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WOMEN AND RADICALIZATION

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Countering Radicalisation through Development Assistance

In the spring of 2005 the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on the Danish Institute for International Studies to undertake a policy study on how to counter radicalisation through development assistance.

Despite growing interest in the field, very little research has yet been conducted. To expand the knowledge base, a number of subject matter experts were identified and asked to produce papers on select topics. Initially, the papers were intended to serve only as background material for the policy study. Due to considerable international interest it has been decided to publish the papers as DIIS working papers, making them available to a broader audience. All papers can be downloaded free of charge from www.diis.dk.

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The papers do not reflect the views of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs or any other government agency, nor do they constitute any official DIIS position. For more information on the policy study, please contact Michael Taarnby Jensen (mtj@diis.dk) or Louise Andersen (lan@diis.dk).

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Abstract

The paper focuses on women and radicalization within the context of Muslim societies (majority, minority, and half Muslim) societies and groups, mainly in Asia and Africa. The basic argument advanced in this paper is that Islamic feminism with its gender-egalitarian discourse and practices has a major role to play in the empowerment of Muslim women—and of men and society as a whole—and should be brought to bear in devising policy, strategy, and tools.

Introduction

This paper focuses on women and radicalization within the context of Muslim societies (majority, minority, and half Muslim) societies and groups, mainly in Asia and Africa. This is *not* to suggest a Muslim exceptionalism; to the contrary, this focused attention may serve as one among other examples of the experience of women and radicalization. The basic argument advanced in this paper is that Islamic feminism with its gender-egalitarian discourse and practices has a major role to play in the empowerment of Muslim women—and of men and society as a whole—and should be brought to bear in devising policy, strategy, and tools.

I. Mapping the terrain

CONTEXTS: TRANSNATIONAL/COUNTRY FLOWS OF GENDER PROGRESSIVE AND EXTREMIST DISCOURSES

While this paper focuses on the country or national level, it is important to recognize and analyze the ways the transnational, regional, sub-regional, and global 'exist' at the local level through a variety of flows. To effectively elaborate and apply an assessment tool for country analysis this transnational (etc.) presence at the local level needs to be taken into account. I look at the transnational dimension before discussing the country-level.

Transnational flows include the circulation of (patriarchal) extremist discourse and (gender, etc.) progressive discourse that both claim legitimacy in Islam and/or in secular nationalist causes. Women who are placed in subordinate positions within patriarchal systems are connected by gender (but by no means, *only* by gender) in transnational and country-level contexts in a variety of meaningful (but not monolithic) ways. Understanding the transnational flows of extremist and progressive discourses (their means, methods, and projects) and local points of convergence with women is salient to the issues of women and empowerment and of women and radicalization. Briefly, I mention here, before discussing more fully below, that in the case of gender-progressive discourse women have developed and are in charge of their own transnational networks and connect directly with other women at local levels. The (patriarchal) extremist transnational networks are devised and controlled by men and that they attract or

compel women to support their work at the local level. According to the available research, women do not appear to be typically part of transnational extremist networks.

Gender progressive discourses

During the decade of the '90s, and especially post-Beijing plus 10, there was a proliferation of women's transnational, regional, and sub-regional networks through which feminist information flowed. This increased circulation of feminist thought and practices was particularly noticeable among Muslim women. It included debates and information on secular feminism/s (*indigenous* to countries and societies with Muslim, etc. populations and expressed in multiple discourses including secular nationalist, religious, and humanitarian/human rights discourse) and Islamic feminism (articulated primarily in religious discourse drawing principally on Qur'anic re-interpretation).¹

The ways feminist, (mainly secular, but also Islamic, etc.) thought, strategies, and methods flow through women's feminist transnational, regional, and sub-regional networks—their meetings, conferences, publications, etc.—is captured in the work of Moghadam (who analyzes transnational feminist networks or TFNs) and Tripp who examines women's feminist networks and intellectual flows in Africa. Shaheed discusses Muslim women's feminist transnational networking practices of Muslim women focusing on the network called Women Living under Muslim Laws. This intensified networking among progressive Muslim women occurred simultaneous to leaps forward in information technology and increased access to the Internet and email by women in all corners of the globe and beyond metropolitan centers. Not only were Muslim women, along with others throughout the world, able to expand their networking practices on an unprecedented scale but they gained as well uncensored and more immediate access to global flows of information. Networking and information streams were no longer primarily controlled by states but were in the hands of civil society actors. Women, especially, were quick to take advantage of new openings.

