

**SELF-IDENTITY AS A FORM OF DEMOCRATIZATION:  
THE SYRIAN EXPERIENCE 1**

by

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**INTRODUCTION**

This chapter combines historical research and a field reporting of participatory action research (PAR) with one of the grassroots women's movement in Syria. I will analyze the participatory or democratization efforts by members of this informally organized group (the group) that is working toward Muslim women's self-identity. Islamic higher learning and its relation to Islamic principles of gender justice provide the framework of this analysis.

Various factors have been affecting the priorities in women's Islamic knowledge and self-realization within the predominantly Muslim society of Syria. Even when the group emphasizes community-based informal education and social welfare activities, inside and outside views of Islam and Muslim women do influence the decision-making process. These decisions may concern matters ranging from the group agenda to the members' identifications

with Islam. Interpreting Islam in this group's course of action is, consciously or unconsciously, affected by the domestic, national and international affairs of Syria. The present Syrian constitution does not declare Islam as a state religion. Yet, it is hardly possible to find a discussion of any issue in Syria or any other Middle Eastern and Muslim countries without invoking a "monolithic" representation of Islamic religion-cultural and political image. Meanwhile, no studies attempted to present the Islamic conceptual and pedagogical foundations for individuals' self-identity with Islam and the consequent civic decision-making process that affects the individual and communal life.

As a PAR researcher and educator, my working and reporting on this group is to argue for the change in discourse to be able to understand Muslim women's movement towards democratization. Some members of the group felt a need to further their indigenous educational strategies and invited me to participate in the group's study-circles. The group strategies consisted on reading the Qur'an and acting on what they learn. I knew of the group earlier and had informally observed some of their activities during subsequent visits to Syria. My presence in Syria for a period of three months annually during 1995-1997 helped develop this research and educational working relationship with the group.

Considering the Islamic principle of self-discipline for self-realization as neither inferior nor superior, this group affirms autonomous responsibility as central to the Islamic religio-political process of educating. The group interpreted this principle to mean first-hand knowledge of Islam from its primary sources. Intimate knowledge of these sources (the Qur'an and the books of Hadith that contain the Prophet Muhammad's extrapolation of Qur'anic principles) is viewed as the only means to 'liberation.' Liberation is intended to rid oneself of the dichotomous agendas of "liberal" vis-à-vis "traditional" interpretations of

Islam.<sup>3</sup> The group's primary concern have been to understand and apply the Qur'anic way of life. Participatory decision-making process in the group, has been confined within the males' 'traditional' (i.e., grounded in absolute principles) interpretation of Islamic texts concerning the role of individual within a religio-socio-political structure of family and society. My work with this group, as a facilitator, takes the Islamic principle of self-discipline one step further to affirm self-identity within the Islamic premise of gender justice.

To facilitate their movement from the predominantly males' interpretations of the Islamic primary sources is to make the Islamic principle of trusteeship (Qur'an, 2:30) explicit through higher Islamic learning. A Muslim individual may not fulfill the Islamic pedagogy of a trustee without being able to autonomously choose, understand, and act on her choice of Islam as a worldview. This process requires both autonomous morality and intimate knowledge of the Qur'an before an individual can act as a trustee. Proxy or heteronomous moralities--though represent prevalent practices--do not replace autonomous morality. Community welfare is central to Islamic principles of governing, but it does not preclude the primacy of autonomous morality as a form of self-governing. Within the guidance of the Qur'an and Hadith, when in conflict, the community collective welfare takes precedent over individual rights. My analysis of this group self-learning and self-governing is intended to present a form of democratization by this Syrian feminine movement to affirm Muslim women's agency. The group may not call its work democratic, nor feminine. This movement, though, has achieved and maintained some form of effective intellectual and civic participation despite the historical and cultural constraints that dominated the Syrian society, like other Muslim-Arab societies. My intention is not to compare this Syrian grassroots

movement with other movements inside or outside Syria, but to change the perception of Muslim women's invisibility as an indicator of full dependency and/or oppression. By changing the discourse we find that "mainstream" literature concerning democratization, Syrian society, and Syrian Muslim Arab women have overlooked this type of groups because these groups are not connected to the center of power. Applying self-identity for self-realization approach within the Islamic framework of gender justice as a base of participation or democratization presents different set of assumptions. Self identity for self-realization approach presupposes higher Islamic learning to re-gain the power of knowledge as a means of active agency. Further synthesis of the context of this study, the history and culture of Syria provide evidence for this group's active agency.

## **THE CONTEX**

Though rarely recognized in Western literature on democracy and participatory decision-making, Islamic intellectual and spiritual autonomy, consultative decision-making and governance represent a form of democratic process. (al-Hibri, 1992) This form of democratization calls for individual self-realization as autonomous, political entity, and for recognizing this entity as a prerequisite to social justice. I have argued elsewhere **4** that identity cannot be re-claimed through superficial "empowerment." This latter will only make the female feel more inferior because she still relies on the group to affirm her participation, in the name of leadership, for instance. This inferiority, in turn, may cause her to become oppressive to others. I also argued that the perception that social justice result in individual justice is problematic. Even distributive justice (Young, 1990) may not result in the equilibrium of male-female relations as long as concepts of superiority (domination or

protection of female morality) and inferiority (feeling oppressed or the need to be protected) have not changed. Governance in the Islamic morality is granted first to each individual as the trustee of Qur'anic guidance. A Muslim may not be consciously Muslim unless she has the choice to accept or reject the "Divine guidance" and, with full awareness, become responsible only towards the "Supreme Guidance," God (called Allah in Arabic).<sup>5</sup> The community of such individuals then entrusts its affairs to an elected council that relies in its decisions on mutual consultation and consensus. Leadership in this governing body is given to the person who is knowledgeable and of a just character.

