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**□ MUSLIM WOMEN'S ISLAMIC HIGHER LEARNING  
AS A HUMAN RIGHT: THE ACTION PLAN <sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

How do we expect the Muslim woman, collectively and individually, to identify with Islam as revered teachings and to act within its parameters, and to accommodate new human knowledge, be it that of a local *Mufti's* (clergy) injunction or a human rights advocate's recommendation, while neither Muslim societies nor human rights advocates recognize her self-identity as an autonomous spiritual and intellectual being? Accessing Islamic higher learning (deeper knowledge of the Islamic primary sources, the Quran and the authentic *Hadith* [prophetic tradition]), is argued to be the means by which the Muslim woman self-identity is recognized as a trustee. Relying solely on others' interpretations to guide her spiritual and intellectual needs is by itself an evidence that the Muslim woman's right to understand, to consciously choose, and to actively act on her choice of Islam is being compromised. Muslim Woman's deeper knowledge of the Islamic primary sources is significant to defining her relationship to God and to others.

Muslim woman's understanding of "human rights" within the Islamic worldview, based on pedagogical reading (the art of learning and teaching) of the Quran is

significant. I derive the rationale behind the demand for woman's educational rights from the Islamic worldview. The methodologies of the discipline of education and the strategies to implement the platform for action--that define the parameters for the Muslim woman's human rights--are grounded in that worldview. Examining her role as a human entity in the Quran does not merely concern the Muslim woman's "free choice;" it concerns her ability to maintain the pedagogical dynamics of Islam to effect a sustainable change in history. Self-realization of Muslim woman can only effect a sustainable change in history when that self-realization unfolds the meaning of trusteeship. The Quranic intention of trusteeship or vicegerency (*AL-khilafah*) (2:30) eliminates the replacement of the individual trusteeship by proxy.

The intent of this essay is to make a pedagogical interpretation of the word and the script of the sacred, analyzing empirical data concerning Syrian Muslim women's perception of Islam regardless of their educational level. Such an interpretation is to be a meaningful exercise to women living in the post-modern era and to produce an action plan for the Muslim woman to regain her identification with Islam. One of the Quranic intentions in entrusting human beings with individual rights and responsibilities toward themselves, each other, and the universe is to bring a balance between the sexes. The interpretations of these rights and responsibilities, therefore, need to stem from efforts to exact the balance between polarized perspectives that have dominated, for instance, the fields of Muslim women's studies and of human rights activism.

The strategic implications of this chapter lie in : (1) presenting a pedagogical paradigm to rethink and to act within the balanced perspective of Islam and its primary source, the Quran, away from the many layers of "taqlids" (following precedence) and

from Western rationalization of Islam, (2) facilitating for Muslim women the strategies to realize their identity and to re-learn Islam in its clear, transforming meanings, and (3) interpreting human-rights activists' concerns within the Quranic concerns for a just human society, where justice means balance and fair play in the order of things, and a sustainable change of women's role.

## **Introduction**

The topic of Islamic higher learning as a human right was instigated by my work with North American Muslim women (Barazangi, forthcoming). It is both rewarding and humbling to know that as a Muslim woman I am able to build bridges between two apparently "clashing cultures" that I have equally experienced, the Syrian and the North American. Yet, I strongly believe that I was only able to do so because I have changed the paradigm of understanding my identification with Islam, and not merely through my higher secular education. Only when I realized my identification with Islam was I able to conceptually accommodate and socially integrate the two cultures. As I speak in the voice of a middle-aged Muslim woman, who for at least three decades has been observing and searching for bridges to cross the dichotomy between the ideals and realities of Muslim women's education on the one hand, and the polarized views of Muslim women's identity, on the other, I was only able to reflect and to maintain the pedagogical dynamics of Islam when I consciously adapted both my thought and action to the Quranic paradigm of seeing Islam in its simplest, and yet most direct form. I therefore expanded my long-term activist scholarship with North American Muslim women into Muslim women's education in general, and the situation among Syrian women, in particular, to understand

the educational practices among Muslim women within the context of the historical interaction between the Western secular and missionary and the contemporary Muslim dogmatic systems of education. This understanding may shed light on the process that I believe was responsible for the Muslim woman's inability to reflect on, and be conscious of, her belief and action and, hence, may lead to solutions. My earlier findings suggest a more acute problem than mere access to educational institutions--secular or religious, basic or higher. Thus, deeper knowledge of the sacred may pave the road to reversing the historical process, or at least changing the paradigm of Islamic and of Muslim women's studies, and of the Muslim woman's role.

One of the primary goals of the Islamic revelation is justice ('Adl) as the basis of human interaction. Justice is established by recognizing the individual's conscious, informed choice to reject or realize the divine will as represented in the words of the Quran and to make it the basis of a creative action. According to the Quran (2:30), God has entrusted (gave Al-Khilafah/ vicgerency/ trusteeship to) all humans with the divine will (Shari`ah/ moral guidelines). This step was necessitated by a higher order of moral action: freedom to fulfill or not to fulfill the will of Allah (The God). Moral will is not moral unless it is freely willed and completed by a free, informed agent. And justice in Islam is based on this ethical moment of choice that encompasses the whole of the human thought and actions. The belief in One God, al-Khilafah, and justice must be realized in action and change of perception. (Barazangi, 1996: 77-78) But before this can happen, the listener to or reader of the Quran must avoid preconceptions and see "in Islam the unfolding of something unique, which has to be understood in its own terms." (P.J. Stewart, 1994: ix)

If the present stance of human rights advocacy is to realize the woman's "active participation in all spheres of public and private life" (The UN Covenant, 1996:7), then human rights are established by recognizing that the Muslim woman--regardless of how she is defined or defines herself (Lazreg, 1994:2)--can actually participate only within a particular ideological context of her choice. For her, the unique authority of the Quran, the position of the prophet as the greatest man, and the strength of the Muslim family (Stewart, 1994: xiii) constitute the enduring frame for the constancy and flexibility of Islam over time.

