

Jordanian Islamists and the Agenda for Women: Between Discourse and Practice

Author(s): Lisa Taraki

Source: *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jan., 1996), pp. 140-158

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4283779>

Accessed: 01-06-2017 06:53 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Taylor & Francis, Ltd.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Middle Eastern Studies*

# Jordanian Islamists and the Agenda for Women: Between Discourse and Practice<sup>1</sup>

LISA TARAKI

The resurgent Islamist movement in Jordan<sup>2</sup> presents itself as a movement with a clear vision of what constitutes a society based on Islamic principles. Islamist activism and institution-building projects are presented as part of a grand strategy for the reconstruction of an Islamic society and the repossession of an Islamic heritage long denied to the Muslims due to colonialism and the alienation of ordinary Muslims from their own religion and traditions.

Can we indeed identify such a coherent Islamist project in Jordan today? An examination of Islamist discourse and practice reveals that in Jordan, as in most other Arab countries, the Islamists have yet to elucidate a consistent and coherent societal project. What we witness is the process of constructing an Islamist agenda. As can be expected from an experiment in the making, we find varying degrees of inconsistency and dissonance both at the level of discourse and practice, and more important, between discourse and practice. This lack of coherence can be attributed to several factors.

First, and on the political level, the Islamist movement operates in a political field which has undergone some important changes since the launching of the state's democracy campaign at the end of the 1980s. The campaign jettisoned the Ikhwan into a political field for which they were not fully prepared. While the 'modern' political concepts such as democracy, political pluralism, and freedom of thought and expression were easily incorporated into the vocabulary of the nationalist, liberal and leftist parties, they presented a problem to the Ikhwan. How were they to reconcile these concepts, products of secular Western culture, with Islamic political principles such as *shura* and *ta'a* and with their own traditional formulations of the ideal polity? While the Ikhwan have embraced the new concepts enthusiastically in their official discourse, they have yet to resolve the many thorny questions which inevitably arise in the world of practice when the new abstract notions come up against long-held beliefs and ingrained practices.

Second, the Ikhwan are faced with a range of constraints imposed upon them by interests and forces external to the movement. Primary among these is the state, which, despite the close relations between the

regime and the Ikhwan, has sought to contain the Islamist project. This restraining force of the state – in a context where the Ikhwan represent a loyal opposition and not a movement aiming at wresting state power – puts limits upon the extent to which the Ikhwan can aggressively pursue their agenda for the Islamization of society. A clear illustration of this can be found in the domain of culture, of which the representation of women is an important part. There, despite lip service to Islam, the state and its Westernized class allies are pursuing a cultural project not only hostile to the Islamists but pointedly and deliberately excluding them.

Third, as a movement in the process of formation, the Islamists are working among both a changed and a more diverse constituency than before. This means that as the constituency's life experiences and conditions change *and* as it becomes more diverse, revision of the traditional formulations about society and social relations becomes more necessary. But in the meanwhile, what occurs inevitably is that there is more room for competing interpretations of Islam, views within the constituency vary on what the priorities of the Islamist movement should be, and individual and collective initiatives and experiments – sometimes at variance with 'official' positions – become bolder.

Can we say the same about the Islamist agenda for women? The answer is at once negative and affirmative. First, and at the level of discourse, both popular and official, there is little evidence that the Ikhwan in Jordan have carried out any serious reformulation of classical conservative and Islamist thinking on women. The necessity of adapting to changing circumstances, particularly transformations at the level of gender relations and women's increased visibility, receive no more than lip service in the discourse of the Ikhwan. Now-standard formulations such as the permissibility of work outside the home provided it does not conflict with women's domestic duties or involves contact with men, or the encouragement of female education in 'appropriate' fields, remain locked at the level of generalities and without explication and discussion.

Moreover, there is little effort to go beyond the classical Islamist discourse that treats women as an undifferentiated social category. That women differ according to occupation, education, marital status, financial responsibilities within the family, and the extent to which they are integrated into the public domain, does not seem to matter much in this discourse, which persists in its presentation of woman as an essence rather than a complex and living reality.

On the other hand, Islamist practice pertaining to women is in a state of negotiation, renegotiation, and redefinition. In fact, and this should not come as a surprise, this is the one area of the Islamist agenda which is most open to debate and most amenable to experimentation. This is so

precisely because the classical Islamist discourse which treats woman as essence has failed to take account of the diversity of the contemporary female condition and has not made the leap necessary to make it more relevant to the lives of real women in the real world. It is also worth noting that much of the negotiation, contestation, redefinition and experimentation are being carried out by women themselves. Islamist institutions and ideologues are participants in this process and try to influence it, but individual women must make the choices and do so in many different ways. Finally, it should be noted that this process of negotiation goes largely unrecognized by the official and popular discourse, which continues to be silent on the need for a reformulation of traditional positions.

Sherifa Zuhur has noted a similar dichotomy between discourse and practice in Egypt. She points out that Egyptian Islamists have divided gender issues into areas of negotiability or immutability according to the pressures in their milieu. They are willing to give greater flexibility to adherents in the realm of practice such as education, family planning, and childbearing than they are willing to entertain within theory.<sup>3</sup> We shall see in the case of Jordan that while Islamist discourse remains largely ossified in its traditional mould, practice is beginning to take many divergent and sometimes unorthodox directions.