Knowledgeability and just characters are determined by the benefit individuals bestow to other members of the community. Michael Chamberlain (1994) argues that "Western concepts of legitimate order were inappropriate to medieval Muslim society where social advancement was dependent upon the production of knowledge and religious patronage." He adds, "[I]t was the household, rather than the state agency or the corporation, that held political and social power." (I) Chamberlain argument still applies to present-day religious learning, particularly among Muslim women who have been invisible to historians, social and cultural investigators because the latter apply the Western concepts of legitimacy. The culture of the study-circle, for instance, still is a major form of, not only high culture, as Chamberlain suggests (p.81), but also of knowledge production and affirmation for the concept of benefit among women. He adds, "In the biographical dictionaries, 'Ifada [benefit] was probably the most common term for education itself. The elite of Damascus as elsewhere divided the social universe into insiders and outsiders. Here the principle of social division was not between the pure and the impure, or between the naturalness of the well bred and the affection of social climber, but rather between the beneficial and the useless." (113) Women

who teach women in the study-circles are still viewed as pious, of just character, and of relative power when their knowledge is disseminated to “benefit” other women. This is evident, for example, in the mushrooming of women's study-circles inside and outside the mosque in Damascus and other Syrian cities in the 1960s, in response to the political and social instability. The grassroots movement reported here started as one of these study-circle.

6 The movement ability to maintain active participation, perhaps, was because of their invisibility and by being away from the purview of both the “liberal” and the “traditional” in their endless confrontations and dichotomous views.

What is peculiar about this Syrian women's grassroots movement is its attempt to regain its grip on Islamic knowledge as a means of participation and democracy. As the present context of the Nation-State and regional foreign relations do not concern themselves with this form of participation, women's groups, like the group in this study, became oblivious toward political changes. Such attitude made these women unaware of the effect of the outside concepts and foreign policies on the perception of women’s national and domestic role in society. Despite their attempt of self-realization, the basic problem for this group seems to lie in its members’ lack of realization that their identity was, and is being shifted for them within national and international policy-making. Thus, "Self-identity," no matter how an individual or a group defines herself, is central to my analysis of present views of democracy by this Syrian women group.<sup>7</sup> Women in general are still perceived to represent the domestic affairs by proxy and Muslim women are still perceived as the preservers of culture, and not as contributors to culture. Women's issues are being played internationally in collaboration with, or despite the internal policy-makers. This domestic proxy is more pronounced among

Muslim societies, like other population in the developing world, because they are still heavily dependent on the international market of ideas as well as goods.<sup>8</sup>

Muslims, particularly women, have not had the opportunity to broaden and balance their understanding of the perennial relationship between modern knowledge, and economic and political power in its contemporary form. Such an understanding is assumed to help their capacity as educated citizens in evaluating and contributing to their own development. I should add that such understanding may not be valid without women understand their own identity and the Islamic basic premise of trusteeship. The lack of such understanding does not necessarily call for outsiders' discourse of these societies as colonized 'savages' or 'oppressed group of people that need to be civilized or emancipated.'<sup>9</sup>

Syrian women, like most women in the Middle East and in the rest of the Arab, Muslim, and developing worlds, have in the last two hundred years been given the following identities. They are chronologically and sometimes interchangeably identified as Oriental, Harem, Muhammadan, Moslem, Near Eastern, Greater Syrians (that included present day Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon), Syrian Arab (vis-à-vis Jordanian, for instance, beginning with Arab-Israel conflict over the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, 1948), Middle Eastern (beginning with the US involvement in the region's affairs to protect its oil's strategies and revenue, stretching from Egypt to Pakistan, and from Turkey to Yemen), Arab (beginning with the formation of the United Arab Republic unity between Syria and Egypt, 1958), Muslim (beginning with the Syrian government cooperation with the Iranian Shi'i revolutionary government after 1978 revolution).

What makes these shifts in identification significant to understanding the role of women vis-à-vis men in the region and in Syria is that outside concerns for women's status

and women's education began to surface simultaneously at the introduction of the European missionary and colonial intervention. This intervention was followed by "[S]tate rhetoric and eventually state action in matters of women's education that paralleled the ideas expressed in the discussions and writings of male intellectuals."<sup>10</sup> These concerns were also followed by the introduction of European industrialized economy in the early 19th century and the search for markets as well as cheap labor in all classes and levels in the "Near East" (Hammam, 1972). What makes the emphasis on these identities significant to understanding Syrian women vis-à-vis other women in the region is the centrality of Syria since ancient times as a crossroads to and from the region of cultural, religious, economic and, political trends, and as a crossfire between the European/American crusaders and the Middle Eastern Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

In a literature search about Syrian women in the Cornell University collection, only 14 records about women were available among 1258 records on Syria, the oldest of which were written by two American male missionaries. The titles of these missionaries' works, and their accounts of "Women of the Arabs" (Jessup, 1874) and "Women of the Orient" (Houghton, 1877) are often used as authority facts in contemporary sources about Syrian women. What has been projected in the literature as the Syrian women's needs for "emancipation" and "democracy," has often takes the tone of these writings that Syrian women's oppression is solved by the intervention of outside "Christian salvation" or sympathetic, humanistic approaches.

