middle class and below confront obstacles on a daily basis. Reeling under the blast of the economic crisis caused by the population explosion that has continued since the 1960s, the majority of women living in the cities are working in the informal sectors. Most of them are involved in low-paid manual labor, and for the time being one can see no signs of improvement.

Despite this, Egyptian women can consider themselves blessed when compared to women in Algeria. The policies with regard to women adopted by the Algerian government are almost the opposite of those of the Nasser and post-Nasser governments in Egypt. In the name of Islam, Algeria's strong centralized system of government has promoted the policy of a woman's place being in the home, and the reason for the adoption of this policy with respect to women is a result of the 150 years of harsh colonial administration by France and the struggle for independence against this rule.

In 1830, the French colonial power invaded Algeria, and did not fail to criticize Islam, advocating the superiority of modern Western civilization just as the British did in Egypt. In addition, it is important to remember that this was done not only to justify French colonial rule, but also to protect the special rights of the French settlers in Algeria, who made up less than 10% of the total population. The French saw no necessity to grant equal rights to the local population who believed in Islam, which they regarded as "an inferior belief". As a result, the Muslim citizens were subject to comprehensive discrimination, and their economic base was completely destroyed. Driven into a tight corner, the Muslim public turned the very logic of their French colonial masters against them. They adhered to the values of traditional Islam so as to reject the colonial system. The patriarchal system was even strengthened, and demands for the protection of women and their isolation increased. In the cities it became the norm that women could only go outside to the public bath or to visit the doctor, and women and the family became symbols of the identity of the nation.

In 1954 a liberation movement (the FLN) initiated an armed uprising, and the logic that they adopted was the same. In other words, for the FLN, 'independence' meant to resurrect the old social structure and traditional Islam that had been negated by the French. With this ideal, the FLN were able to get widespread

support from the general population, and in particular, from the peasants. For women, on the other hand, with the exception of an extremely small number of intellectuals who had been educated in France, the independence struggle was also a war to reestablish the old way of life. Women contributed to the liberation movement by working as nurses, cooks and washerwomen, and at times transported arms under their clothes while wearing the veil, but these military activities were regarded as exceptional, due to the unusual circumstances. Both men and women regarded the military activities of women such as transportation of arms as being merely "in place of" the men who went underground under the harsh oppression. For the majority of Algerian women, who were not even allowed to go out of the house, not to speak of obtaining an education, before the war, politics and military activities were the affairs of men, and they did not question the idea that the place of a woman was in the home.

The aim of the FLN after independence was the revival of traditional Islam, and accordingly, there was no reason to expect any change in the situation surrounding women. Under the leadership of Boumédiène, who seized power in 1965, the FLN finally began to strengthen their conservative stance, emphasizing the traditional Islamic lifestyle of women and the family as a symbol of Muslim identity to unify the two nations in Algeria, that is, Arabs and Berbers. However, as indicated earlier, the participation of women in labor markets does not depend on cultural policies only. If the economic factors demanding women to work are present, their participation increases at once. But, from the early stages of independence Algeria was plagued with high unemployment. The situation became even more serious after the oil-shock in 1973, because France closed the door to immigrant workers from the former colonies, including Algeria. Anyhow no favorable circumstances requiring women in the cities to work existed in Algeria.

Nevertheless, not all Algerian women were captives of traditional Islam. The bourgeois government officials that made up the privileged classes were strongly intent on westernization, and women from these classes participated in public affairs almost freely. They were blessed with influential connections by birth, and some took up high positions in government. However, such women were exceptional, and their achievements did not serve as an ideal for the women of other classes. Both men and women in general regarded the women in western clothing as connected with moral decay and imperialistic culture. With the exception of women from the privileged classes, Algerian women in rural areas could not repudiate the veil or segregation and could not seek paid work. Even in the 1980s, and even in the cities, the persistent criticism of women leaving the home for reasons other than commuting to work or school is reported.

In such circumstances, the FLN had been under criticism from the Islamist groups in the 1980s, due to the long economic crisis and government corruption. In order to avoid this criticism the FLN began to make use of the issue of the status of women. As mentioned earlier, the Islamists definitely do not encourage polygamy and the use of exclusive divorce rights by men. However, since that had been

found in the Quran, they thought that it should be accepted as a law of the state. In 1984, the FLN government conceded to the Islamists' assertion, and adopted a family law based on traditional Islamic ideals. Working women felt the situation crucial, and the first non-governmental feminist movement was formed during the process of debate regarding the family law. When the single-party FLN autocracy collapsed in February 1989, these working women joined the newly formed political parties stressing gender equality, and took up positions against the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). However, the male leaders of the new parties have not placed great importance on the issue of working women, and the elevation of the status and public participation of women in Algeria is still far off.

#### **4. THE CURRENT STATE OF ISLAMISM**

It is well known that the Islamic movements, which grew in North Africa from the mid-1970s, are mainly supported by poor immigrants to the cities. However, analysis of this fact leads us to a serious conceptual discrepancy. The violent attack on unveiled women by people of rural origin was counted as an activity with an organizational background, and further, the Islamic movement itself was interpreted as a reaction to the destruction of the patriarchal system caused by the expanding participation of women in the public sphere. To make matters worse, the existence of several Islamists who advocate the veiling of women, forcibly if necessary, gave positive evidence of this argument. The misleading interpretation seriously influenced the construction of the concept of "Islamism" and feminist studies. In addition, the government authority does not hesitate to fabricate cases of violent attacks on women in western style dress. The actual situation is much more complicated.