The Islamist discourse on women, both in its popular and official manifestations, conforms to the well-known paradigm shared both by conservative Islamic thought and the more modern Islamist movement. Barbara Stowasser, in a study of what she calls the 'fundamentalist' and 'conservative' literature circulating in the Middle East today, shows that

In the area of women's role in society, they speak in similar language, insofar as both emphasize woman's natural and God-given domesticity, glorify the status awarded to her in Islam, and predict certain doom to befall the Islamic world if the woman abandons or is lured away from her traditional place in society. . . .<sup>4</sup>

The more modern fundamentalist idiom, however, takes account of the contemporary world:

To the fundamentalists, the so-called liberation of women is one of the characteristics of modern society which demonstrates that Muslims have strayed from the teachings of Islam. Women's emancipation is a deviation borrowed from the materialist West, where its features are adultery, illegitimate children, AIDS, and women so hardened by professional competitiveness that their reproductive organs have gone into a state of recession . . . At the basis of this deviation, the fundamentalists perceive an ongoing

Judeo-Christian conspiracy that combines the motivation and battle plans of the Christian Crusades with the goals of Zionism. The West . . . has chosen to launch its attacks against Islam on many fronts, most notable among which is the Islamic family structure.<sup>5</sup>

Another study has pointed out the main features of the Islamist view of women's modesty, which has taken up so much space in Islamist writings:

Key concepts relating to the ideology of female modesty are contained in the words '*awra*, *fitna*, and *zina*. That is, the entire body of a woman (except her face and hands) . . . must be covered to avoid embarrassment and shame. Even the voice of a woman is '*awra* and should not be heard. On the other hand, woman is also a potentially destructive element in society. Her appearance causes *fitna* (chaos or discord), and she therefore must be covered for the protection of men . . .<sup>6</sup>

There is not much that one could add to these depictions of the 'generic' Islamist discourse on women. In Jordan, it finds expression in a vast popular literature, and in public discourse in newspapers, mosque *khutbas* (sermons), lectures, and *da'wa* activities at the grassroots level. The most prominent medium carrying the Islamist position to the widest audience is the written word, however, mainly in the form of pamphlets and small books found in book stalls, bookstores, and the ubiquitous Islamic book exhibits all over Jordan. The bulk of this material, carrying titles such as *Why the Hijab*, *The Wisdom of the Hijab*, *The Status Women in Islam*, *Message to the Muslim Woman*, *The Modern Muslim Woman* is not produced in Jordan but comes, often in inexpensive local reprinted editions, from Egypt, Lebanon, and the Gulf states. There are also manuals on Islamic etiquette, personal hygiene, Islamic rituals, and even sewing, where the reader can cut out patterns for making the now-standard *jilbab* and other clothing.

The discourse of the Islamists presents ideal womanhood as consisting of faithfulness to home, husband and children, and modesty in attire and conduct in public. This is a staple of both the popular and official Islamist discourse, and receives endless repetition in books, the Islamist press, public lectures, and in *da'wa* activities aimed at women. There is very little scope for an open and direct discussion of real problems encountered by many Islamist women: how to reconcile women's domestic duties with the demands of work; whether a good Muslim woman should eschew work in a mixed-sex setting rather than compromise her honour; what form and extent of head and body covering are desirable or acceptable; and a host of other decisions that must be made by women on a daily basis.

It is interesting to note that the image of Islamic womanhood can also be propagated by women whose own lives in part contradict this ideal image. One of the very few books produced by Jordanian women Islamists is a work entitled *Women's Dress and Adornment in Islamic Jurisprudence*, a work of scholarship and research in Islamic texts. The author, an educated working woman currently the Supervisor of the Dar al-Arqam School in Amman, prefaces the book like this:

The young Muslim woman could not resist [the Western cultural assault]. She began to imitate the Western woman, and went out of her home dressed but naked [*kasiya 'ariya*, i.e., wearing Western dress] under the pretext of liberation. She insisted on competing with men in all fields of life, claiming equality with them. But what was the result of all of this? The woman was the one to lose. She lost the protective shadow of her home; she gained materially but lost her dignity . . . But then came this sweeping tide, a call for a return to the pure spring, to Islam. A call for the return of the Muslim woman to her kingdom at home . . . The Muslim woman returned with new determination, saying:

I want to return to God to regain my honour!  
 I want to return to Islam to find my humanity!  
 I want to return to my home to answer the call of my nature!<sup>7</sup>

The tension between discourse and practice is glossed over in Islamist discourse, most of all by ideologues like the author of these lines. Even though the course of her own life must illustrate the tension between theory and practice, Mahdiyya al-Zumayli is not willing as an official presenter of the Islamist position to concede such tension or problematic areas. Possibly the most prominent of Islamist women activists, she has led an active life outside her home as a graduate student of theology at Azhar University in Cairo, as an employee in the Ministry of Education for several years, as supervisor of an Islamic school, and above all as an Islamist activist and leader.<sup>8</sup>

It should be pointed out that official Islamist discourse – especially that directed at non-Islamists – presents a somewhat modified formulation of long-standing positions without however complicating it or admitting that the theory has changed. Interview questions directed at ideologues elicit standard lines such as ‘we encourage women’s employment as long as it fulfils Islamic conditions and does not affect their other duties’,<sup>9</sup> and ‘we are not against women’s work or education. The Islamic movement is proud that most of its strength in universities and during the elections derives from women.’<sup>10</sup>