While both secular feminist and Islamic feminist discourses circulated increasingly in the 90s, it is important to note that it was in this decade that Islamic feminism emerged constituting a revolutionary paradigm shift, as noted, grounding its arguments and practice in re-interpretations of Islamic religious sources, especially the Qur'an. Inspired by the Islamic methodology of *ijtihad* (critical investigation of religious sources) and utilizing the core tool of *tafsir* (exegesis) Islamic feminists subjected the Qur'an to fresh scrutiny around questions of women and

¹ On secular and Islamic feminisms see the Addendum.

gender. Islamic feminist discourse aimed at empowering women and producing more gender just societies first surfaced in certain countries at critical moments in political and socio-economic upheaval and transformation such as Iran, Egypt, South Africa, etc. and this new feminist discourse began at once to circulate globally, regionally, and transnationally. Badran, Esack, Mir-Hosseini, Najmabadi, and Yamani were among the earliest to draw attention to this new phenomenon emerging inside Muslim societies.

With Muslim women throughout the world now equipped in un-paralleled numbers with education, both religious and secular, to the highest levels, this incisive re-reading of Islam became possible and indeed, inevitable. Muslim women--traditionally excluded from the official and mainstream interpretive communities—began to put themselves at the center of the new epistemological work in Islam. Wadud, a pioneering woman theologian, produced the first major text of Islamic feminism called *Qur'an and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* that was published in Malaysia in 1992. It was soon translated into many languages, appeared in cyberspace and was re-published by Oxford University Press in New York in 1999. Another key text of Islamic feminism, and also with immediate wide circulation, was produced by Barlas, a political scientist, called "*Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, as the title suggests forcefully exposing the patriarchal intrusions into Islam. The work of these feminist exegetes and others have articulated the core ideas of the new Islamic feminism: The full equality of women and men in public and private spheres, and construe the public and private as a continuum, refuting the notion of public space as male and private space as female. These new Qur'anic interpreters forcefully demonstrate that Islam is gender egalitarian and gender just, and expose the patriarchal thinking and practices they crept into interpretations and practice of Islam.

Islamic feminist discourse is generated by women who have specialized in religious sciences and secular disciplines. Women identified as 'secularists' tended at first to be skeptical of Islamic feminism. "Secularist" and 'religious' women were initially wary of each other, but now the gap has closed between them both welcome Islamic feminism as a powerful transformational force in the lives of women and society.² This has important implications for bringing women in Muslim societies together across a wide spectrum together in projects to develop sound and safe societies. Muslims *own* this gender-egalitarian Islamic discourse. The word is out that gender-egalitarian feminist discourse is not the sole preserve of "the West,"

² There are problematic and often misleading categories, but generally the latter are more overtly 'religiously-identified' than the former.

nor purely the product of secular thought. By now there exists in parts of the Islamic world a whole new generation of Muslim females who have grown up exposed to new Islamically grounded gender egalitarian ideas as research by Droeber indicates.³ The full impact and potential of the continued spread of a gender-egalitarian discourse as part and parcel of Islamic thought and ethics, and not the patented property of the West, has yet to be seen. Islamic feminist discourse constitutes a revolutionary opening and presages a way forward in creating new gender just societal structures and practices. With increased exposure by Islamic feminism of the oppressive injustice/s of patriarchal thought and practices perpetrated under the guise of Islam and a new mobilization of women under the banner of Islamic gender equality and gender justice, the possibilities of backlash from ordinary conservatives and extremists need to be contemplated.⁴