Recent approaches, such as Deniz Kandiyoti's, emphasize "the centrality of the state to any analysis of women in the Muslim world" (Cole, 1992: 23). Though I do not subscribe to Kandiyoti's centrality of the State, I recognize the relevance of some relationships that she

draws with reference to the Nation-State concept. She explains how the "women and development lobby exerted pressure on national governments to recognize the role of women in combating poverty, illiteracy and high birth rates" and how this recognition often triggers the need to be supported by "right-wing elements in society, including the army, to encounter the opposition of "religious groups." (Kandiyoti, 1992:253). What more confusion of Muslim women's identities is there, given that religious groups are assumed to also be "right-wing elements" and the majority of Muslim women are still 'religious' in their own way?

More contemporary approaches, such as Murphy and Gause, III (1997:58) raises the question: "Is democracy a policy goal of the United States in the Middle East?" Their answer is: "[T]he Clinton Administration officials are reticent to use the word democracy in their statements on the Muslim Middle East." Murphy and Gause, III continue: "However, they [the Clinton Administration officials] do not explicitly exclude the region from their general foreign policy goals of expanding the number of democracies and market economies throughout the world."

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

I chose PAR to compliment the Islamic framework of self-identity for self-realization. In a PAR approach the researcher acts as facilitator, and participants generate knowledge for the research as a means to self-learning--the concerned participants have a stake in generating the research problem, defining it, and looking for solutions from within their own worldview.<sup>12</sup> Narrating my work with the group consists of reporting some of my interaction within the group, analyzing and synthesizing what seems to be the underlying principles and assumptions of these Syrian women's view of democracy. The synthesis will

shed lights on the content and the process of their "democratic" thinking. It should be noted here that these accounts are my translation from the Arabic language of excerpts from discussions and events in which I participated at different times during three different scholarly visits to Syria. I have inserted several endnotes--some of which are lengthy--to some of the narratives to familiarize the reader with the particular Syrian Islamo-Arabic religious and cultural contexts. I also state some of the Islamic principles as stated in the Qur'an in order to show the fluctuation of conception and practice between the original principles and their interpretations, influenced by others' readings.

The goal of this reporting is to follow-through the construction process of the "democratic" decision-making among these Syrian women. As these women define their issues, think about solutions within the prevalent social practices vis-à-vis the Islamic principles, they are invoking some form of democratic process of participation. Note that I did not introduce the word 'democracy' in any of my discussions with the group. When I asked some members and the leader of the group--in a separate context from that of the study-circle--to write their own essays expressing their respective views of democracy, I was told that I should be able to derive these views from the group discussions. Thus, my synthesis relies largely on my participatory observation and partially on the provided literature written by some members of the group.**13**

Syrian women' agency never failed its struggle to preserve and maintain the cultural values of not going public with household and familial affairs which might have helped, unintentionally, in reinforcing the social perception of women's marginal, dependent role. Only recently we start seeing sketches of this agency appearing, but mainly in the fields of literary and popular culture.**14** In addition, legitimizing and de-legitimizing this agency was

never as intense as it has been during the last half century, given that internal feminine identifications began to emerge more explicitly as well. The internal politics, that kept Syria in political turmoil from the time of its independence from the French colonization, 1947, until the strong grip of the present governing Ba'th party, also kept Syrian women's views of democracy swinging, depending on the leading party's agenda and with whom it allies. It is only after the failing of the unity with Egypt, early 1960s, and the occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights during the 1967 war, that informally organized groups of Syrian women began to search for solutions collectively, as separate of the political "nationalistic" agenda. One of these groups is the focus of this study. Few women also participated in the already existing professional organizations and labor unions. Some had their literary salons.<sup>15</sup> Yet, only one formal women's organization, Syrian Women Union that was founded in early 70's, has been the sole formal representation of Syrian women in national and international venues. More recently, some female academicians started making their voices heard, but it is too early to assess their impact.<sup>16</sup>

How does Islam, then, play a role in contemporary issues of democracy in domestic, national, and international affairs, such as the relationship with the US? Why do we need to address US foreign policy, for example, in the context of Syrian women's grassroots movements? The history, past and present, of the region is still built on conceptions or misconceptions of the role of Islam in balancing or offsetting any social and political act, even when the issues under discussion concern personal laws (such as, marriage, divorce, inheritance) of the 15% Christian and population.<sup>17</sup> Since it is hardly possible to find a discussion of any issue in Syria or any other Middle Eastern and Muslim countries without invoking a "monolithic" representation of Islamic religio-cultural and political factors, the

Islamic conceptual and pedagogical foundations for individual's self-identity and its consequent civic decision-making are called for.

## **CONVERSING WITH THE GROUP**

In January 1995, I attended one of the weekly study-circle of the group. The informal educator and activist leader, Ms. Hana, had just made her first public presentation at the Syrian National Public Library in the Capital, Damascus, about the role of women in the Qur'an. A rare occasion for women to address such issues in such prominent public forum, made the work of this group more significant for understanding grassroots movements towards democratization. It is instructive to note here that the Syrian government had just lifted curfew on public gatherings and events, particularly study-circles in mosques. This change of policy coincided with the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the Syrian alliance with US and other Western governments in the Gulf War, the Syrian government involvement in the Middle East "Peace process," and the US President Clinton's visit in the late 1994.

I knew of Ms. Hana and her earlier activism more than thirty years ago, before I first came to the United States as a graduate student after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Her group consisted then of five to ten women who were fed-up with the different trends of "democratic," modern, secular forms of governing, particularly the ways in which Muslim women's issues were being discussed-- often as a lip service to the intellectuals and religious elite. The goal of Ms. Hana's group<sup>18</sup> is for the members to do their own study of the primary sources of Islam and to apply them in their daily life. They started by individually reading designated chapters or sections of the Qur'an, meeting once a week, and discussing what they understood from their reading. As they began to build a consensus on their

understanding of the basic principles, they implicitly generated an integrative agenda for themselves, which have eventually become the agenda projected among other similar offspring groups, with the hope to achieve Muslim-Arab women's self-education about Islam. It seemed to me when I first participated in these study-circles that the majority only rely on Ms. Hana's input. As time progressed, however, I realized that they were making their own contribution, but out of the traditional respect for mentors, they would listen attentively until the leader finished her presentation.