While the official discourse (especially election platforms and statements of position) contains platitudes such as women being partners in the building of society<sup>11</sup> and allows women an opportunity to participate in public life,<sup>12</sup> the bulk of the discourse (including the official discourse) imagines women very differently. Not only does this discourse sanctify women's domesticity, as we have seen, but it also imagines them as weak-minded creatures and addresses them as such. Briefly, the language of much of this discourse doubts their capacity to understand and practise Islam in a mature and responsible manner. In addition, it appeals to certain aspects of women's supposed nature (vanity, jealousy, the desire to be attractive to men) to drive the Islamist message home. Mostly produced by men, this discourse invokes what are supposed to be women's innate fears and interests, most of which have to do with femininity, marriageability, and a good reputation.

A remarkable booklet for sale at an Islamic book fair at the Ikhwan-operated Dar al-Arqam School in Amman epitomizes this approach to women, albeit in a cruder style than that found in most of the popular literature addressed to women. How does the author convince women that mixing of the sexes (*ikhtilat*) and going bareheaded and exposed (*sufur*)<sup>13</sup> is not in their interest?

Despite the intelligence of the gentle sex, its members have not woken to the fact that beautiful women are in the minority. So how did the majority prefer *al-sufur*, since inasmuch as it makes the beautiful few more attractive it detracts from the desirability of the ordinary many . . . How do the less beautiful accept *al-sufur*, since it does nothing but rob them of the capital in the hearts of men, a capital generated by the *hijab*? How do they accept that the more beautiful add this capital to their already large wealth . . .?<sup>14</sup>

What is striking here is that *Islam*, in the view of the author, takes account of women's vanity; their jealousy of other, more beautiful women; and the competition among women over men, and accommodates itself to these innate desires and vulnerabilities:

Woman's happiness is realized when she sees herself the object of admiration and the target of all eyes. Her happiness exceeds all bounds when she feels this attention through a word or a look. Islam provides her this in its rulings, and has accorded her complete care. Islam has also noted that woman is inferior to man in insight and endurance. It is because of this that the wise are puzzled by her having been duped by the call to *ikhtilat*. This is not in her interest . . . it takes away most of [men's] admiration for her . . .<sup>15</sup>

Another book, also on display at the book fair, follows a different approach, but appeals to the same desires and fears supposedly innate in women. How does the author, also a man, convince a fashionable modern woman of the virtues of the *hijab*?

I imagine you now, with your beautiful face . . . How can you abandon it to such a dark fate? How can you let it burn in fire tomorrow [in hell]? Picture it with me, look at the mirror, and compare your face as it is now with what it would look like charred: it is blackened, and burned pieces of skin protrude here and there. Is this not a shame? Yes, it is a shame and also a calamity! How can you bring yourself to discard your face to such a fate? . . . The *hijab* brings upon you God's satisfaction and love, and does not require great effort. With a few simple steps you will become *muhajjaba* [dressed in Islamic garb] and God will be pleased with you.<sup>16</sup>

In case this appeal to a woman's vanity and the warning of the fires of hell is not convincing, the author deploys another familiar argument, that of convincing her that the *hijab* will not harm her chances of marriage:

Sometimes – if you are engaged to be married – the devil will come to you and tell you your fiancé will break off the engagement and leave you if you decide to wear the *hijab*. Your fiancé may be of the kind who allies himself with the devil. But you must persist in the path of good, the straight path, and not be afraid of the devil . . .<sup>17</sup>

The first author is more direct; not only does he warn of the dangers of *ikhtilat*, but also of the dangers education poses to women who want to get married:

What must be noted is that most male university graduates in Egypt . . . go back on promises made to their female colleagues at the university. After graduation they marry illiterate peasants while the majority of the women graduates remain spinsters, except for the few who work hard to find a husband, usually beneath their level . . . These women live in a state of repression and resentment and feel deprived of what they desire, even if they put on a brave front. What makes these young men marry peasants even though university graduates can share half of the burdens of life with them . . . ? I think the major reason is that the fire of their [the graduates'] femininity has been extinguished. The femininity of the village woman is still flaming, and at the height of its impact on the soul. It is therefore a grave disservice to women to encourage them to mingle with men . . .<sup>18</sup>

What is interesting here is that while the author is speaking of the dangers of coeducation, he is giving the subliminal message that university education *per se* and the delay in marriage it entails puts women at a disadvantage against the idealized competitor, the young peasant girl unsullied by previous contact with men. This contradicts facts on the ground, where thousands of women – many of them dressed in the *hijab* – attend university and college, work in offices with men, *and* are able to find suitable husbands, not only men beneath them in social standing.

The carrot-and-stick approach used by these authors is actually part of the popular Islamist strategy to convince women of the virtues of the *hijab* and the dangers of mixing with men, the two cornerstones of Islamist gender ideology. While most Islamist discourse may not be as unsophisticated as the two works cited, *targhib* (enticement) and *tarhib* (intimidation) are two main elements in its arsenal. These are put to use most effectively in women's *da'wa* activities, where women 'missionaries' (*da'iyat*) visiting homes or giving sermons at mosques warn of the fires of hell, juxtaposing images of suffering errant women against those of women happy, content, and protected under the Islamic way of life.