Extremism

The accelerated spread of (patriarchal) extremism by Muslims was also underway in the 90s. I place “patriarchal” in parentheses to indicate that extremism is by definitional patriarchal. Discourses of extremism with an Islamic gloss circulate globally penetrating into local communities. In the (patriarchal) so-called Islamic extremist universe men are in charge; they are in control of transnational flows and operations. It appears, as already suggested, that women are characteristically brought into contact with this transnational ‘Islamic’ extremism at the country level, or near home base, where they might potentially be inducted into extremist circles through local pressures and incentives. Women are more useful to these patriarchal extremists and more accessible at local levels, as I shall discuss below.

Radicalization (in varying degrees) is produced and circulated transnationally and at country-level, in secular and/or communal contexts in conditions of injustice, political frustration, and grievances. The protracted unsolved question of Palestine and the plight of Palestinians, and post- 9/11 exacerbation and accelerated spread of Islamophobia have caused many Muslims, including secularists, to assert an Islamic identity (often also thrust upon Muslims, secularists and the more religiously-identified alike through official and un-official profiling) and to show heightened solidarity with other Muslims. This is by no means *not* to suggest that those assert

³ The just-out book of Droeber, aptly titled *Dreaming of Change: Young Middle-Class Women and Social Transformation in Jordan* demonstrates this.

⁴ Mernissi in her 70s path-breaking book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* discussed how women entering the public domain through the door of education and work threatened conservatives, and in her new edition in the 80s drew attention to the mounting forces of conservative Islamic backlash.

an Islamic identity and those who resist injustices necessarily are or become extremists (as some facile opinion would have it) but rather to point to a volatile environment in which *some* persons, especially under extreme provocation may veer into extremism. Within the context of wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, etc. and the growth of Islamophobia, there has been a transnational and spread of extremism among certain segments of Muslims. Such radicalization occurs in contexts of despair, loss of dignity, outrage against injustice, and perceived lack of other alternatives to effect timely and adequate change.

COUNTRY CONTOURS

To avoid homogenization and to assist a contextualization of specific environments within which to introduce development projects informed by Islamic feminism that might prevent or wean women away from involvement in extremist groups it appears useful to identify a grid of typologies such as:

1. Muslim majority countries, Muslim minority societies, and the few where Muslims constitute roughly half the population as in Lebanon and Nigeria, for example. (Is extremism mainly intra-communal, or inter-communal? Where does the state stand regarding religious minorities?)
2. Muslim-majority countries that identify themselves as Islamic states, for which secularists may constitute a principle threat, and as secular states, for which Islamist radicals (and sometimes even moderates) would constitute a threat. In these diverse environments the *language* of feminism would be salient.
3. Muslim-majority countries under occupation and/ where war, civil unrest, and terrorism exists, and those countries where there or low levels or an absence of extremist violence.
4. Muslim-majority countries, or Muslim minority communities, with active Islamic and/or secular feminist movements, and/or a feminist heritage (typically part of secular nationalist and Islamic reformist histories) and countries/communities where there has been an absence of feminist discourse, debate, and activism. It is important to make a distinction between feminist movements that challenge patriarchal assumptions and practice and women's movements that do not and may even re-enforce patriarchal systems. (If there is a local precedent of feminist discourse and activism that question gender systems and practices this heritage may be drawn upon to advantage.)

Understanding some of these country specificities would help in ascertaining optimal approaches to the introduction of development initiatives and help determine whether it might

be more useful to work with the state or with civil society actors, or ways of working with both, and what kind of rhetoric to employ.

WOMEN IN PATRIARCHAL CONTEXTS, SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS

Women in Muslim majority and minority societies live in patriarchal public and patriarchal private spaces. Typically, in the public sphere there is a greater degree of gender equality than there is in the private or family sphere (precisely what Islamic feminism is trying to redress). Gender inequality in the family sphere is still held to be ordained by Islam according to radical extremists (as well as by mainstream Muslims).