What is peculiar about this group is that very few of them obtained a college degree and, yet, they were able to combine historical and contextual interpretations of the primary text with the contemporary needs of Muslim women and their families to guide their action. Only few of them, however, seem to have been able to self-identify themselves as autonomous individuals irrelevant to their familial and historical situation. The continuous change in membership and the inconsistency in attendance made the work of this group looks ineffective in its early formation. Now, a few hundred members strong with a variation in the level of formal education, their main concern still is that they practice what they have learned.

In addition to their weekly study-circle, they have one day of the week devoted to visiting and helping, on a voluntary basis, in the bathing and cleaning elder women and their rooms--changing sheets and towels, and using cleaning tools bought by the group as well--who live in a government-run old people home. Another day is devoted to collecting any aid they can receive unconditionally from contributing families --money, food, clothing, etc.--and distributing what they collect via visitations to needy families. Their way of distribution is not a one-time charity-like work. Rather, it is well-studied and well-planned procedure of informal contacts, through family relatives or friends. As volunteers, they form a one-on-one

working relations with the donating family (s) and the women in the recipient families toward building these women's own agenda. The main agenda is self-learning of some skills--from managing household to educating self and others in Islam. The purpose is to benefit the society, but also to gradually change the perception about their role--in the immediate and extended family, in the neighborhood community, and in the society at large--from the limited household care-takers to agents of change.

I attended other meeting with the group during its monthly study-circle. About 25 self-selected women were in one of these meetings in 1995 at one of the member's home. Most of these women also attend the weekly study-circle in the mosque. The nature and the content of discussion, however, are different. The monthly meeting is geared more toward self-evaluation of the activities and issues facing the group, in addition to planning for special occasions (e.g., marriage, birth, death, holidays, children's activities) for the individual and the collective membership. The monthly meeting can be described as similar to an executive board meeting, with the difference that these women exchange their role of leadership informally. By the default of taking on the responsibility of benefiting others, these women neither call themselves, nor are they officially registered as chairs of committees. It is a common knowledge among the group that a particular member takes care of certain tasks, and that she can draw-on other women's resources when the latter express their availability. Sometimes, she requests their participation even when they do not volunteer for their own tutorial benefit.

In this special monthly meeting, I introduce my work with North American Muslim women, and suggested as a means of brain-storming that each member reflects on her involvement with the group--a PAR Strategy. Ms. Hana started by talking about how her

perspective on Islamic interpretation has changed from the time I knew of the group almost 30 years ago. She claimed moving from a one-sided view into an open dialogue. This claim was partially evident in the responses that I gathered from the 25 women when I went around asking each one--in the group setting--what was in her view the most pressing issue that the group had hoped to resolve. The variation in their answers was in the way each have expressed her own interpretation of a single issue. Though this was a testimony to their participation in their individual and group decision-making, the recurring issue of concern was evident of how international agenda had dominated their discussion. As the issue of "Islamic dress" surfaced, for example, and as I challenged them of its priority, their openness in critiquing their own views, elaborating on certain sources as evidence was instructive, though not very promising.

A middle-aged relatively new member stated: When I first joined this study circle about five years ago, no one told me that I should practice the wearing of 'Hijab' (veil),<sup>19</sup> because I was already practicing it. I wanted to know the basis for it, so I studied the related verses from the Quran and the Prophet's traditions. I became convinced afterward that if I accept Islam as a way of life, then wearing a modest attire is not an issue for discussion, nor is it a matter of making me more or less "backward or dependent." To the contrary, I feel that if I am to be an active member of the community, and if I want to be able to come to the mosque regularly and participate in the activities, Hijab would facilitate my activism and communications. I would not have to worry that others will see me as a woman only [ a sex object]. They will respect me for what I have to say and do, not for what I ware.

Another young member in her early twenty told me later that she could not understand why she had to justify her life style to others, especially outsiders: Even when I wear blue jeans, I am questioned about my way of dressing.

Though I do not consider the form of dress central to Muslim women's education and emancipation any more than the centrality of Western women's attending a church or a synagogue to their 'liberation' movement, the fact that the issue of Muslim girls' education in Western countries was reduced to the fight over whether or not a girl in France or a teacher in the US or Turkey should be allowed in the classroom with her head-cover made such a conversation among Syrian women in 1995 indicative of other factors, such as external identification of the Muslim women's issues. **20** It is ironic that most of these women in this particular study-circle were not aware of the above events in the Western countries, given the limited information in Syrian media, but the issue of the dress kept surfacing. I think this surfacing resulted mainly from an earlier incident in Syria in which some political elite's group. Being discontent with the mushrooming of women's "religious groups" and their adaptation of the 'Hijab' as the form of dress, some of this elite group started pulling head-covers of these women in the streets. Their excuse then was that such practice was against the revolutionary measure of the governing party strive to liberate women. In response to the "religious elite" group, the government condemned such incident, but the discussion never ceased, nor the increment of women's practice of the form of dress.

The rationale among the group for the modest dress was different from other rationale that I have heard and read about among religious and secular groups of women--be it in North America, England, France, Egypt, etc. These Syrian women were not discussing, nor concerned with the symbolic, political stigma that was attached to the "veil." **21** Rather, their

concerns were mainly of how to understand the Qur'anic principle of modest dress--whether for male or female--and to explore the different interpretations in order for each member to reach a satisfactory solution with which she feels comfortable.