The Islamic way of life may not be easy for all women to get accustomed to. Manuals and books, as well as instructions from *da'iyat*, help initiate women into the new mode of living. One of the books discussed earlier provides a day-to-day guide to becoming a true Muslim. The 'method', which stretches over twelve months, spells out in detail the rites of purification. During the first three months, for example, a woman is instructed to repeat the phrase '*Astaghfar Allah*' ('I ask God's forgiveness') one hundred times after sundown prayers, fast the first day of each month (after taking the husband's permission if married), read part of the book *Al-Targhib wa'l Tarhib* (Enticement and Intimidation),<sup>19</sup> lie in bed on her right side every night, and perform regular prayers and memorize verses from the Qur'an. This regimen gets more complicated and demanding as time passes, involving more fasting on specified days of the month, more memorizing from the Qur'an, more repetition of special phrases after prayers, and the observance of increasingly proper codes of conduct.<sup>20</sup>

Variations on these innovative rituals are also taught to women in *da'wa* activities in homes, schools, and university campuses. It is clear that some of these are of questionable authenticity from an orthodox Islamic point of view; but they fulfil a function, and are not very different from those which Western cults use in their initiation rites. The kind of woman imagined by those who write and propagate this material is not very different from the impressionable new recruit to a cult: she needs the security of rote, and must be told every step of the way what she can and cannot do.

What are Jordanian women's concerns as articulated by the Islamists, including Islamist women? The Islamist gender discourse we have thus far explored is largely of an abstract nature, rarely addressing itself to particularities of Jordanian society. This is especially true of the popular literature directed at women, since most of it is not produced by Jordanians and in any case lacks local specificity.<sup>21</sup> It may be expected, however, that the Islamist press in Jordan can provide a window through which to see how Jordanian Islamists define the issues relevant to Jordanian women, and how they formulate women's local concerns.

A survey of the first 57 issues of the Ikhwan weekly newspaper *al-Ribat*, covering a 15-month period beginning in December 1990 and ending in March 1992<sup>22</sup> confirms the observation made earlier that Islamist discourse in Jordan has steered clear of problematic issues facing women in society. Moreover, the survey yields the other unsurprising finding that the Ikhwan newspaper is no more committed to discussing women's issues than other publications in Jordan or elsewhere; even though women's dress and demeanour are made into burning social issues in their political discourse, the Ikhwan do not see fit to give much space in their only mass-circulation publication to addressing women or discussing issues relevant to them.

*Al-Ribat* made a promising start by devoting a page to family and women's affairs in its first five issues. Very soon, however, news and commentary on the Gulf War, parliamentary affairs, and Islamist movements in other countries (primarily Sudan) pushed the page out. It reappeared exactly one year later at half its original size, returning to its full-page status three months later, under the new title '*al-Murabitat*' (women fighters of the cause, a more militant title). News stories and columns on issues related to women, mostly by female writers, appeared intermittently in other sections of the newspaper throughout the period covered in the survey.

It is not surprising that the tenor and style of most of the material on women's themes appearing in *al-Ribat* are not very different from the standard Islamist mode of dealing with and addressing women. A good part of the material is polemical and exhortative, urging women to support the *jihād* in Palestine and Iraq (especially during the war), denounce *ikhtilat*, be a good mother and raiser of generations, and other familiar prescriptions and proscriptions. One gets the impression, in fact, that much of this material is reproduced from other sources and not the original work of its authors (that is when they are identified by name, which is not very frequent).

Very little material was found covering local women's issues, even those having to do with Islamists themselves. For instance, while a fierce

controversy was raging in other local newspapers like *al-Ra'i*, *Jordan Times*, and *al-Sha'b* about the directive issued by the (Ikhwan) Minister of Social Development to separate male and female employees in the ministry, *al-Ribat* practically ignored the issue and carried two small items, both attacking the non-Islamist press for allowing the enemies of the Islamists to poke fun at the minister on his decision. Meanwhile, the subject of *ikhtilat per se* took up a good deal of the space allotted to women's subjects, mostly consisting of warnings of its dangers without posing it as problematic or open for discussion.<sup>23</sup>

The very few exceptions to this rule occur, interestingly, when the subject is Islamist activism (defined as the *da'wa*, or mission), a key element in the Ikhwan's work in society. How to make the *da'wa* more relevant to people's needs and situations is a concrete and real concern of the Ikhwan, who have invested a great deal of energy and personnel in spreading the mission among different sectors of the population. In an article calling for a reopening of the gates of *ijihad* so that Islamist activists can be more effective in their work, a writer identifies some of the issues facing the Islamic *da'wa* and awaiting a solution:

... the issue of bribery, test-tube babies, dealing with banks giving interest, music, *ikhtilat* between the sexes in study and work, the assumption of government posts by women, shaking hands with women, women's participation – with modesty – in mixed-sex Islamic activities, and a host of other urgent issues. Delving into these issues is thorny and grave, and individual scholars do not dare to tackle them on their own. What we need is a group of scholars such as an academy of jurisprudence to find solutions to these problems, so that Islam will not be accused of rigidity, petrification, or isolationism when in fact we do have the ability and means to find such solutions.<sup>24</sup>

