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A double-edged sword: Challenging women’s oppression within Muslim society in Northern Nigeria

Fatima L. Adamu

Islamic development NGOs find it difficult enough to finance their work, because Western donors are often reluctant to sponsor NGOs with religious affiliations. Muslim women activists working to achieve development with gender equity face an even greater challenge: they must secure funding as well as justify their goals to those within their societies who see feminism as a threat.

Until recently, there has been a muted relationship between ‘gender and development’ and religion, in spite of the importance of religion in the lives of many women who are the beneficiaries of gender and development (GAD) programmes. As a Muslim woman activist involved in work on gender issues in Northern Nigeria, I consider the issue of religion to be particularly relevant to the policy and practice of GAD in Muslim societies. Because gender issues are both religious and political concerns in many Muslim societies (Hale 1997; Mernissi 1996), any attempt to reform gender relations that excludes religion is likely to fail.

Currently, Muslim women in many communities throughout the world are redefining Islam as a legitimate tool for engaging with and tackling gender issues in Muslim societies (Baden 1992). It is true that interpretations of Islam have been used by leaders in the past, and are still used today, as grounds for refusing women their rights as individuals, including access to secular, ‘Western’ education and the right to participate equally in politics (Callaway and Creevey 1994). In Nigeria, women’s right to be elected to the secular central government is being challenged in the name of Islam. Consequently, Hausa women of Muslim faith in Northern Nigeria are being left far behind, compared with their sisters from the South (ibid.).

Nigeria is a secular state, but the majority of the population in Northern Nigeria are Muslims. The Hausa people are the dominant ethnic group in the region. It is estimated that Hausa is the largest ethnic group in Africa, with a population of 50-60 million (Furniss, 1996). Islam reached Northern Nigeria via trans-Saharan trade routes, about the eleventh and twelfth century. By the nineteenth century, Islam had become part of the cultural identity of the Hausa (Imam, 1991). The impact of Islam on the Hausa people society was deep and widespread, and it is difficult to separate the two cultures: the Jihad movements of the early nineteenth century, which aimed to ‘purify’ Islam and prevent it mixing with indigenous traditional beliefs, had a far-reaching impact on Northern Nigeria.

Few attempt to underplay the centrality of Islam in determining the position of women in Muslim societies, and its impact on the
everyday lives of women. In such societies, ideas about gender relations are derived from interpretations of Islam, and these ideas are enacted either through legislation or public opinion. Matters of central concern to women such as inheritance, marriage, child custody, divorce, and other marital relationships are governed by Islamic rules in many Muslim societies. In Northern Nigeria, the Shari’ah courts, which practise Islamic personal law, remain the most relevant and widely used legal system, despite the option of using the civil court. Legal matters which concern women in their role as wives and mothers – for example, disputes over inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody – are therefore commonly conducted or resolved within the Islamic legal system rather than the parallel Nigerian civil legal system.

In questioning such issues, Muslim feminists have found themselves in the middle of a conflict between Islam and the ‘West’, facing a double-edged sword. The importance and relevance of women’s participation in the Islamic movement, and the emergence of Islamic women’s movements in the Muslim world, have been interpreted by some as ‘an ambiguous political struggle’, where women are on the one hand ‘fighting actively against their inequality, but on the other [are] accepting or supporting their own subordination’ (Duval 1997, 39). But despite conflicting interpretations of our struggle, the fact of the matter is that Muslim women activists are confronting issues of concern to the generality of Muslim women; and we are doing so in our own way. This article is my personal reflection on this struggle. What are the consequences for women who attempt to reform gender relations in Muslim societies? What problems do we encounter, and how do they relate to the ideas, plans, and programmes of GAD?

**GAD, Islam, and the West**

GAD can be seen as a battlefield in which the conflict between Islam and the West is played out in Muslim societies. While much writing on women and development in Muslim societies from Western academic researchers and media commentators shows a lack of understanding and bias (Callaway and Creevey 1994; Toynbee 1997), GAD is viewed with suspicion by some Muslim scholars as offering a means to the West to wipe out the values and beliefs of Muslim societies. Some Western writers do indeed suggest that Muslim women may be used to attack Islam and undermine Islamic values. Mervyn Hiskett, for example – a British scholar who has spent years in Northern Nigeria and who has written on how to deal with the expansion of Islam in the West – describes women as the ‘Islam’s Achilles’ heel’; his solution is the assimilation of Muslim women into ‘Western’ culture (Faruqi 1994).