What concerns me as an educator, specialized in curriculum development in Islamic and Arabic studies, is how these women in the group were interpreting the global emphasis on Muslim woman's attire--by Muslims and non-Muslims--and what implications such interpretations have for these women's own readings of primary sources. Detailed circumstances that surround discussions of texts, whether concerning issues of dress or any other issue, have significant consequences for self-understanding of Islam. Whether the issue is the nature of the decision-making process or their ability to defend their legitimate place in the mosque, what matters most is that we recognize self-realization and self-identity as indicators of democracy among this group. A "fresh" reading of Islamic texts proves the biases in prior interpretations and practices as well as the irrelevance of some the above Western concepts and approaches. The following incidents illustrate the realization of the meaning of Islam in their own individual and familial lives.

In that same year, February 1995, this group of women had started meeting in a newly established mosque after they had convinced its appointed leader to open the mosque for them two hours before the Friday congregation in order to hold their study-circle. The mosque leader had secured the approval of the board of directors (all males) to designate a special space for this group of women to hold their study-circle and to join in the Friday sermon with other women who frequent the mosque, undisturbed by male worshipers. **22** Hardly a month has passed for this study-circle arrangement, when the mosque leader announced at the end of one Friday sermon that the women could not come to the mosque any

more given that there was not enough space for the multiplying number of males who frequent the mosque during the fasting month of Ramadan.

This first incident did not seem to be of concern for most of the attending women, as if they have become used to such sudden fluctuation in decisions of mosque “authorities.” As I happened to be in attendance then, the incident was a signal of opening a new front for struggle, not only because I have been researching and arguing literary and actively similar rationales among Muslims in North America, but because this same leader had, only few weeks earlier, proudly announced that he was making space for women's participation in his mosque. It is instructive to note here that the Islamic spirit of Friday gathering and sermon is not limited to the congregational prayer, but intended mainly to gather each local community to discuss its affairs. That is why there is a mosque in every little community, even in the remote rural areas. Yet, some Muslim societies have started--in response to intruding cultural and ideological forces--preventing women from frequenting the mosques on Fridays with the rationale being fear of "unnecessary" exposure to outside ideas. At later times, the rationale became that of "unnecessary" intermix between men and women. Such practice transformed with time into a rule, and many contemporary conservative leaders, as Keddie (1992:47) suggests, are reading such rules back into the Qur'an or books of Hadith. Worst yet, this “reading back” now claims that woman's attendance of Friday gathering is not obligatory on women, classifying women with children and the mentally disable as not being responsible for such religious requirement.

The mosque leader happened to attend one of my public lectures on Muslim women's human rights at the Damascus American Cultural Center--at which about ten women from this group were in attendance--, and have refuted my argument as unfounded, giving the

example of his mosque. I was arguing then that Muslim women Islamic right to deeper knowledge of Islam was denied by not being allowed active participation in religious affairs, part of which is Friday gathering.<sup>23</sup> It is further instructive to note here--according to what was related to me after being back in the US-- that many religious leaders (predominantly males) were privately opposing the sudden openness in publicly discussing Muslim women's issues. These leaders started to criticize--at the pulpits--the "importation of 'Western' ideas of permissiveness, particularly in the name of discussing Muslim women's human rights and liberation by 'Western trained women' at the American and British cultural centers." These oppositions, ironically, were taking place at the same time when the government-supported Syrian Women Union was holding workshops and other preparatory events for their representation in the, forthcoming then, September 1995 International Women's Conference in Beijing.

What made such dualism and shifts in discussions and the giving or holding space for women in public domain significant is that such incidents were not limited to Syria. As an insider-outsider observer, <sup>24</sup> I was able to specifically track-down how certain issues are reflecting the 'hidden agenda' or the "hidden curriculum" behind this shift. The second part of the mosque incident and the rest of the conversation within the group, along with the variations in the responses to such manipulations will explain.

At the end of the collective prayer on that same Friday in February, 1995, I thought that I should intervene, suggesting to meet with the mosque leader immediately and offering my support if they choose to act. After some hesitation, Ms. Hana and another woman volunteered and the three of us went to the leader. At the end of ten minutes of arguments and counter arguments with the leader, the other woman used the argument of women's praying

at the great mosque in Mecca. I followed by saying: "you have only two choices, either you work the issue with your board of directors or we will be praying next Friday on the sidewalks around the mosque, bringing our own rugs to conduct our "obligatory Friday prayer" as the Quran and the Hadith evidence dictate. **25** As we left the mosque, Ms. Hana looked as if she was bewildered by the course of events. Two days later, Ms. Hana told me that the women will be able to retain half of the space and conduct the study circle as usual. When I asked her how she managed to reach such a solution, she told me that an opportunity developed in which she was able to talk to the leader alone. I managed to attend one of the study-circles before leaving Damascus that year, but I was discouraged by the site of the dividing curtain. I felt as if such a solution would send wrong messages about women's place, women's Islamic education, and women's emancipation. True, such messages are still prevalent among many "religiously" oriented women's groups, but other incidents that I experienced in Ms. Hana's study-circle, and that I will summarize below, suggest different results.