In another article, Bassam al-'Ammush, a frequent contributor to the newspaper and a professor of sharia at Jordan University, responds to a reporter's question regarding the role of women in the *da'wa* in this way:

If we wish to overcome these obstacles [to women's participation], we must begin with the woman herself so that we may leave behind concepts imposed on her. They told us, 'woman's voice is *'awra*', firing their volleys without specifying that what is meant is hesitant, submissive, and feeble speech ... They told us that women's going out [in public] is an imperialist plot, and did not specify that what is meant is going out uncovered. They gave us a saying of the Prophet, 'women are imperfect in mind and religion', but did not explain that

imperfection refers to the preponderance of emotions. We do not call for an abandonment of Islamic law, but rather of concepts added on to it . . . How do we wish to rule society and change it to Islam when we ignore more than half of society? Woman's obligation to participate in the *da'wa* is many times greater than that of men, considering the size of the population she can work among: she works with her own sex, is more capable of spreading the mission among children, and can spread the call among the men [in her family]. Furthermore, there are more women than men in any community.<sup>25</sup>

Another rare example of a critical examination of issues related to the *da'wa* is an article, this time by a woman, tackling the issues of women's status within the Islamist movement:

It is noteworthy that the issue of Islamist women still occupies a small space in the range of issues raised by [Islamists]. Discussions of women are in fact meant to marginalize their role and confine it to narrow realms, whether done deliberately or not . . . In frankness, the Muslim woman has become weary of repetitious issues such as her obligations regarding her appearance and dress, and her husband's rights over her, while substantial issues are ignored. This does not mean that the issues raised are not important; it is only that they should not dominate all our thinking and discourse. As the shaykh Rashid al-Ghanushi has said . . ., 'Islamists have interacted with women in a limited way to the extent that people think that Islam means nothing to women but the *hijab*, staying at home, and fighting *tabarruj* and immorality. The impression is created among a large sector of women that culture and freedom and participation in the nation's future require a revolt against Islamic teaching and an imitation of the West in its good and bad aspects.' . . . Why are Islamist women not given a degree of freedom within a lawful context to participate in the building of society? I especially address men, and more particularly husbands, and [ask them] to make allowances for their wives' duties in Islamic work . . . Islamist activism regarding women is restricted within the axis of the *hijab*. If a young woman adopts it, we consider the process of change and Islamic construction to have been completed. The Islamist movement for change has produced a large number of women wearing the *hijab*, but the question that remains is this: how many of them are workers for the task of building a civilized Muslim society?<sup>26</sup>

These infrequent departures from the traditional Islamist discourse<sup>27</sup> may be a sign that the Jordanian Ikhwan are at the threshold of raising

subjects considered taboo by the Islamist movement thus far. It is not surprising that these calls for a re-examination of standard Islamist arguments and positions should come from Islamists themselves, or that they should be issued within the framework of the *da'wa*. As women come to play a more visible role in the *da'wa*, the need to free them from some of the long-standing restrictions becomes more important.

It is important to stress a last point concerning Islamist discourse in general. While the few calls for renewal no doubt take encouragement from the emerging reformist trend within the Arab Islamist movement, Islamist discourse in Jordan is largely immune to that trend and in fact almost totally ignores it. Islamist thinkers such as Rashid al-Ghanushi, Munir Shafiq, Hasan Turabi, and Yusef al-Qardawi, whom we can consider the pioneers of the reformist trend in Islamist thought, receive very little attention in Islamist discourse in Jordan. For instance, in the 57 issues of *al-Ribat* we find very few articles by or about these thinkers. Moreover, the Islamists in Jordan have yet to produce thinkers and ideologues of the calibre of writers in Egypt, Syria, and particularly, the Maghrib.

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the most problematic issues confronting Islamist practice today have to do with women: women's participation in the public domain, women's appearance and conduct, and gender relations in general. While it is true that Islamists face challenges in other areas of social and economic life – such as how to Islamize financial institutions and the educational system, or how to conduct themselves in a 'democratic' system – they have not invested half the emotional energy in these areas as they have devoted to the 'woman question'.

The experiment in Islamic living finds its greatest challenges in four problematic areas: women's dress and appearance, contact between men and women, the extent and nature of women's education and work, and women's activism within the Islamist movement.

A casual observer in Amman, Zarqa, Irbid, and the other major towns in Jordan will find women in different states of dress and 'undress' (if we are to borrow Islamist terms). Women choosing to wear some form of Islamic dress (*al-ziyy al-shar'i* or *al-ziyy al-Islami*) have a number of options available to them. They may choose the most severe version, a uniform consisting of the *niqab* (face covering), gloves, a head covering, and a *jilbab* (a cloak-like garment); or they may opt for the most minimal, which is comprised of the head covering and some form of Western dress, even jeans. The *sine qua non* of the Islamic ensemble is the head covering, which itself comes in different styles, colours, and materials. The extent and kind of jewellery and makeup are also quite variable.

It is of course obvious that not all – perhaps not even a majority – of women wearing some version of Islamic dress are members or sympathizers of the Islamist movement. It is a mark of its influence, however, that it has managed within the space of a decade to make the modern Islamist uniform or variations on it an attractive and viable option for women, particularly to those in cities and big towns.