Two prerequisites, therefore, are needed to fulfill the human rights declaration, represented in the Beijing platform for action, within the Islamic conception of justice: First, that the Muslim woman's self-identity be acknowledged by both Muslims and non-Muslims before we can expect her to be an agent of change instead of a receiver of change. Second, that the Muslim woman participates in interpreting her own choice before we claim that a free choice of identification with Islam is actualized. In essence, to fulfill the purpose of human existence as the trustee which Muslims see as a Quranic mandate (Sura 'chapter' 2:30), a Muslim woman should at least be acquainted with the Islamic system and its methodologies (Al-Manhaj/Al-Shari`ah) (Barazangi, 1996:91-92) before she can turn the article of faith into action. This acquaintance is not to be limited to those who are literate, nor to those who read Arabic or to those who acquire higher degrees in secular or religious institutions in the Western sense of literacy and higher education. To the contrary, understanding Islamic guidance and the Islamic worldview, relying mainly on the transmitted oral tradition that varies in its language of communication, is as simple as the ability to recite and know the meaning of the article

of faith stripped of the many layers of translations and meanings that might be class-, ethnic-, or knowledge-biased. This does not imply to be cut-off from previous knowledge and tradition, but rather to keep that knowledge and tradition in their right place as secondary sources. Nor does it imply a denial of the centrality of Arabic to the believing Muslim spiritual immersion in Islam because Arabic is the only language of prayer, even when the praying individual does not understand the Arabic lexicon. The language of the scripture becomes important not only as a tool of expression but as a means of uniting the individual with God, once the basic message of the scripture was communicated in the individual's own language.

To move the Beijing platform from a plan into strategies of action for Muslim women, each prospective participant needs to understand the platform's purpose and ramifications within the context of her chosen identity before we can claim a "people-centered sustainable development" (UN.Covenant, 1996:7) that will alleviate the present human conditions of injustice. Here is where I argue that full access to Islamic higher learning, that is, deeper knowledge of the Islamic primary sources beyond the ritual religious acts, is the basis for the Muslim woman to effect a change in history. Trying to approach Muslim women's human rights from this pedagogical approach may help clarify some of the structures underlying life and thought in Islam, without which no Muslim woman, or man can change yet remain identified with Islam. The fact that many Muslim women rely solely on others' interpretations of the scriptures and the word to guide their basic spiritual, intellectual, and physical needs is by itself evidence that the Muslim woman's right to understand, to consciously choose, and to actively act on her choice of identifying with Islam is being compromised. Full access means that she takes

part in the interpretation of Islamic teachings as well as the platform for action to maintain the dynamics of Islam, rather than being limited to maintaining the human reproduction, the Muslim family structure, or the individual human rights as suggested by others. Human rights and Islamic identity are not given, but are gained by the individual's conscious efforts towards self-realization.

For a woman to realize herself as a Muslim, she first has to understand that her basic human right is to reject or accept Islam in its fundamental combination of faith and action. To consciously choose to identify with Islam means to realize the relationship between faith and action, the standard whereby action is to be judged lies outside of human, in the divine will. For a Muslim, the centrality of the Oneness of God and humanity means that Allah is perceived as the core of all values and the source of knowledge. To know the divine will, human beings are given two things: revelation--a direct disclosure of what God wants them to realize on earth (the law of nature, the system); and rational ability (sense, reason, initiation) necessary to discover the divine will unaided. For God's will is imbedded not only in causal nature, but also in human feelings and relations. Humans must exercise moral sense to discover God's will. A human being begins his or her life with *Fitra* (natural endowment) (Quran, 30:30). Individual destiny is exactly what each person makes of it. If one relates *Fitra* to the most frequently recited verses in the Quran (1:1-2; "In the name of god, Most Gracious, Most merciful; thanks be to Allah, the Guardian of the World"), the method of objectifying the Quranic principles becomes clear to the individual without the need of others' interpretations. (Barazangi, 1996:78) Such a strategy can be applied to any group of women irrespective of their level of education and regardless of any social

factor that could bias their access to the meanings in the text. This strategy was instrumental among early Muslim women who realized that by accepting the Oneness of God they were able to question the social constraints that surrounded them, including some of the Prophet Muhammad's earlier injunctions. This is evidenced in Surat (Quranic chapter) Al-Mujadalah (58:1) and in Asma bint Yazid's and Hind Bint `Utbah's questioning the Prophet on the comparative roles and rewards of men and women at the time when these early women were giving their own vote (bay`ah) to the Prophet and acceptance of Islam. (Ibn S`ad, 1904) These early women were not taught critical thinking by any one. It was their conscious choice to relate to the meaning of the Oneness of God as the core of values that made them critical even of the Prophet's interpretation of the verse about women's voting (Quran, 60:10-12).