Because women are positioned and treated unequally in patriarchal systems, whether glossed as secular or religious, under particular conditions and inspired by a certain awareness, as evident from past experience, this may:

1. catalyze women to assume greater agency as women in order to change their lives and the structure and practices of society, which they do from within where they stand (within their society and culture), mobilizing both indigenous secular and indigenous religious discourses.
2. cause them to acquiesce in their subordinate status and roles, while also, frustration and suffering may make them susceptible to being drawn into radicalized groups that hold out the promise of elevating their sense of dignity and personal worth along with the improvement of their social and economic conditions.

The first category of women become feminists (with or without the name) in thinking and deed through an assertion of their own, often defiant will, and/or through the encouragement and support of other women who work against the grain. The second category of women who try to play out what they have been led to believe are their ordained roles are often dissatisfied with their secondary status. These women may achieve enhanced personal worth and be drawn into more fulfilling lives through positive self-development or may be open to further exploitation.

WOMEN VULNERABLE TO RADICALIZATION

1. The largest group of women vulnerable to the blandishments of radical extremism in the form of improved economic and social conditions are the poor and un-educated or under-educated and the socially marginalized or displaced, as in the case of rural women and girls living in towns and cities.
2. Women with strong political grievances and a deeply-felt sense of injustice to their national, ethnic, and/or communal group.
3. Women who are susceptible to induction into extremism through religious pressure and argumentation (about duty, reward, etc.)
4. Women who are related or who have close ties to radicalized men.
5. Young women and women who are single, divorced, or widowed (women without men).
6. Women who have suffered the loss of family or someone close, or whose suffering from untenable political conditions pushes them over the edge.

ROLES OF WOMEN IN EXTREMIST GROUPS

Much more knowledge of women in extremist groups than is readily available is still needed. However, if we extrapolate from earlier historical examples of women involved in militancy during national independence and liberation struggles, it would appear today, as before, that women perform a range of functions. These include operating as recruiters to extend the base of support, as providers of basic services, and actors carrying out militant operations.

There is some research, and media coverage, on women at one end of the spectrum--those who carry out militant operations enabling us to know something about who these women are and about their recruitment. Women have been brought into extremist operations, ie. recruited as suicide bombers, at moments of extreme escalation in violent struggle and usually as a last resort. Women have been part of violent wings of secular and religious militant groups (often these distinctions are blurred no matter the self-announced group identity). The most high-profile women involved in terrorist acts are the Palestinian suicide bombers whom Brunner notes have linked and claimed by secular and to religious groups. Women have also participated in the Chechnya militant resistance and Kurdish PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan) militancy, etc. We learn from such examples that that under extreme conditions or at extreme moment women will be brought on board to commit terrorist acts in defense of a national/communal cause. These women will be carefully picked and according to evidence may not necessarily fit anticipated vulnerable categories. In countries where there are wide-

spread militant movements, or the potential for extremists to gain a foothold, that concern should be focused on the question of the possibility of women being drawn into them and how such women might be attracted towards more positive pursuits. Since, along with offering material benefits and enhanced self-esteem women, (patriarchal) extremist groups often use religious cum cultural arguments to persuade women to join their ranks, the power of Islamic feminist thought (ie. legitimizing other roles, responsibilities, and possibilities) linked with concrete development initiatives might offer persuasive alternatives.

II. Approaches and support

I have suggested in the endeavor of linking development assistance with efforts to counter support for extremism that development policy-makers and program designers draw upon the ideas and practices of Islamic feminism. Islamic feminist discourse was initially elaborated in various parts of the Muslim world in the 1990s, in such countries as: 1) the secular state of South Africa within the Muslim minority community; 2) The Islamic Republic of Iran; and 3) the Muslim-majority state of Egypt which calls itself a secular state where the principle source of law is the Islamic shariah. These examples illustrate the variety of local contexts and state systems in which Islamic feminist emerged. All of these examples are countries with traditions of secular feminist thought and activism which had played important roles in indigenous social, cultural, and economic transformations at key historical moments. I reiterate that Islamic feminism has a role to play in the further development of Muslim societies. It should be recognized, however, that the term Islamic feminism remains contentious in many quarters while its message is widely accepted. Even most articulators and practitioners of Islamic feminism have been reluctant until recently to accept the term. There have been exceptions, however, for example in South Africa and Indonesia, where the term was used by activists who have included women and men together. It is advisable that development practitioners be sensitive to the particularities of local environments and attentive to issues of language.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS AIMED AT EMPOWERING WOMEN