Among Ikhwan women, that is, those who identify with and are involved in the activities and work of the Ikhwan, there seems to be a smaller margin of freedom in the choice of dress. Perhaps because the Ikhwan have made the matter of dress one of the cornerstones of their cultural and social agenda, and because women's appearance is the most visible sign of commitment to the Islamic way of life, adherence to a uniform dress code is stressed and enforced more vigorously, and freedom of choice is discouraged.

And what of the Ikhwan's success in creating a woman who eschews Western standards of beauty and fashion? The popular Islamist literature, for instance, is clear on the necessity of women liberating themselves from alien aesthetic values and standards of beauty and fashion. But in a world where the Western paradigm reigns supreme, it is not easy to replace that with something more authentic, especially if the authentic has its origins in early Islamic times and is difficult to envision. It is important to note in this regard that the Arab Islamist movement in general has not equated authentic culture with the culture of the majority, that is, peasant culture. In fact, the movement's cultural project not only does not sanctify peasant culture (including dress, standards of beauty, and religious expression and practice), but also tries to supplant and replace it with a more authentic 'Islamic' culture. The contours of this culture are still being negotiated, especially in problematic areas such as dance, music, theatre, and one would assume, dress.

In matters of beauty and style, the Islamist woman is presented with a nebulous 'Islamic' paradigm which provides little guidance beyond how to appear in public. What hides under the *jilbab*, however, is highly diverse and is invariably influenced by – if it is not replicas of – Western styles.<sup>28</sup> This situation is not as paradoxical as it may seem. Islamists, far from de-sexualizing women and imposing a puritanical code in private, recognize their sexuality and even stress the need to appear attractive to men. Thus, in the absence of ready and authentic Islamic standards of beauty and fashion, women are left with little choice but to follow the current norm, which is by and large a version of the Western paradigm. It will be interesting to see if the Islamists are successful in introducing an Islamic style for women which is at once different from the peasant and the Western models.

The Islamists have expended a great deal of energy in the campaign against *ikhhtilat*, or contact between women and unrelated men.<sup>29</sup> An emergent code of behaviour derived from the injunction against *ikhhtilat* includes segregation of the sexes in Islamist activities such as book fairs, rallies and lectures; the avoidance of eye contact and hand-shaking between women and men; an implicit seating rule separating men from women in certain kinds of public space such as lecture halls and university classrooms; and other codes and rules still in the making.

The battle against *ikhhtilat* appears to be an uphill struggle in Jordan, primarily because the Ikhwan do not have control over the public space in which most of the interaction between men and women takes place. The state is the largest employer of women and runs the largest institutions of higher education; it has thus far ignored calls to ban coeducation and the separation of women and men workers in state institutions. The private sector is also largely oblivious to the Islamists' considerations and has not responded in any real way to their rhetoric about *ikhhtilat*. Moreover, the Ikhwan have not come up with answers to the practical problems the segregation of the sexes would present: for example, how would productivity of workers be affected by segregation, and how much extra expenditure would be involved in ensuring that men and women do not mix at work or study? The directive of the Ikhwan Minister of Social Development in 1991 to separate female and male employees in the Ministry brought these and other questions up for public scrutiny; but in the debate that ensued, the Ikhwan did not have much to say beyond lauding the minister for his courageous act and complaining of persecution from the media and other hostile quarters.

The Ikhwan in Jordan have by and large accommodated themselves to a sexually integrated reality, and are developing social strategies to deal with it. Moreover, and in some settings, such as universities and colleges, they are actually encouraging certain forms of contact between women and men. Reference is made here to activism in the Islamist student movement, which requires a great deal of coordination and planning for activities and events such as lectures, rallies, and particularly elections at the departmental and faculty levels. The same acceptance of contact with men is found in professional associations, such as the Pharmacists' Association, where a women's committee headed by Islamists encourages participation of members in professional conferences and the general assembly of the Association.<sup>30</sup>

The Ikhwan-operated Islamic Hospital in Amman is presented as a model Islamic institution. It has separate female and male nursing staffs, segregated wards for patients, and special hours for men and women in the staff cafeteria. All female personnel, including physicians, are required

to wear Islamic dress, and nurses are provided free of charge with a standard white *jilbab*. But even in this institution, the rules prohibiting *ikhhtilat* cannot be totally observed; because there is no separate female medical staff, most nurses work with male physicians, and most women patients are seen by male physicians. This situation does not seem to present any problems to the women (or men) who work there; in fact, the aura of propriety created by the dress code and separation of wards makes it possible for men and women to work together without feeling that they are being compromised. Referring to colleagues as 'sister' and 'brother' further enhances the propriety and permissibility of these contacts, and desexualizes them to the extent possible. As several nurses commented to the author, nursing still has a bad reputation in society, and it is only in this hospital that they feel they can work without damaging their reputations. Here they are treated as sisters and not as objects of pleasure (*mut'a*) for the physician. Any sexual harassment from male physicians would be severely punished.<sup>31</sup>

Modern Islamist discourse has taken account of women's need to work outside the home, but has qualified it by stressing the primacy of women's domestic roles and functions as mothers and keepers of the home. Work is also allowed provided it is not in mixed-sex situations, 'agrees with women's nature' and is in 'appropriate' fields. The education of women is justified on the grounds that educated women make better mothers and that it is better for women to provide services to other women, such as instruction, nursing care, and medical treatment. Like work, education must be limited to 'appropriate' fields, and should not be coeducational.<sup>32</sup>