My findings among both North American (Barazangi, forthcoming) and Syrian women and their families are a proof of this point. These findings indicate that a higher level of formal, secular or religious education does not correlate with Islamic higher learning as I explained above. It, instead correlates with a wider gap between male's and female's understanding of Islam. The males tend to see Islam as something that gives them superior power and knowledge over others despite their definition of Islam as 'submission to the will of God,' while the females see Islam as a protective power by being totally submissive to the will of God as interpreted mainly by the males. In addition, higher education (both religious and secular) has not changed the problematic attitude about the female role in Muslim societies. The Muslim woman is still viewed, and views herself, as a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a wife, but rarely as having an autonomous trusteeship in line with the Quranic intention of Al-khilafah (2:30).



In the Islamic worldview, deciphering the signs, or *ayat* of the Quran is, as Schimmel (1994:114) and Rahman (1980:1) assert, something that is endowed in human existence: "And we should show them our signs in the horizons and in themselves" (41:53). What prevented women from deciphering the Quran in the last few centuries is, in my view, the introduction of the perception that the act of deciphering of the sacred requires special preparation and is limited only to the elite males. For example, when I was trying to derive the meaning of 'taqwa' (consciousness of Allah) from my interviewees both in North America and Syria, I asked them to tell me how they could be both pious to God--'piety' is the general translation of 'taqwa'--and to other humans at the same time. A 21 year-old female college student said: "As women, our first role is to attend to the family, and hence our piety to God is only possible when we pray and fast, while our piety to others is shown by accepting and fulfilling our role." Clearly, she had accepted a view of piety that showed a heavy male bias, and resulted in gendered meaning of the term. This biased meaning, it seems, has led to the injustice committed against women when they were denied the direct role of the trusteeship, al-khalifah, and the ability to play their own moral role. 'Taqwa' in Islam is the only distinction between individuals (Quran, 49:13). It is this criterion, set by God, that the individual is judged by when he or she strive to maintain an equilibrium of the moral limits of God and the ethical limits of the individual. The ability to play one's own moral role and to be freely willing to strive for the equilibrium are what make the ability to accept or reject the trusteeship meaningful.

Ever since that interview, I realized that approaching Muslim women's emancipation from an educational and developmental stand-point needs another

dimension, namely, perceptual and attitudinal change. The implications of the above statement are more far-reaching than a mere mistranslation of the Arabic word 'taqwa.' They imply that (1) this woman assumes that one can only be pious or conscious of God's presence when she performs the religious rituals, while Islam intends the conscious realization that "the standard whereby [human] action is to be judged, lies outside of [human]" (Rahman, 1980:29); (2) to be pious is to be silent, while Islam affirms that to be silent when injustice is taking place means to be impious (Quran, 5:9); and (3) to be silent is a woman's sign of consent to a marriage or any other matter that a male in her household may insist on, while Islam explicitly affirms that a marriage contract (orally, or by written signature) is a condition for the consummation of the marriage (Quran, 4:24). Such a realization makes "conscience" as central to Islamic identity as love is to Christian identity when one speaks of the human response to the ultimate reality, the merciful justice.

Educational, historical, anthropological and sociological studies of Muslim women rarely show interest in the spiritual and intellectual autonomous development that has more far-reaching meaning in Muslim women's struggles for justice than mere "equality," such as, e.g., equality in education. Even recent studies in human rights and their implementation among Muslim women have little to do with the women's own realization of their role in understanding the Islamic belief and social system. Before introducing her to other concepts outside the sphere of her beliefs, such a realization is critical to effecting real and participatory change. Without realizing that the paradigmatic sphere of her own perception of her own role is in contradiction with the

system that she believes as 'Islam,' a Muslim woman's changing of her role by another outside paradigm will only bring a temporary solution.

### **The Content of Islamic Higher Learning**

The Quran, as Rahman (1980:1) suggests, is a document that is squarely aimed at the human being: Originally it was intended as a "Guidance for humankind" (as in '*hudan li'l-nas*' [2:185] and numerous equivalents elsewhere). The issue in Islamic higher learning, therefore, is not access to secular or religious higher education, but of allowing the Quran to speak for itself to the individual to be a person's guide. Schimmel (1994:114) asserts that by listening to the primordial sounds, one understands why sound could be regarded as creative power. This deep significance in the recitation of the divine word and of its meanings, even if the listener does not know Arabic (Hiskett, 1995:37), has become virtually unavailable to Muslim women in the last few centuries because women were largely deprived of attending and participating in such activities. This deprivation was the result of the many layers of interpretation which had accumulated to the point where some contemporary extreme Muslim groups consider women's voice to be a public *'Awra*, lack of chastity.

The pedagogical question now before us is: "How can we facilitate for the Muslim woman the means to reconstruct her identification with Islam by accessing deeper Islamic knowledge that allows her to actively recite and listen to the Quran and to translate the Islamic religious and cultural concepts into action?"

Muslim women have largely been deprived of the opportunity to have direct access to the Quran and to reflect on it. Being viewed as a dependent of men, the Muslim woman's experience of God became a distant belief mediated through her male household, an Imam, or saint once Islam took on an institutional structure of faith. The first strategy then is to facilitate her direct access to what the Quran has to say (50:33, 37) in order to let the belief in God's existence as a rational belief become clearer in her mind and in her heart. Without such direct access, the proxy structure will remain standing in the way of her trusteeship, al-khilafah.