Bugaje, a Nigerian Islamic scholar, who is a liberal on gender issues, echoed these suspicions in his 1997 discussion of women’s empowerment: ‘these two decades, during which the UN championed the globalisation of women’s issues, happened to be the two decades during which the UN became increasingly a tool in the hands of a few Western nations who were using it to achieve their selfish political goals. ... This left many Muslims unsure about the role of the UN in respect of women’s issues’ (Bugaje 1997, 9). While I would wish to challenge such general suspicions on the part of Muslim scholars, they are borne out to some extent by certain UN documents dealing with women, which emphasise individual rights more than responsibilities and community rights. Moreover, the incompatibility of the documents with some Islamic values – especially regarding inheritance law, moral values and practice, and the role and nature of the family – is apparent. For instance, Article 15.4 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) says: ‘States Parties shall accord to men and to women the same rights with regard to the law relating to the movement of persons and the freedom to choose their residence and domicile’. While this may seem reasonable, problems arise in practice for
Muslim women, since it is incompatible with Islamic ideas of household relations, and the division of responsibility between husband and wife. Once a marriage contract is fully concluded and enacted, it is the husband’s responsibility to provide the material and sexual needs of his wife. In return, the movements and activities of the wife outside the household need the consent of the husband. In Hausa society, the principle of male responsibility for maintenance is reinforced by the fact that it is seen as socially appropriate for a wife to seek divorce if her husband fails to support her. Records from courts in Sokoto from 1988 to 1998 shows that 53 per cent of the civil cases brought before the court (not all of which are concerned with divorce) are maintenance-related.

Other principles adopted in international documents carry similar messages. In the Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, agreed at the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1991, the 50th paragraph agrees that women should have equal rights with men in matters of inheritance. This is incompatible with the Islamic law of inheritance, which gives women half of what men inherit due to the laws regarding men’s responsibility to maintain women.

Moreover, UN documents do not recognise the abuse of women’s economic rights inherent within the current Western development model. They therefore fail as an instrument for Muslim women to use in fighting the mismanagement and exploitation of resources in the developing world, both by the elites within those societies, and those in the West.

The practical implications of ignoring Islam for GAD work

Even if such suspicions are unfounded, and GAD programmes are not in principle intended to undermine Islamic values, the exclusion of religion from development discourse and practice is in itself Western in orientation, and contrary to Islamic principle. Perhaps more importantly, it is unrealistic. The lives of women in many Muslim societies, including those of Northern Nigeria, challenge the idea of considering gender issues separately from religion: Islam is not just a religion to which we claim allegiance, or which we mark through performing rituals. It is a total way of life, and we aspire to conduct our lives according to its teachings. In her study of the influence of Islam and Western education on women in Sokoto, northern Nigeria, Knipp (1987) identifies three categories of women: non-Western-educated women, young women, and professional women. Some of their words are presented here.

A non-Western-educated woman says: ‘Islam is a great influence on what I say and do, what my relation is supposed to be with my husband, my family’ and my children’ (ibid., 407). Another woman explains: ‘Most things that you do in life are guided by the religion: whatever you do, you do for God’s sake. … Islam is my religion … it guides one as to how he’s going to lead his life’ (ibid., 139-140). A young university student says that ‘… every single thing, how to enter a toilet, how to stay with others, how to acquire knowledge, everything is in the Qur’an … personally, to me, Qur’an is everything’ (ibid., 277). One professional women states: ‘Islam is a way of life, not a part of life; whatever I do, I hope it conforms with the religion, so more or less all my behaviour, all my acts, I’m praying they conform with the religion. It is more or less my own way of life’ (ibid., 406). It can be seen from these words that any GAD initiative which is based on the idea of a separation between women’s religious and gender identities will risk alienating and excluding many Muslim women.

An example from my own experience of an initiative which tried to operate in this way is the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), part of the Nigerian government’s poverty-alleviation programme. Since 1996, the government has designated
millions of US dollars to assist women with credit to improve their income-generation activities. In order to receive this credit, people are required to form cooperative societies. By this condition, those Muslim women in the north who practise purdah (seclusion) are excluded. In 1998, when I was conducting research in Sokoto state, northern Nigeria, many Muslim women in this situation asked me to assist them in forming cooperative societies, in order to meet the credit requirement. The volume of such requests overwhelmed me; I contacted the relevant authorities about this matter, and they promised to look into the case. We started to discuss the idea of getting around the problem of seclusion by forming a cooperative society within an extended or polygynous household (which is the dominant household form in this area). This idea would depend on whether women wished to work with each other in this way within a household; it would also involve visiting individual households in order to make them aware of the opportunity to gain access to credit, in addition to discussing the usual difficulties and problems that may arise. I left the country to study abroad shortly afterwards, and do not yet know the outcome of the discussion and the authority’s final decision. If my research had not coincided with the implementation of FEAP, these women might have been overlooked, as was the case with other women’s development programmes.

Many GAD programmes are substantially funded by international funding organisations, the majority of which are from Western societies. For Muslim women activists, who need money to fund our programmes, this presents a challenge: we must strike a balance between meeting the requirements of the funding organisations and carrying out our work, as well as balancing this with the opposition we encounter from some quarters of our societies. This is an enormous and difficult task; at the centre of it is our concern for the condition of the women with whom we are working.