As I reflect back on the above incidents and other directly and indirectly related events, I realize that Ms. Hana was not bewildered by the mosque incidents. Rather, she was experienced in the existing social and political circumstances of the time that her apparent hesitation was neither because of inability to respond, nor a matter of succumbing to males' decisions. Her action was actually a result of 'wait-and-see' strategy. She has known the leader and other religious leaders along with the social and political context to the effect that she realized that the best strategy was not to be publicly too assertive too soon. This analysis was affirmed by her response to my discontent with a new leader of the same mosque, when he addressed women's role as being the instigator of temptation on one Friday in 1997. As I

questioned the group about not responding to such views--implying as if they were complacent-- Ms. Hana responded: We know that this man is fair, so we have to be patient even when, sometimes, he sound as if he is against women.

The question of women's democratization among this group, therefore, is not whether or not these women take their place in the public explicit decision-making process. Rather, by their ability to privately argue their case and their ability to understand the circumstances that surround each particular decision-making process and each issue, and to work with the circumstances to secure that their voice is being heard and their place is being preserved. Had the outcome of the mosque incidents have been different, one might argue as to whether or not such process remains a democratic one. These women response is: as long as we are able to reflect on our own strategies and are free to pursue or drop them, self-realizing our role in the process that affects our own lives and benefit other women, we feel that we maintained our Islamic, civic rights.

I learned, in 1996 that Ms. Hana and another certified member of the group had also established a nursery school on the same basic principles of learning with each other and acting together on what they have learned. Few of the certified educators in the study-circle also became teachers in Ms. Hana's school. **26** When Ms. Hana was questioned about her bias in selecting only the teachers who practice the modest form of dress by another group in a 1997 forum, she explained her school motto: I recruit my teachers on the basis of believing and practicing the following three principles; (a) no child should be afraid of speaking and communicating, especially with adults, (b) all children should be able to learn and feel loved, and (c) all of us believe and act within the premise that we are all equal and that there is no master but Allah. Since modest dress is one teaching of the Qur'an, teachers are

expected to have it reflected in their appearance and behavior like any other moral rule. She added, I do not know why I should rationalize the principles with which I would like to run my school, while others who use different motto's are not questioned about their bias. Perhaps the issue of modest dress still occupy a certain stigma in some of these women's self-identification, but these women--in the group-- are not defensive about it, nor do they present endless politicized or symbolic arguments.

During the third year of my project, in 1997, I attended more of Ms. Hana's study-circles. Perhaps, I was driven to attend more because I wanted to learn more from them. At one study-circle, Ms. Hana mentioned the 1995 mosque incidents, commenting: I would have never had the courage to go public if it was not for her, referring to me. Her statement reminded me of another event in which a prominent male Muslim scholar of Islam suggested that a Muslim woman's piety dictates that she does not argue in public, nor join the "western" women's agenda and way of liberating. Ms. Hana's statement, however, seems to refute such perception of the Muslim woman's piety even though she uses the strategies of 'wait and see' and private persuasion. One needs to know the various meanings of piety of Islam to be able to understand Ms. Hana's and her group perception and course of action. **27**

For example, at the above study-circle, after Ms. Hana finished explaining some resources on the issue of individual responsibility and the meaning of Taqwa ( piety or the balance in the human affairs) in the Qur'an, I challenged the group to come back the next session prepared to tell their individual stories as to how they were able to apply what they have learned about the subject. I was overwhelmed by the competing stories the next week, but most of all, I was taken by surprise when a sixty-year old woman, Fatima, privately at the end of the session showed me a list of her own findings of the different contexts of Taqwa.

She said: I found that my application would be better if I start by learning about the contexts in which this word, Taqwa, appears in the Qura'n, so I made this list. Fatima humbly handed me her only copy of the list. I have referenced her findings every time I am thinking about the Islamic view of equilibrium in human affairs in my research work. Though, it was a simple listing of the occurrence of the word, it was the result of her own research to find a meaning for her own action.

Whether we call it democracy or theocracy, Fatima's account was not a response to those who philosophize or politicize Islamic teachings or realities, nor to those who advocate or suppress the discussion of women's human rights. What concerns us here is that some women, like that sixty-year old Fatima in Damascus, had made their own choice, and realized their own identity and contribution as agents of change. For Fatima, this was the essence of the democratic principles in Islamic life, even when she did not have a special training and even when she did it differently, she has made her own decision as how to approach the issue.

For me as a participant action researcher, I have gained new mentor and a friend. Fatima seems to share my views of self-identity, but more importantly, I have learned from her that critical thinking can happen even when one does not have the training for it, if she chooses to do it. Once a woman self-realize her role in the group, her collective participation in the group may help her make a difference in the pedagogy of Islamic education. Certainly Fatima was that woman--she has been a part of the group for many years-- and she was able to make an effective individualized constructive contribution only when she complemented self-realization with self-identification. Such a contribution also has further educational implications for Islamic participatory dynamics and for the democratization of the women's grassroots movements that operate within the Islamic framework. As important, this

contribution will make a difference in understanding other grassroots movements toward women's spiritual, moral, intellectual, and political autonomy.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

If we try to understand the above narratives within the context of Jessup's (1874) remarks of "seventeen years of American missionary in Syria" (then, Greater Syria), we can begin to see where the confusion about the role of outside intervention in relation to internal politics concerning women has taken place. Issues of democratization, particularly among women's grassroots movements are older than these interventions. The present 'personal law' and its perceptions that were generated as a result of such interventions along with the dualism in internal politics--concerning women's involvement in the decision-making process--are good examples.