As in any other Arab society, the Islamist prohibitions and prescriptions on work and education are being broken on a daily basis in Jordan, with the Ikhwan and their sympathizers and followers as witnesses and participants in the process of taking down the barriers erected before women in work and education. Islamist women are found in all academic fields at colleges and universities, and Islamist institutions themselves encourage female education in non-traditional disciplines. The Islamic Community College in Zarqa, which has separate men's and women's facilities, is one such example. It has female students in pharmacy, laboratory technology, accounting, business administration, and computer programming, and offers non-academic extension courses to women in word processing, computer programming, public administration, and the like. It is clear that the female graduates of these academic programmes and training courses cannot all be employed in institutions catering to women only, or in those where the separation of men and women is guaranteed. Islamist institutions, therefore – and here we shall include many community centres and women's organizations which operate short-term courses for

women in traditional and non-traditional subjects – are actively engaged in the education and training of women for skills which are meant to enhance their chances of working in the state or private sector. Many of the jobs involve contact with the public, and cannot be viewed as being ‘appropriate to women’s nature’, a concept whose definition is stretched to the extent that it loses its original significance.

Islamist institutions which employ women, although careful to observe the rules of sex segregation as far as possible, are probably no better than others in accommodating to the ideology of the primacy of motherhood and domestic duties. At the Islamic Hospital, for instance, the nurses’ committee, representing the nearly 250 nurses employed there, was negotiating with the administration over extending maternity leave beyond the 30-day post-delivery leave allowed at the hospital.<sup>33</sup>

Islamist women’s involvement in the public domain has been traditionally confined to the fields of *da’wa* and charitable work, both carried out among women. Within that tradition, a growing number of Islamist women’s organizations combine religious education with assistance to the poor and the provision of some social services and vocational training, and have sprung up in mainly poor areas of cities and the major towns.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of the 1980s Islamist women were preparing themselves for a more openly political role, outside the sphere of women’s work. Women campaigners were very much a part of the street scene during the 1989 parliamentary elections, and women were encouraged to attend the many election rallies held by the Ikhwan in public places, and to vote in the elections. After the elections, the Ikhwan launched what can only be described as a campaign to enter – and gain control over – student and professional associations, unions and other representative bodies. Women are very much a part of this offensive, and have received a considerable amount of exposure and have been at the centre of some public controversies on a number of occasions.

The Ikhwan do not seem to be troubled by this increasing public visibility of their women. While it is true that they have not embraced wholeheartedly the idea of nominating women for parliament, they are not only consistently exploiting the voting power of their female constituency, but are also giving more public exposure to some of their women. The experience of the General Federation of Jordanian Students is a good example of mobilizing women for political campaigns. The Ikhwan won an outstanding victory in the 1990 elections for university-level preparatory committees at Jordan University, Yarmuk University, The University of Science and Technology, and ten community colleges. It is clear that this success (they won over 96 per cent of the seats in the Higher Preparatory Committee formed after the elections) could not have been achieved

without mobilizing the female student body, which ranges from 39 to 45 per cent of the student population in institutions of higher education. Women have also been a significant factor in election victories in the Nurses and Midwives Association and the Association of Pharmacists, which in 1991 were controlled by Islamists.

These and many other examples make clear that the Ikhwan are systematically exploiting the female factor in political contests, and are accommodating themselves to the increased visibility of women – as individuals to be approached and persuaded to vote, to attend rallies and participate in demonstrations and marches, and to work as campaigners – which this entails. There are also indications that the Ikhwan may be willing to give certain women figures a higher profile than before, as a price to be paid in return for increasing the Islamists' weight and visibility in institutions important to them.

The controversy surrounding the elections for the General Federation of Jordanian Women is a case in point. In August 1990, a slate of Islamist women won all seats on the Executive Committee of the Federation in bitterly contested and highly publicized elections. The Islamist women were pitted against the Federation stalwarts, a group of Westernised and professional women who had thus far dominated and run the Federation. The Islamists were eventually unseated after the High Court ruled in January 1991 that the elections were null and void.<sup>35</sup> In the nearly six months during which they controlled the Federation, however, they became involved in activities which inevitably gave some of them the public exposure Islamist woman had not enjoyed before.<sup>36</sup>

#### NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank the Ford Foundation for a grant under its Middle East Research Competition which made it possible to take time off from teaching to conduct field research and complete most of the writing of this article.
2. This article focuses primarily on the Society of the Muslim Brethren (*Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, hereafter the Ikhwan), which is the largest Islamist force in Jordan.
3. S. Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt* (Albany, NY, 1992), p.107.
4. B.F. Stowasser, 'Liberated Equal or Protected Dependent? Contemporary Religious Paradigms on Women's Status in Islam', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol.9, No.3 (1987), p.276.
5. *Ibid.*
6. V.J. Hoffman-Ladd, 'Polemics on the Modesty and Segregation of Women in Contemporary Egypt', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.19, No.1 (1987), p.43.
7. M.S. al-Zumayli, *Libas al-Mar'a wa Zinatuha fi al-Fiqh al-Islami* [Women's Dress and Adornment in Islamic Jurisprudence] (Amman, 1987), pp.8–9.
8. Hoffman-Ladd has observed much the same about Zaynab al-Ghazali, the foremost Islamist woman leader in the Arab world. She notes that even al-Ghazali, 'whose own