Because of the rural population explosion, or 'Open Door' policy since the 1970s, a large-scale migration has occurred in North Africa. However, governments did not have efficient policies to cope with this situation, and the influx of people from the rural areas have been left to their own devices. Confronted by housing and employment problems, these people have to dwell in slums surrounding the large cities, and already they feel betrayed in their expectations of city life. Men engaged in multiple jobs at the lowest level to support their families, but with chronic inflation their earnings were never enough. As a result, they had to depend on their wives' earnings as well. Also, slum life is far different from what they were used to in the villages, and they had no privacy. In this environment, where sexual sensitivity and anxiety can easily arise, women came to be subjected to more sexual and psychological harassment. For the men, who lived with the values of the patriarchal system in the villages, this situation was unbearable. These men believe that the women in a man's family should be kept away from the sight of others, but not only have they been unable to protect and control the female members of their own families, they have even come to depend on women's income – a crushing disappointment for them. However, the

pain of this turns to rage when they see women of the upper and upper middle classes in their showy western clothing. They cannot help questioning why only the ruling class has continued to be blessed with affluence. Their sore recognition is that the reality of the situation has become altogether so far apart from both the ideals of the government and those of Islam. Reeling from the shock of the affluence and liberalism of the ruling classes, these men formed social pressure groups against western dress, and even instigated violence against women wearing it on the street. Thus the rage against the affluence, indulgence, and moral decay of the ruling classes exploded. The lower social classes hold the widespread view that the westernized women live profligate lives, and there are even whispered rumors of schoolgirls from the upper class being involved in prostitution. Under these circumstances, support for the Islamists' assertion that the westernization of the ruling class is the source of the economic crisis, moral decay and all other social ills, is natural and to be expected.

In this way, the confrontation between Islamists and the government has come to take the form of class conflicts. However, what has been stated up to now in this paper has been limited solely to the logic of the supporters of Islamism. The leaders of Islamism have a different logic for opposing the westernization of women in their societies. As a matter of fact, the majority of these people are men from the urban upper middle class, who were not brought up within the traditional framework of the strong patriarchal system which exists in rural areas. Although they may not encourage paid work for women, they certainly do not hold the view that a wife working outside may hurt the dignity of the husband. The reason that they are opposed to the westernization of women is nothing more than a precaution against imperialist plots, and anxiety about moral decay in their society.

As pointed out earlier, the framework of the Islamist ideology with regard to women was inherited from the Muslim nationalists of 100 years earlier. These nationalists suspected that the westernization of women was an imperialist plot aimed at undermining the Muslim family and destroying Muslim culture, and they expected women to live an 'Islamic lifestyle' to protect the Muslim identity. In other words, women were thought to be charged with fostering and maintaining the Muslim identity at home. Here is the theoretical basis for the Islamist advocacy that a woman's first priority is to the family, and any work requiring the family to be sacrificed was unacceptable. However, almost no Islamist leaders repudiated the idea of paid work for women, because as long as they fulfilled their duty to their family, there was no reason to deny them work outside. Their only sticking point is that non-related men and women are not to share the same space.

The psychology of the Muslim male that leads him to believe that free mixing between men and women leads to social disorder is well documented by feminist research, and the Islamists are model material for this dispute. The Islamists argue that to prevent moral decay in society, public places for men and women should be kept separate. This is the concept generally criticized as 'segregation'. Of course 'segregation' is problematic. Saying that men will surrender to female temptation

and that the result will be social disorder if men and women mix in public means that women are not being seen as members of society. They conceive society as a man's world, so the participation of women will undoubtedly be impeded. In addition, criticism of interaction between men and women stands on the presupposition that women always tempt men. Thus, women are thought to lack the ability to control themselves. However, 'segregation' is supported by a truly large number of Muslim women because it is thought that it effectively eliminates unwarranted gender discrimination in the workplace and transport congestion.

The reason that the Islamists demand that women must be veiled in front of unrelated males, is also because they are afraid that failure to do so will invite moral decay, and in debates regarding clothing, they fiercely criticize the depravity of the West. To those who hold this belief, the clear proof is the beauty contests and pornography prevalent in the West – which they regard as being little more than men's using the female body as a means to make money. Despite the claims regarding female liberation in the West, these people believe that, in reality, western women are regarded by western men as little more than objects to serve their sexual appetites, and are not free at all. True freedom, they believe, is when a woman is judged by her humanity and morals.

The reason that well-educated Muslim women from the upper middle and upper classes, who are blessed with good conditions for public participation, are among the followers of Islamism is that, on one hand, they naturally sympathize with the ideal of the importance of the family, but also because they agree with this criticism of the western treatment of women as sexual commodities.

These women are critical of the western woman's way of life and are pursuing their own way of 'liberation' for Muslim women. While they do not oppose the legalization of polygamy and so on, as the male Islamists do not, and also insist that a woman's first priority should be to her family, they are also calling strongly for equality between men and women. From the point of view of the argument that "true Islam" acknowledges gender equality, these women are the virtual descendants of the 19th century reformers. In addition, contrary to the official announcements that women should give priority to the family, they are hoping to make inroads to the center of Islamist organizations, and are displaying their intention of leading their own movements.

Of course, there is a lot of opposition to this from the male Islamists, who are not free from the legacy of the traditional Islamic view that men and women should have separate roles. The logic that these men use to argue this point is that the reason that God created two sexes is undoubtedly because He intended different roles for them. They argue that while men and women are equal, if they were the same to the point that their roles in society were the same, then there would have been no reason for God to have created the two sexes, given that there exist in the world organisms that reproduce by simple cell division, and that this provides a clear basis for the idea that the reason that God created the two sexes is that He

intended different roles for them.

As long as they believe that God is the creator of all things and that all creation reflects His will, it is not easy to refute this argument. However, Islamist women will not back off easily. In the process of their participation in the movement these women have become extremely active, and now is the time to watch how these 'conscious' new women will change Islamism.

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