A Muslim woman at present may believe in Islam, in God, in the Prophet Muhammad, and in the Quran, but deep inside likely will be troubled by the conflict between her awareness of and belief in the unseen (2:3) and her inability to directly experience God as the guidance, the Merciful. The "functional existence of God" that Fazlur Rahman (1980:1) asserts calls for the individual herself to reflect on the meaning of 'Allah' in her own life in order to be at home with the concept of God and the centrality of God in her own existence.

The belief in the Prophet Muhammad is troubled by the fact that he is a man. The cognitive dissonance that a Muslim woman experiences trying to accept the prophethood of Muhammad and his manhood may be the result of her inability to separate Muhammad the Prophet from Muhammad the man. Though the confusion seems to exist in the minds of most contemporary Muslims because of the idealization of the prophet over the centuries, it is a more acute problem for women because their suppressed Muslim identity was due to the claim of male superiority and guardianship. Idealization prevents living one's trusteeship fully.

The Quran, was in effect marginalized by the many layers of interpretations and by being recited only during certain rituals. It lost its aim of being God's guidance of human behavior through direct contact (see Ibn Sad's, 1904, account of the early Muslim women. He devoted an entire volume of his *Al-Tabaqat* to women). As this aim receded in importance behind rituals, woman's identification with Islam became particularly ritualistic, atomized, confusing, and ineffective. In addition, the interaction between European missionary systems of knowledge, and the view of some Muslim philosophers resulted in "preaching orthodox religion to the masses and a kind of rationalist, natural law deism to the elite" (Keddie, 1995:26). This historic change in teaching the Quran affected women's Islamic higher learning negatively. Such learning deteriorated further since the introduction of universal schooling, with separate curricula for males and females (Barazangi, 1995:406-407): home economics and child care were the core for females in the 'Third world' even beyond the 1960's (Sims, 1991:226). Islamic education, referred to in the Quran (3:110) as the process of shaping character within the Islamic worldview. Based on the Quranic dictum, "Read in the name of the Creator... who taught [human] by the pen" (96:1-4), which means that to read is to learn and to act as guided by the Book, Islamic education evolved from this kind of comprehensive training in the first Islamic community in Medina (c. 623) to a course of study on religion or its inculcation in social mores.

After the introduction of secular and missionary educational systems in the Muslim world, women's education suffered more because women were largely prevented from participating in either of the educational systems because Muslims, largely men,

feared cultural hegemony. Later on, the curriculum in the few girls' schools was limited to memorization of some verses and *fiqh* (jurisprudence rules) of purity and prayer, and home economics. While for males, it was the study of *usul al Fiqh* (the foundations of jurisprudence), the art of recitation, and other Quranic and related sciences.<sup>3</sup>

Islam as a belief system and a worldview permeates individuals' thoughts and action. Higher learning in Islam is this direct, deep contact with Islam's basic principles, primarily in its oral form and, consequently, in interactions of the sacred word and text with daily life. A Muslim woman who, for example, recites the verses "in the name of Allah, Guardian of the world, the Merciful, the Magnificent" (Quran, 1:1-2) tens of times in daily prayers without relating to their significance as defining the human relationship to God and to others, may not be able to realize herself as a Muslim. This phenomenon, it seems, is one of the main reasons that Muslims in the last three centuries, mainly in gender relations, have been missing the Quranic reminder of three main points of these verses: (1) that everything except God is contingent upon God, (2) that God's might is essentially a mercy, and (3) that both these aspects entail a proper relationship between God and humans and consequently also a proper relationship between humans (Rahman, 1980:2-3). I argue that because women were prevented from direct involvement in Quranic studies, beginning with the art of listening and recitation and ending with the science of interpretation, they in effect are not practicing Islam as a pedagogical system of the trusteeship. As a result, women do not realize themselves nor are they being realized as Muslims in the full meaning of the word.

The introduction of universal schooling to Muslim societies could not change the attitudes about women's education nor about women's Islamic higher learning. Western

feminists, like the rest of Western societies in general, may have partially benefited from the secular universal education because of the already “sharpened minds” resulting from medieval Christian theology. (Rahman, 1982:15) Yet, even when contemporary Western feminists have taken the interpretation of the scriptures in their hands, they could not change the widely accepted Christian concept that Eve is created of Adam’s rib nor the perception of female morality, evidenced in the “New religious right” backlash. It took Western feminism, which early on had rejected Judeo-Christian religious and cultural concepts, less than twenty-five years to realize that it was not religious concepts as such that were at fault but rather their Androcentric interpretations. Now, even when Western feminists discuss these spiritual and religious factors from within their own faith and with the new tools and creativity, with very few exceptions such as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1990), they may not be able to contribute to the religious debate because, in Rahman’s words, secularism has destroyed the sanctity and universality (transcendence) of all moral values. Any reconstruction of these universal values within the secular framework will demand a grounding in a particular perspective and, consequently, relativism will continue to haunt any set of human rights standards no matter how just it may be. Muslim women, on the other hand, may still benefit from the prevalent acceptance of Quranic moral values as the standards (no matter how ill-practiced). These standards may help Muslim women to differentiate between communicating the worldview of Islam, on the one hand, and interpretation the specifics of this worldview, the Quran within its own terms, on the other, without trapping the latter in secularism. It is the marginalization of women’s “religious” higher learning that Western feminists have ignored early-on in their own movement, and that is still largely unrecognized as

fundamental to social change when they outreach to women in societies where religiomoral worldviews prevail.