I suggest a number of areas of intervention. There will be different environments in which particular interventions would be appropriate and stand being well received or the contrary. Earlier I offered a country typology grid to assist in assessing local environments. This is to

suggest a plurality of project interventions should be considered that are attentive to local needs rather than devising a standard project package.

1. *Supporting education for girls.* For example, in India as the meticulous research of Sikand and others show, there is an increasing interest among the (mainly impoverished) Muslim minority community to open up the existing extensive madrasa education for girls, mainly by building new schools. Families and communities are less reluctant to allow their girls to attend madrasas than they are to enter secular state schools. Moreover, the few existing girls' madrasas tend as well to include secular or practical subjects alongside religious subjects in their curriculum so that extending this system would offer girls, especially poor girls, a chance for education. In Indonesia, the pesantren system of religious schools widespread throughout the country, including rural areas, is also offering increased education to girls. In some of the pesantrens in Indonesia Islamic feminist readings of Islam are replacing conservative interpretations of the religion. There are some pesantrens that are now known for introducing progressive ideas about gender and Islam. These local initiatives could be supported at this key moment.
2. *Providing work opportunities.* A key to keeping women from falling prey to enticements held out by extremists is through programs that offer economic security for females and their families. Girls who complete their education in madrasas in India or pesantrens in Indonesia, or in state schools in other countries become equipped to teach other girls, or to teach in gender-mixed schools, or to engage in various kinds of community work. There is a vast range of income generating projects that development projects have supported in the past and may continue to support. The ideology of Islamic feminism can be drawn upon to back the prospects of Muslim women working in contexts where has conventionally been seen to be religiously or culturally forbidden or inappropriate.
3. *Providing legal literacy training, forums for debate of gender and law, etc.* Women have often been unaware of the laws or legal principles that protect their interests. While there have been programs that help teach Muslim women about their legal rights as enunciated in national constitutions and state law, there have been insufficient efforts to make Muslim women aware of their rights and protections within Islamic law. There is also increasing debate in many countries concerning Muslim marriage contracts and about instituting Muslim personal laws. Clearly the needs will differ according to the different country typologies.
4. *Engaging local Muslim women leaders active in education, cultural arenas, religious activities, and the media in efforts to promote women's empowerment.* In Niger, for example, as the research Alidou shows, there are women story tellers and poets, often belonging to Sufi orders, who support women's empowerment. Alidou gives an example of a pious Sufi woman who draws upon her traditional educational and cultural formation and communication skills in

making the transition to radio broadcasting thus extending the sphere of her outreach well beyond face-to-face venues. In India, Sikand points to *ustanis* or Muslim woman informal teachers, middle-aged women, who are found in poor urban quarters (his example is Old Delhi) who offer instruction in their homes for girls of modest backgrounds whose families stop their education at primary school level or for girls continuing school in the state system but whose families wish them to have a religious formation. The *ustanis* impart an Islamic education (Qur'an, etc.) and are well regarded in the community. It is suggested that the *ustanis* might be supported in their efforts to provide religious instruction to girls and in expanding their curriculae.

5. *Forums for public debate and examination of contentious issues.* Opening or extending space for articulating, examining, and seeking solutions to grievances and injustices perpetrated against a national, ethnic, racial, or sectarian group or against women as a group. It seems important that such issues be forthrightly faced so that ways of dealing with them could be collectively and publicly discussed. These spaces could be in the form of workshops, conferences, study groups, etc. Women and others in the community thus would be able to educate others about their grievances and their ideas for ameliorating situations.
6. *Working with women in areas of political or armed conflict, or in zones of natural disasters.* Women in such contexts are at risk of being drawn into, or forced into, supporting extremists, and / or may become victims of extremists. Presently, there is considerable worry that ultra-conservative Islamist groups, and/or extremist groups may gain advantage through exploiting disaster aid pouring into Pakistan in the wake of the recent earthquake. The dangers and pitfalls and the particularly pernicious effect of this were evident in the case of the tsunami devastation in Aceh as Kamaruzzman who works with a local woman's NGO points out.