The European introduction of the concepts of women's education and "liberating" from illiteracy, ignorance, poor health and so on was seen by Jessup as the base for the introduction of "democracy" in the land "of the Arabs." Jessup writes: "The remarkable uprising of Christian women in Christian lands to a new interest in the welfare of woman in heathen and Mohammadan countries, is one of the great events of the present century." (vi) One only needs to ask the Jessups of today why is it that American and Syrian women are still struggling with issues of democracy despite the claim that Syrian women were "liberated" with the help of "their American sisters"? If we look at the American and Syrian women's continuous struggle, we would recognize the lack of understanding of Syrian and other "Mohammadan," "Arab" and "oriental" women. We would also realize that even American and other Western women's struggle is not being understood by those who claim the role of

"saviors" when these "saviors" still maintain the perception of women's role within the domestic proxy and the morally dependent .

Similarly, when Houghton writes: " my purpose has been to write a book ..., I trust the following pages will be of special value to those Christian ladies of America whose sympathies and efforts are enlisted in the work of elevating Oriental women through the power of Christian education," (5) I wonder why it is that the majority of these Oriental 'educated' women are still illiterate, particularly after the introduction of Western missionary and universal schooling 200 years ago! (Barazangi, 1997) Furthermore, why is it that a good number of the American women have deserted Christianity and religion in general in the 19th Century in order to elevate themselves to liberation, while other Oriental women were told that they could only be elevated through Christian education? Finally, why is it that some contemporary 'Western educated' Muslim women began to desert Islam when they are told by Muslim clergy that Islam is a liberating religion?

As I read some sources by Muslim male authors of the 19th and 20th centuries, emphasizing Muslim women carrying the 'torch' of chastity and morality to preserve the Muslim family and society and the world's social fabric, I become more convinced that the same problem underlies issues of women and democracy every where. These issues take different forms and shapes, but the basic assumption or perception that surround women's role and women's place in the democratic process are the same.<sup>28</sup> Women are not being realized, nor have they realized themselves as autonomous intellectual and moral citizens. The slow strategies of 'wait and see' and the 'private persuasion' that Ms. Hana uses is, perhaps, part of the problem. Furthermore, thinking of women's participation in the decision-making process as only a problem of democratization process may never lead to

understanding the problem in-depth, nor to finding subsistent, permanent solutions to recognizing women as individual humans.

Merryl Wyn Davies (1988) asks: "Is this increasing realization of interdependence [in the modern world] matched by an increase in mutual understanding?" As Muslim males themselves now cannot be economically independent nor involved in the governing process, the best strategy, as suggested by one female lawyer, is to prepare these women with some coping skills.

These problem solving skills, I assume are merely social skills to negotiate the immediate familial and community environment, but these women will never become equipped to negotiate the interaction of global and internal policies. As Piaget's social theory (DeVries, 1997) indicates, a person who is not autonomous morally (i.e., being able to make an independent sense and choice of the value of reality) cannot cope cognitively, and hence cannot cooperate fully, nor can she be constructive intellectually. In other words, non-autonomous person may not be able to become an agent of change, but will remain the object of change. Thus, be it a good-will outside intervention, affirmative action, or private persuasion, they will not make a subsistent change alone because the woman herself is still not realized as an autonomous being.

## ENDNOTES

**Nimat Hafez Barazangi**

1. I would like to thank Jill Bystydzienski, Mary Katzestein and Jotinder Sekhon for their invaluable comments and suggestions.
2. I address 'Islam' here as a worldview that encompasses the religious belief and cultural milieu. For the Islamic view of gender justice, see my "Vicegerency and Gender Justice" in Nimat Hafez Barazangi, et al. eds., 1996. *Islamic identity and the Struggle for Justice*. Gainesville, University Press of Florida. pp. 77-94. I argue that the Islamic concept of justice begins with the elimination of particularism--between males and females--in the religious responsibility, as all humans are given the trust of vicegerents of God.
3. See Barazangi, Nimat Hafez. (forthcoming 1998) "Muslim Women's Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right: Theory and Practice" in Webb, Gisela, ed. *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women's Scholarship-Activism in the United States*. Syracuse University Press.
4. See further discussion of individual and social justice in Barazangi, Nimat Hafez. (in review) "Literacy and Women's development."
5. See my "Muslim Women's Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right: Theory and Practice" in forthcoming Gisela Webb, ed. 1998. *Windows of Faith*. I argue that the Quran itself mandates access to and acquisition of "higher Islamic learning" --deeper knowledge of the primary religious sources--implying the ability to choose in order to live out the "trust" God has given to human beings--women and men.
6. It is ironic that a well-known Syrian contemporary "liberal" thinker, Sadik Al Azm, dismisses all religious thought as reactive, non-critical (*Arab Studies Quarterly*, 1997, 19, 3: 118). Had he observed closely what has been happening in these study-circles, particularly those run by women, he would have realized that some of these women are confronting what

he calls "the superstructures of thought, culture, heritage, and religion." (P 115) The difference between his vision of such confrontation and of "religious thought" is that these women are confronting these structures, beginning with the household and familial, not with the state nor the corporate. In addition, these women's concern is not merely "economic, political and social accomplishments, as the Arab liberation movement hoped to," but mainly attitudinal change about females role even within the same "reactionary religious groups."

7. For further analysis of the concept of self-identity of Muslim women and the role of international organizations and the universal human rights documents in women's 'democratization' process, see my "Muslim women's Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right: The Action Plan" in Erika Loeffler Friedel and Mahnaz Afkhami, eds. 1997. *The Politics of Participation: Muslim Women and the Beijing Platform*. Syracuse: Syracuse university Press. I argues, that without self-identity and self-realization, the work of these organizations and documents will not produce a lasting sustainable effect because women are not taking charge in defining their identities and their problems.