For example, in Western societies, secular, universal schooling system may have helped Western feminists to overcome classism in accessing knowledge, but they could not change the conception of women as derivatives. Universal schooling, on the other hand, did not help Muslim women to overcome any biased social construct. That is why contemporary female graduates of Shari'ah schools, such as Al-Azhar--the oldest Islamic university in the world--are not members of Muslim councils (*Majalis Al-Shura*) and other similar religious bodies, as are their Muslim male and Western female counterparts. □ Also that is why, after 200 years of secular education and about 50 years of UNESCO's war on illiteracy, Muslim women still could not change the misconception surrounding their social role as did their counterparts in contemporary Western societies who introduced the systems of universal schooling and modern feminism? Had Western feminism been equipped to discuss these factors as part of the general paradigm of Islamic studies, of Muslim women's studies, and of area studies, we may have a less polarized views and a paradigm of the study of Islam and of Muslim women different from the present static, dogmatic Muslim and the atomized, secular-based Western paradigms.

Without placing the Beijing platform for action within the framework of women's Islamic higher learning, I argue that we may be able to translate some of its articles into realistic gains for some Muslim women, but we may not be able to objectify the Islamic concepts as intended in the Quran away from their social and narrow ritualistic meanings, nor enact the sustainable and effective participation that the platform recommendations



suggest. Formal education and universal, secular schooling alone will not help bring about a profound change in the self-understanding of women. The recent reports on Syrian females' gains in third level education attest to my argument. For example, the UN *World's Women 1995* reports that the percentage of Syrian females per 100 males enrolled in third level education was 68 in 1990. The *Syrian Arab Republic National Report to the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995* also indicates that female enrollment in Syrian universities in 1980 was (26.12%), increasing to (39.08%) by 1993. Also, female university graduates in 1980 was (27.33%), rising to (35.97%) by 1993. (National Report. Damascus, 1995:15) Though the statistics indicates a significant increase, when I probed deeper into the actual impact of these and other gains, my findings, confirmed by other studies conducted by Syrian women ( Abd Al-Rahim, 1996; Sha'ban, 1995; Al-Hussaini, 1995; and Lahham, 1995), suggest that the same hypocritical attitude towards women's liberation still exists at the individual, religious and political levels, locally, nationally and internationally: woman's first role is being a wife and a mother. This attitude becomes more acute when the Syrian government, like other governments that claim secular administration, gives male graduates of Shari`ah schools and other religious figures prominent public status to preach a religious rhetoric against women's public participation under the disguise of protecting the social fabric, and at the same time feminizing the teaching profession, claiming gender sensibility. Arnot (1993) argues that feminizing the teaching profession reinforces old gender attitudes. Meanwhile, none of the female graduates of the religious schools fill any of the public preaching positions nor serve in the Muslim councils that produce different *fatwas* (

injunctions) against women's right to self-realization. This situation became worse when some of the extremist women's religious groups were allowed to develop their own study groups, preaching different and segregated roles. The Syrian government did not allow large gatherings for many years until the early 1990s and still maintains a one-party political system. Though some may argue that these extremists groups show increasing women's participation, their gender politics in the gender market that is endangering the real gains in women's human rights issues. The issue is not merely having women's participate in interpreting the divine will, rather, the issue is in whose interest is the interpretation, and by what methodology, paradigm, and framework.

What complicates the matter further, in Syria and in other Muslim communities, including in North America, is that Muslim and non-Muslim polarized groups continue to speak for Muslim women, reinforcing the misconception that Muslim woman cannot "self-identify" her needs and course of action. As these groups speak at each other, the majority of Muslim women are caught in-between, with no real solution on hand. Only a few of the universally-schooled women, so far, are able to speak in their own voice, but fewer yet realize the two prerequisites of identifying with Islam: self-identity through active participation in the interpretation process.

The Quranic Chapter '~Al-Nisa' (The Women)" opens with the verse: "Oh, humankind (*al-Naas*), be conscious of (*ittaqu*) Allah (your guardian) who created you of a single soul '*nafs wahidah*' and created of it her mate '*zawjaha*'."

If we accept this verse as *apropos* to understanding the Islamic stance on women, a Muslim woman who identifies with Islam is an essential part of the interpretation process of Islam. That is because human nature is distinguished by its soul '*nafs*'

(Rahman, 1980:17): In Islam, there is no separation between mental and physical being, and soul implies the totality of the person and her disposition, or the close relation between human heart and mind) which realizes the existence of God through its relation with itself and nature. The compelling richness of these meanings in the Quran, as Abd Al-Rahman (1987:34) wrote, is what allowed generations of Muslims to find yet new interpretations. Yet, once a non-Quranic framework of interpretation was introduced and/or once a particular interpretation was enforced as the ultimate one, such as Al-Ghazali's acceptance of the Greek, Christian, and Hindu concept of separating human nature into the mental and the physical (Rahman, 1980, 17), both the richness, and the ability of Muslim individuals to realize their direct relation to these meanings were lost (Abd Al-Rahman, 1968: Vol. 1:18). We see, for example, how the concept of Adam and Eve from the Judeo-Christian tradition has influenced the prevailing translations of the above Quranic verse (4:1). The feminine marking of the word 'nafs' was changed to imply both sexes and translated into 'person' (Ali, 1946). The feminine pronoun attached to '*zawjaha* (her mate)' was changed to a masculine and translated 'his mate,' and eventually the order of creation was reversed to imply that Eve was created of Adam's rib (Smith and Haddad, 1982), despite the fact that the concept of Eve does not exist in the Quran.