‘Partnership’, donors, and religious NGOs

My concern as a Muslim gender activist has increased in the course of interaction with some funding organisations. Much has been said about the idea of ‘partnership’ between donors and local NGOs. Although it is an improvement upon the previous relationship between donors and NGOs, we still need to make progress. The organisations and sectors of work which are successful in attaining funding are still chosen almost exclusively by the donors, who define their areas of interest, while local NGOs struggle to fit in. In desperate need of money, some NGOs re-adjust their areas of interest to accommodate the donors’ interest, even if this means their work is less useful in responding to the pressing areas of need in the community.

In the 1980s, my experience was that many funding organisations chose not to work with Islamic women’s organisations because of their religious orientation. Although this has changed somewhat, this reluctance still resurfaces regularly when interacting with some of them. For example, in March 1998 I attended a workshop on capacity-building and possible partnerships for northern Nigerian NGOs, as part of a project run by the British government’s Department for International Development (DFID). When the NGOs were divided into groups, according to the workshop methodology, a disagreement erupted over a request from some participants that there should be a group of religious NGOs (some of us were representing Islamic and Christian organisations). Those opposed to our being grouped together argued that we had been invited not because of our religious affiliations, but in our capacity as NGOs involved with women’s development initiatives. We wanted to know what was wrong with being a religious NGO, and who should define the identity of NGOs – themselves, or funders? Do NGOs with a firm rooting in a religion have to appear to change their identity in order to satisfy the donors?
Even after an area of work is mutually identified by a donor and a local NGO which is based on religion, and after funding is agreed, other problems concerned with the issue of religion may arise in the implementation. For instance, in 1994, the director of a US-based funding organisation visited the state where I worked, in search of NGOs with whom to work. During his visit, he made a presentation to representatives of different NGOs on the areas of work for which funding would be provided. Our NGO looked at the areas and – although we were not comfortable with some components in many of them – in consideration of our local needs, we decided to collaborate with the donor in the area of health-care. One of the uncomfortable aspects of this area was the funder’s expectation that we would integrate a family-planning component. Our NGO's stand on the issue has been that family-planning is a private affair, with no imposition from any organisation or authority. We duly expressed our concern to the funders, and a consensus was reached in principle. However, in practice it was a challenge to work with the donor because the project, consisting of all the components that the donor expected to see, and its funding, operated as one system; as one part was affected, so also were the others.

While we were having difficulties in dealing with the funding organisation, we had to face another problem of opposition and resentment from the community in which we were working. In particular, the presence of a vehicle that belonged to an American funding organisation on our organisation’s premises was misinterpreted by visitors as an indication that we might be bought or used by the USA against Islam.

Lessons and conclusion

In my experience, few women or men in Muslim communities disagree with the content of GAD programmes which address women’s practical needs and interests, or even the reform of gender relations, aiming for a fairer society. However, many question GAD programmes on principle, viewing them as illegitimate because they are ‘Western’. In line with this, Muslim women activists, including myself, may be branded Western agents, funded by foreign powers to undermine Islam. As a result of this attitude, and funders’ mistrust of organisations which have a religious affiliation, the concerns of Muslim women remain unacknowledged and unaddressed. As it is said, ‘when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers’.

A weakness of many so-called ‘gender and development’ programmes is that by targeting women and women’s issues only, and by excluding men and other issues of wider social interest from the gender/development discourse and practice, an impression is created that women are the only sex vulnerable to Western influence. In my experience, this may increase Muslim communities’ suspicion about what ‘gender issues’ mean, and harden their stand against interventions which promote women’s interests and needs. Focusing on women’s rights is seen as a means of diverting attention from the pressing economic and political problems facing many members of Muslim societies, especially in the South and East. Not only are international economic and political bodies involved in this, but local elites are also implicated. In the name of preserving ‘tradition’, they use the issue of women the debate about women’s rights to legitimise their position, and to divert the attention of ordinary people from the soaring unemployment and political oppression that characterise their lives.

Finally, the difficult and fragile relationship between Islamic women’s organisations and international donor organisations, which are predominately from Western societies with a Christian heritage, perpetuates the marginalisation of Muslim women activists in the transformation of their society and religion. Since, as I have discussed, Islam is a religion which embraces all aspects of Muslim women’s lives, and shapes their experiences, any GAD initiative that
attempts to exclude religious concerns from its planning or implementation is likely to exclude Muslim women, and to record a low level of success in addressing their practical needs and long-term interests.

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References


Notes

1 When a Hausa woman says ‘family’, she is referring to her parents’ family, not her marital family, hence the reference to ‘husband and my children’ as different to ‘my family’.

2 The theme of the workshop was ‘Capacity Building for Decentralised Development’. It took place in Kano, 10-12 February 1998.