- life demonstrates an unusual activism – she divorced her first husband because he objected to her activities outside the home, and she offers [her] readers . . . historical examples of Muslim women as warriors for the faith in the public sphere – says it is contrary to woman's *fira* [nature] to work outside the home, and it is a woman's first duty to be a wife and mother.' See V. Hoffman-Ladd, op. cit., p.41.
9. Mahdiyya al-Zumayli, interview with author, Amman, 31 March 1992.
  10. Ziyad Abu-Ghanima, interview with author, Amman, 26 October 1991. Abu-Ghanima was the spokesman of the Islamic Bloc during the 1989 parliamentary elections, and served as editor of the Ikhwan newspaper *al-Ribat* for some time.
  11. *Al-Risala al-Intikhabiyya: Kutlat al-Haraka al-Islamiyya* [Election Message from the Islamic Movement Bloc], Amman, n.d. This document was circulated during the 1989 parliamentary elections campaign.
  12. From the charter of the *Hiżb al-'Amal al-Islami* (Islamic Action Front Party), founded in 1992 at the initiative of the Ikhwan and with a majority of Ikhwan members. See H. Hurani *et al.* (eds), *Dalil al-Hayat al-Hizbiyya fi al-Urdun: Hizb Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami* [A Guide to Party Life in Jordan: the Islamic Action Front Party] (Amman, 1993), p.20.
  13. Among the important buzzwords in the Islamist gender discourse are *ikhhtilat*, *sufur* (which literally means uncovering the face, but which has come to denote going bare-headed), and *tabarruj* (literally, display of the female body, which is equated with wearing Western dress, using makeup, and going bareheaded).
  14. M. al-Mansur, *Hikmat al-Hijab* [The Wisdom of the Hijab] (Amman, 1988), pp.21–2.
  15. *Ibid.*, pp.27–8.
  16. H. Quffa, *Al-Muslima al-'Asriyya ila Ayn* [Whither the Modern Muslim Woman?] (al-Zarqa', 1989), p.95.
  17. *Ibid.*, p.141.
  18. M. Al-Mansur, op. cit., pp.19–20.
  19. The author refers to a book by Imam al-Mundhiri, in four volumes.
  20. H. Quffa, op. cit., pp.143–67.
  21. In fact, Barbara Stowasser has observed that modernist, conservative, and fundamentalist literature all lacks local specificity and consistently speaks to the problematic of the 'Muslim woman', not that of the Egyptian or Jordanian or Turkish Muslim woman. See B. Stowasser, op. cit., p.262.
  22. The first issue is actually numbered zero (10 December 1990). Several issues seem to have been censored and did not appear.
  23. In an interesting twist, the newspaper (No.10, 28 May 1991) ran a story ('reported by Agence France Presse, which certainly is not dominated by Muslim Fundamentalists!') about the battle against coeducation at Mills College in the United States, claiming that the students' success in keeping the college an all-woman institution (by raising three million dollars in three weeks) indicated that even the American people are sympathetic to the cause of single-sex education. In other words, it is not only the 'backward' Islamists who fight for sexual segregation; even the morally bankrupt Americans have seen the value of a women-only education.
  24. *al-Ribat*, No.24 (16 July 1991).
  25. *al-Ribat*, No.50 (14 January 1992).
  26. *al-Ribat*, No.14 (30 April 1991).
  27. In fact, these three articles are the only ones to raise controversial issues related to women in the 15-month period covered by the survey of the newspaper.
  28. An encounter between the author and a group of Ikhwan women in a private home in Amman in 1991 shows the dissonance between the external and the private; once the *jlbab*s and head coverings were taken off, a range of individual idiosyncracies and styles were revealed: from short tight skirts and carefully coiffed hair sported by two of the younger women, to conservative Western dress worn by most of the older women. None of them wore anything resembling traditional peasant dress.
  29. Actually, men who are not *maharim*, that is, men to whom marriage is prohibited.
  30. *al-Ribat*, No.29 (20 August 1991).

31. Interestingly, a nurse offered the author the information that many of her colleagues had met their husbands on the job in the hospital.
32. A distillation of most of these prescriptions and prohibitions can be found in M. Siba'i, *Al-Mar'a Bayn al-Fiqh wa al-Qanun* [Woman Between Jurisprudence and the Law] (Beirut and Damascus, 1984), pp.203–4. It was recommended to the author by an Islamist ideologue in Amman as one of the classic works setting out Islam's view on women. The ideas in it are reproduced repeatedly in popular tracts and booklets.
33. Author's interview with a member of the Nurses' Committee at the Islamic Hospital, Amman, 26 October 1991. This nurse pointed out that about 80 per cent of the nurses at the hospital are married.
34. Some examples are the Umm al-Qura, al-Rabi', Anwar al-Huda, and al-'Ata' women's associations.
35. The court was ruling on a petition submitted by non-Islamist Federation members.
36. For example, the Federation organized a mass women's rally under the slogan 'Rise to the Jihad!' during the Gulf War, which was addressed by Federation President Mahdiyya al-Zumayli and two prominent male Ikhwan personalities.