The question, therefore, is how is it possible for a Muslim society to provide the individual identity when almost half of the society, the women, is paralyzed or not actively participating in realizing the Quranic meaning and guidance? As Islam is affirmed to be both a belief and a social structure that is not based on submission but on

action (Garaudy, 1983:179), being a Muslim requires active participation and not mere acceptance of teachings.

By the same measure, how can we assume that the Muslim woman has regained her human rights without her direct involvement in the interpretation and implementation of the platform for action. History indicates that she was stripped off these rights many times under the disguise of Muslim laws, of state sovereignty, or of the many standards in interpreting human rights. The strategy, therefore, is that she herself generates the meaning within the framework of self-identity with Islam while maintaining the core concepts of Islam, and that we recognize that meaning as the operating principle for action.

### **The Locus of Islamic Higher Learning**

By understanding the meaning of '*taqwa*' (being conscious of Allah) when identifying with Islam, Muslim women can counter the claims of males to being women's spiritual and intellectual guardians and the claim of superiority of certain class, race, national or cultural views. Mutual guardianship and equality in the decision-making process, particularly in religious and cultural matters, are more in harmony with the concept of developing individual autonomy and self-identity than is merely pushing for equality in the distribution of resources, for example.

The strategy here is to ask Muslim societies to explain the claim of no-separation of religious and political domains that has prevented them from ramifying or validating the application of the platform, in light of the fact that at least one-half of their population, the female half, is expected to practice the religion by proxy instead of

consciously exacting the divine will by choice. In addition, how can these societies explain this claim when some of them do not allow women to vote despite the fact that voting (*bay`ah*) is one of the fundamentals in rejecting or accepting Islam and the human trusteeship? Furthermore, how can they claim no separation when all but few of these societies exclude women from their Islamic councils while women are members of parliament in some of these societies? (UN. From Nairobi to Beijing, 1995: 211). We, the human rights advocates, also need to ask ourselves a similar question as we try to forge special strategies for Muslim societies. How do we define Muslim societies vis-à-vis non-Muslim societies? Muslim societies and we, as part of these societies, will have three choices in answering the above questions:

**a.** Change the misleading interpretation, for instance, that men are in charge of women's moral and intellectual well-being, as is the case with the generally quoted interpretations of Quranic verses 2:228 and 4:34, and change the claim of the universality of human rights since the human rights principles do not address the specificity of what constitutes self-realization and its full meaning (Islamic higher learning vs. models of higher education).

**b.** Decline the claim that Muslim societies are acting within the Islamic Shari`ah, or

**c.** Change the Shari`ah or what is translated into English as 'Islamic law.'

Since choice "c" is neither acceptable nor possible for a Muslim woman who has chosen Islam, we are left with two choices. The simplest and the more practical for a lasting effect is choice "a."

The claim of men's moral guardianship of women mainly is based on the concepts of *Qawamah* " and *Daraja* ", i.e., responsibility towards and a degree or an edge in verses 4:34 and 2:228 respectively. In order to interpret them, we need to put them in the contexts of their *Suras* (chapters) as well as in the context of the Quranic concept of Vicegerency (*Al-Khilafah*) and the meaning of God in such verses as "in the name of Allah, Guardian of the universe, the Merciful, the Magnificent" (1: 1-2). The *Qawamah* in 4:34 only implies the domestic and financial obligation vis-à-vis the woman's biologically essential role of procreation. The variation in the *Daraja* among men and women in 2:228 only indicates an added responsibility for the male when he initiates the divorce process. Elsewhere (Barazangi, 1996:87) I have suggested that the relationship between the meanings of verses 4:34 and 2:228 and Islamic justice and human Vicegerency is summarized in verse (4:32) " Do not enviously wish for that which God proffered on some and not on others. Men and women, to each belong the works they have personally accomplished." That is, although Islam regards men and women as created for different but complementary biological and domestic functions, it does not specify these functions, nor generalize them to other intellectual and social roles. For the claim of universality of human rights, this implies that we have to accept the particularity of the Islamic conception of justice and human relationships when we extend the Beijing platform for action to Muslim women.