8. I am referring here to the myth that Leslie Peirce (*The Imperial Harem*. Oxford University Press. 1993: 6) points to as a "source of serious misunderstanding about the nature of Ottoman [Muslim] society. That is the erroneous assumption that the seclusion of women precluded their exercise of any influence beyond the physical boundaries of the harem itself. The harem is [mistakenly] seen as a woman's world--domestic, private, and parochial." Pierce, adds that the Western notions of public/private dichotomy" is challenged by [Western] feminist scholars, but its relevancy is not questioned when applied to non-Western cultures.

9. See Edward Said. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books. Also see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994. *Unthinking Eurocentricism*. London: Routledge Press). Shohat,

herself an "oriental Jew," discusses parallels between Hollywood's European and American "discovery/civilizing of native people" narratives with the depiction of indigenous Arabs in Zionist narratives embodied in Israeli films. See also Ella Shohat, "Columbus, Palestine, and Arab-Jews: Toward a Relational Approach to Community Identity" in Benita Parry, Keith Ansell-Pearson, and Judith Squires, eds. 1997. *Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

**10.** See Leila Ahmad. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale university. Pp. 134-143.

**11.** See Philip Hitti. *History of Syria*. Translated to Arabic as *Tarikh Soryya wa-Lubnan wa-Filastin* by George Haddad and Abd al-Kareem Rafiq. Beirut, Dar al-Thaqafa, 1958: 2 volumes. I have intentionally chosen the translation because the translated title (*The History of Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine*) is more expressive of the shift in the state of affairs.

**12.** For further discussion of PAR approach (s) and their incorporation in the Islamic framework see my argument above about individuals justice vis-à-vis social justice (note 4).

**13.** See, for example, Hanan Lahham. 1989. *Min Hadi Surat al-Nisa (The Guidance of Chapter "The Women" of the Qur'an)*. Damascus: Dar Al-Huda.

**14.** See, for example, authors like Thurayah al-Hafez, Ulfat Idelbi, Siham Turjuman, some of whose work (e.g., Turjuman.1994. *Daughters of Damascus*) only recently was made available to the English readers.

**15.** See Cornelia Al-Kahlid. "Women in Syria: Achievements and Obstacles." Forthcoming, *Middle East Journal*. Al-Khalid also states that all Syrian women's achievements during the last three decades accords with article (45) of the Syrian constitution (1973) which stipulates the state's support of every opportunity for women's full contribution. Though these

achievements are significant, I am still skeptical of yet another sift in Syrian women's identification by others.

**16.** See for example, the works of Bouthaina Shaaban, Najwa Qassab-Hasan, Amal 'Abd Al-Rahim, and Cornelia Al-Khalid.

**17.** The history of the present mixture of 'Islamic,' Swiss, and French laws that are called 'personal laws' or Shari'ah--a loosely used term, confusing the Quranic and Prophetic Shariah, i.e., guidance, with various interpretations--cannot be detailed here. See, for example, Aziz Al-Azmeh, ed. 1988. *Islamic Law: Social and Historical Contexts*. New York: Routledge. For women's views on Islamic law, see Maysam al-Faruqi, "Women's self-identity in the Quran and Islamic Law" in the forthcoming Gisela Webb, ed. 1998. *Windows of Faith* (note 3).

**18.** I am naming the group after Ms. Hana because she was one of the first to volunteer to hold the study-circle in her home. Also, the group at present is referred to as such, and she almost always leads the discussion.

**19.** For analysis of this wrongly used expression, 'Hijab' (veil), both among Muslims and non-Muslims, in Arabic and in English, to describe Muslim women's modest attire, see Nimat Hafez Barazangi. 1989. "Arab Muslim Identity Transmission: Parents and Youth." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vo. 11, no. 2&3, Spring/Summer, 1989: 65-82.

**20.** See, for example, Michel Machado. "Muslims in France: Jacobinism Confronts Islamism" in Tamara Sonn, ed. 1996. *Islam and the Question of Minorities*. Atlanta: Scholars Press. Machado states that "the mounting hostility between Jacobinism and Islamism reached a crescendo in 1989 over the issue of veiling." pp. 66.

- 21.** See for example, “A Veiled revolution” (videorecording, produced by Elizabeth Fernea and directed by Marilyn Gaunt, New York, NY: Icaus Films, 1982).
- 22.** The traditional practice has been that males and females, with the exception of immediate family members in the privacy of their home, should pray in separate groups.
- 23.** See further discussion of this issue in my two articles on Muslim Women's Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right, *passim*.
- 24.** My use of the “insider-outsider” expression here has a dual purpose. The first, is in reference to the practice of “women teaching women and benefiting them” as Chamberlain (1994) stated above. The second, is in reference to being able to gain confidence of the group as “one who understand their cultural and religious intricacies,” (the insider) but at the same time I am assumed to help bringing the “outsider’s” views to bare on their need of critique and self-evaluation.
- 25.** I happened to have just finished an extensive research work on the subject of whether or not women were obliged to attend the congregational Friday prayer like men. The evidence clearly indicates that the Qur'anic and the Prophetic tradition affirm that there is no particularism in the religious rights and responsibilities of males vis-à-vis females. Yet, as explained earlier, certain practices became the principles, instead (see my 1996, “Vicegerancy and gender Justice.”
- 26.** I visited the school during my 1997 trip to Syria, and all I could say about it here is that I would like to go back and learn more from Ms. Hana, who has a high school diploma only, and from her colleagues.
- 27.** See Nimat Hafez Barazangi's analysis of piety (Taqwa) in Muslim Women's Higher Islamic

**28.** See Leila Ahmad for further analysis of these domains, *passim*. Also See, for example, Khaliyah Mohammad Salleh. The Role of Men and Women in Society. *Islamic Horizons*, January/February, 1997:57.

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