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Addendum

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Radicalization is defined in this paper (per guidelines) as support for extremist, violent ideologies and participation in extremist or violent actions; in short, this is a negative definition. Within the arena of women and gender, to be *radicalized* or *radicalization* is often taken in a positive sense: as women becoming sensitized to gender (structural) disabilities and inequalities (in ideology, law, and practice) and proceeding to ameliorate their situation; this is also called politicization (when women act on their new knowledge and/or mounting grievances).

Extremism, also called terrorism, surfaces in national, communal (religious), ethnic, etc. contexts where justice, political, and economic objectives appear to individuals and groups not to be attainable through other means, and in circumstances of real or perceived assaults on dignity and self or group respect, and of exacerbated grievances. Extremism may be fueled by nationalist and/or communalist affiliations and ideologies, which themselves are fed by economic, cultural, and/or social grievances all of which have patriarchal dimensions.

Islamism and Islamist are terms that need to be contextualized and historicized. In the 70s and 80s the term was used as an alternative to the word, fundamentalist. It was associated with those who advocated the introduction of an Islamic state in place of a secular state. By the 90s and especially in the present century, the term Islamist has broadened to include those who draw upon Islam as inspiration in the life of the state and civil society but who do not advocate an Islamic state. Islamists understand the need for the support of women in their political and societal projects; many are driven by expediency but some may be veering towards a genuine interest in constructing a more gender equal society. The fluidity of the term Islamism or Islamist needs to be taken into account.

Secular and secularism are also terms that need contextualization and historicization. Firstly, secularism originally in Muslim societies where it appeared early last century indicated a separation of religion and state and a secularist was an advocate of this. Secular also connoted space for all religions, not an absence of religion. Secular came to be equated by some as equal to western and thus culturally illegitimate or tainted. By the 1970s and 80s, during the rise of Islamist (“fundamentalist”) movements, the term secular was redefined (or redeployed) to mean un-religious and even anti-religious. However, with the attempts by “fundamentalists” or the newly religious to re-define the secular as non- or un-Islamic there emerged an articu-

ation of “secular” as a Muslim concept as in the work of An-Na’im. Finally, the dichotomization of the secular and the religious as a polarized binary has become eroded and it is now more widely understood that the secular and the religious intersect in Islamic thought and practice.

Feminism in Muslim countries and societies has been commonly identified as national secular feminism or simply *secular feminism*, and *Islamic feminism*; these are the terms I use in this paper. National secular feminisms in Muslim countries (which first arose in colonial contexts) are multi-stranded discourses that include Islamic reformist, secular nationalist, and humanitarian or human rights discourses; Islamic feminist discourse is grounded in the Qur’an and other religious texts (Sunna and Hadith) as its exclusive or paramount discourse. In Muslim majority and minority societies Muslim feminist women and feminist women of other religions have worked collectively within the same movements and organizations, while predominantly or exclusively Muslim feminist organizations have also worked with non-Muslim feminist organizations (this is seen, for example, historically and at present, in Egypt, and also in Nigeria where feminists across communal divides worked together to achieve justice for women within an Islamic context, ie the cases of women accused of adultery under the recently established penal codes.) Living in patriarchal societies, women are united by gender, whereas men are not united *simply* by gender.

Women’s movements and women’s organizations, which are movements and organizations run and populated by women should not be conflated with feminist organizations. Women’s organizations might be feminist but more often (in the absence of the feminist identity or identification with feminism) are conservative. They may or may not be affiliated with or adjuncts of men’s political and social organizations