Nasr (1995:463) argues that the sacred law (*Shari`ah*) in Islam involves not only principles but also their application to daily life in the form of legal codifications. This argument is valid as long as we understand *Al-Shari`ah* as that which is outlined in the

Quran and explicated in the prophetic authentic tradition. The argument loses strength, however, once Shari`ah is extended to include the different juristic and contemporary interpretations as part of the sacred. As Renard (1994:32) suggests, the Quranic principles explain not only the need and priority of Islamic higher learning, for example, but the unity of Islamic philosophy despite theological and historical diversity. It is also true that the concept of absolute transcendence has profound implications for one's understanding of both divinity and human dignity. That is, each individual needs to be informed--in his or her own capacity and language "On no soul God place a burden greater than it could bear" (Quran, 2:286)-- and understand before he or she can practice Islam. Collective action, however, requires mutual consultation and consensus to reach a collective understanding. But, we have to guard such an understanding from becoming limited or replaced by the legal codifications, particularly when Muslim *`Ulama* (religious scholars) try to impose one legal code in their attempt to guard the Shari`ah from Western rationalized interpretations. That is, legal codifications are merely human interpretations in specific social and historical conditions, and do not retain the same level of sacredness as the principles or the rules of interpretations that facilitated these codes. Moreover, to accept legal codifications as absolute contradicts the central dynamic of the Quran: that it be understood in its simple pristine form and be open for interpretation at all times and places by capable females and males regardless of their ethnic, class or racial composition. Legalized codes cannot substitute for Muslim men and women's agency in the interpretation of the transcendent.

Neither, however, can a blind acceptance of Western rationalized interpretations of the transcendent as the only scientific, rational one be made into a universal principle.

For example, the varied meanings of human dignity and human development, for instance, do not retain the universality of the basic human rights principles, because they are national-specific and therefore, cannot justify claims of their universality within the human rights. In such claims we substitute the particular Western world view of the secular nation-state for a gender-specific one. Similarly, the claim that changes in the economic conditions by themselves will help women's is limited and limiting.<sup>4</sup> For the UN secretary general (From Nairobi to Beijing, 1995:1) to write the passive statement, "the world has experienced far-reaching economic, political and social changes" without qualifying it with regard to the agency behind such economic changes in the developing world is misleading. Most of these changes were imposed by the developed countries' economic policies and views of development, particularly women's development. Thus, the strategy for regaining agency for women in the developing world, Muslim women being among them, is to change the attitude that woman's agency is merely a productive one, whether in the home, the farm or in the free market. A woman's agency is recognized only when she has the opportunity to express her views and share in all decision-making processes.

### **Islamic Higher Learning in the Platform for Action**

Islamic higher learning is fulfilled only when we have facilitated the development of the Islamic view of an autonomous spiritual and intellectual individual.

My 'reading' of the Quran and the Hadith indicates that Islam established five basic principles to permeate the life of an autonomous individual who can make moral and intellectual choice in a just society:



1. The creation of male and female of a single soul (*Al Nisa'*, 'The women' 4:1).
2. The individual right and obligation to learn, *Iqra*, 'be educated in' the teaching/legislation' (*Al-Alaq/Iqra'* 'The Clot/ read' 96:1-4). `Aisha, the Prophet's wife, and major transmitter of his tradition said: "Modesty did not prevent the women of Ansar from learning".
3. The individual right and responsibility to accept or reject Islam [ *Baiy`ah*, 'voting'] (*Al-Mumtahana*, 59:12). The Prophet Muhammad dedicated a special day for women to discuss Islam with him and to vote on his message and on accepting him as a Muslim community leader.
4. The individual receiving and dispensing of inheritance and property (4:7).
5. The individual membership in the Islamic sisterhood and brotherhood with no distinction of sex, race, class, or ethnicity (*Al-Hujurat*, 49:10).

Within this Islamic perspective of social organization and of education as a means to approximate the ideals of a just society, we can specifically address the role of women and women's education for gender justice in Muslim societies. Islam's strongest argument in favor of *Tawhid* (Oneness of God) is that the believer does not have to resort to the abandonment of logic in order to maintain her faith. Furthermore, if Allah created the universe in order to be known, as the Islamic teachings assert, "it is necessary that human beings be given the capacity to recognize and understand the Truth that brought about their existence." (Cornell, 1994:66).

Similarly, the platform for action's strongest argument in favor of women human rights is the individual maintenance of freedom of choice. Thus, we, human rights advocates, cannot assume this maintenance without recognizing the specificity of self-

identification of Muslim women. Otherwise, human rights maintenance may sound as if Muslim women are asked to abandon their agency or to resort to abandoning their beliefs to be able to maintain their basic needs and human dignity. Several studies show how external intervention without women's deep knowledge of what is "Islamic," for instance, has deprived women of their agency. Badran (1995:107) suggests that such intervention could reinforce further cultural resistance and the use of women as rallying points of cultural authenticity. Thus, human rights advocates may need to change the paradigm of implementing the platform for action, and cannot assume that the implementation in Muslim societies is just another "case study" within the same philosophical and methodological framework.

Muslim women have to be reinstated as agents of their education and outline priorities themselves, beginning at home and ending at the mosque. This reinstatement can be facilitated by:

1. Changing the paradigm of Islamic studies both in Muslim and Western societies and reexamining the claimed universality of human rights declaration. Islamic simplicity dictates that each believer could and should be able to understand the teachings in order to perfect the practice of the system. The idea of ranking and restricting interpretations to certain gender, class or ethnic groups contradicts the Islamic recognition that God is the only Guide and the All-Knowing. Thus, to think of Islamic studies exclusively in terms of scholarly and theological specialties is as misleading as the claim by secular human rights advocates that religion and religious interpretation could be limiting women's freedom of choice.

2. The Mosques have to be open to girls and women; women and girls must be encouraged to frequent mosques not only for special sermons; they must be told that the belief that Friday prayer is not obligatory (*wajib*) for them is a misconception (Barazangi, 1996). Schimmel affirms that *Khutba* (Friday sermon) and Friday prayer are a duty for the community and that women could act as preachers. For this, an example is Maymuna al-Wa`iza (d 1002) in Baghdad.(1994:133).

Furthermore, we have to focus on Muslim women's agency to counter the general misconception that Muslim women are passive and totally oppressed. From within their families, Muslim women run kinship networks and neighborhood networks. They influence local politics. Singerman's story (1995) shows how powerful the Egyptian women who run such networks have become politically and economically. Eickelman and Piscatori (Singerman, 1995: xi) even suggest that the study of politics in Muslim societies can be done outside the state institution and by non-elites, and that governments accord these networks de facto autonomy . I argue that we count on women to work for better control of their lives from within their families rather than be revolting against their families and communities.

3. Membership in Islamic councils has to be open to capable Muslim women who are learned in Islam. In the past, Muslim women were narrators of Hadith, for example, that made them an important part of the *Isnad* process (ascription of an uninterrupted chain of authorities on which a tradition is based), and were involved in the interpretation of the Quran (Siddiqi, 1993:105, 116-123). It is therefore totally unjustified to bar women from Islamic councils today, especially if we keep in mind that oral instruction was, and still is to a certain extent, the rule not only in teaching of Hadith

but also in other Islamic sciences and arts, and that this applies even more so to the interpretation of Islamic philosophy. In Schimmel's view, when one keeps in mind the Sufi insistence upon oral transmission of classical texts for 'reading the white between the lines of the written text' one realizes the equal importance of such reading to the reading of the actual letters. This Sufi viewpoint also helps us understand why Shah Waliuldin of Delhi remarked that the books of sufism are elixir for the elite but poison for the normal believer.(1994:130) Such a remark, in my view, could also be used to criticize Waliuldin's approach to the education of the believers. That is, instead of preventing the normal believers from reading Sufi books, Waliuldin should have made efforts to uplift the Islamic education of these normal people from less valid and less rational readings of Islam affected by the preachers and extremist Sufis to a higher learning of Islam.

By extension, the only way to demystify Muslim women and to correct the wrong images of them as passive and helpless is by opening human rights agencies where Muslim women speak for themselves, even if their perspective differs from the normative perspective of these agencies.

4. Muslim men and women have to be coached to rethink Islam and to act within a balanced perspective of Islam and its first source, the Quran. This perspective has to put in their proper place the many layers of *taqlids* (following of precedent) and interpretations, as well as Western rationalizations of Islam. By dispelling the extremist mystics' and other elites' claims that there are hidden meanings that only a select few can know, the Quran can become comprehensible (Rahman, 1982:137) to even an illiterate person (Adhami, 1996:39). To educate the preachers, women should attend the mosque

regularly and counter preachers' unfounded claims with clear arguments. Similarly, Muslim women have to be involved in debates of the Islamic concept of justice in the face of outside influence. Such debates and encounters do not necessarily call exclusively for educating women theologians. For example, the woman who protested the second Caliph, Omar Bin al-Khattab's imposition of certain restrictions on women's frequenting the mosque was acting from her simple understanding of the core of Islamic message: trusteeship to all.

5. Muslim women have to be encouraged and given the means to educate themselves and others and to define their own identity as autonomous spiritual and intellectual beings. Such education must be facilitated by discussing alternative interpretations of themselves and their place in the community of believers.

In this enterprise, community leaders have to be involved to provide an environment for inquiry and learning, and for building consensus around each step of the platform. Community-based education that could be similar to already existing models, such as the *Kuttab*, the school-like place where boys and girls were, and in many rural areas still are, taught the Quran, and basic literary and math skills, and the *Madrasah*, the college-like place providing higher Islamic education for male and female students.

(Barazangi, 1995:407-408)

Human rights activists' concerns have to be interpreted within the Quranic understanding of a just human society, where justice means balance and fair play in the order of thing. Educating human rights advocates in the Islamic concept of justice ought to be as important as educating local and state governments in human rights.

## NOTES

1. This chapter and the research that led to its conception would not have happened without the special efforts and encouragement of my husband, Muawia Barazangi. Also his comments and suggestions as well as those of Rahel Lidda Hahn and Gisela Webb were invaluable. Erika Loeffler Friedl's editorial suggestions made this essay clearer.
2. See Barazangi, Nimat Hafez, "Muslim Women's Islamic higher learning As a Human Right: Theory and Practice," forthcoming. It should be noted here that this forthcoming work, under preparation for publication, was presented first under the title "Muslim Women's Islamic higher learning Is a Human Right " at The Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., (December 6-10, 1995). The sub-title "Theory and Practice" was added when the present work "Muslim Women's Islamic higher learning As a human rights: The Action Plan" was conceived as a sequel to the original topic. Certain concepts will overlap in the two pieces, no doubt.
3. Salnamas for Sham Province: 1870-1890 'Ottoman Sultans' Decrees for Syria Province'). No. 3 (1296-1297 A.H.), p. 150).
4. Sims' (1991) interpretation of Western models and the legacy of foreign aid in the form of home economics and women's domestication since World War II is a good example of the views that predated the UN declaration of human rights.

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