

Gender Ideology and the Jamaat-e-Islami

By Niloufer Siddiqui

IN EARLY APRIL 2009, THE RELEASE OF A GRAPHIC VIDEO SHOWING A TEENAGE girl being flogged by Taliban militants in Pakistan's Swat Valley sent shockwaves throughout much of that country and around the world. Appearing just weeks after a peace deal had been signed between the Government of Pakistan and Mullah Fazlullah's Taliban faction, the disturbing video footage confirmed widespread suspicions that settling with the Taliban could only mean continued human rights violations and the further propagation of extremist Islamist ideology in Taliban-dominated areas like Swat. The Taliban's explanation for the brutal beating did nothing to allay these concerns: "She came out of her house with another guy who was not her husband, so we must punish her," said one Taliban spokesman. "There are boundaries you cannot cross."¹

As the incident focused the world's gaze on the Taliban's rule in Swat, most Pakistani government officials, members of political parties and women's rights activists rushed to voice their condemnation of the violence. They complained that Islam was being manipulated by the Taliban for the subjugation of women and the establishment of political control. Most ordinary Pakistanis roundly condemned the girl's flogging as well.

Yet not all Pakistanis were quick to join in the public outcry. Officials from the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Pakistan's most influential religious political party, almost instantaneously began issuing statements questioning the authenticity of the video, alleging, among other things, that it was part of a Western conspiracy to damage the image of Islam. The JI then sought to downplay altogether the significance of the video and the beating of the girl that it depicted. Atia Nisar of the JI's Women and Family Commission stated that the video-taped beating of the girl was merely "a small thing. We should talk about drone attacks, not minor things."²

At face value, Mrs. Nisar’s insistence that the beating of a woman by Islamist vigilantes was a “small thing” would seem morally incredible—and perhaps especially so from a party official whose job is to advance women’s rights. But Nisar’s response—and the JI’s dismissive attitude toward the beating of the young girl, a stance that diverged sharply from other, more “secular” political actors—also revealed the disunited and often deeply confused sociopolitical milieu of today’s Pakistan. In recent years, Pakistani political discourse has found itself bitterly divided along numerous, cross-cutting cleavages, few of which fall neatly into liberal and conservative categories. Still, religion has again and again proven to be the primary fault line, and few issues have exacerbated this division more than those surrounding gender and women’s rights.

This paper will provide an overview of the JI’s changing discourse on gender. It will examine both the party’s ideological underpinnings and its politically-motivated behavior with respect to gender. Given the presence of the JI’s large and active women’s wing, the Halq-e-Khawateen, this analysis will also examine women’s evolving role in the party apparatus, exploring the reasons women join the party and what role they subsequently carve out for themselves. It will argue that women members of the Jamaat contribute to a political agenda that will ultimately erode the very rights currently available to them; thus, they work within a modern system but propose goals that, if achieved, would produce nothing less than anti-modern results.

Ideological Underpinnings

THE JAMAAT-E-ISLAMI HAS CONSCIOUSLY ORGANIZED ITSELF ON THE MODEL OF a modern political party, with clear lines of authority and a hierarchical structure, as well as a nationwide network of departments and locally-organized branches.³ Much of the JI’s membership and financial support stems from the newly urbanized lower-middle class of Pakistan’s urban centers, and particularly from the youth, for whom the religious and political ideology of the JI is appealing.⁴ College campuses have served as and remain prime centers for JI training and recruitment.⁵ Student groups—including both the young men’s Islami Jamiat Talaba and its female equivalent, the Islami Jamiat Talibat—while not officially linked to the JI, nonetheless maintain close linkages to the party and propagate the JI’s core messages in universities across the country.

The JI first came into existence in Pre-Partition India as a socio-cultural organization; the movement’s earliest adherents did not initially desire to become involved in politics at such an early stage.⁶ The JI’s founder, Maulana Maududi, had hoped to

train a cadre of “worker-activists” that would ultimately create an Islamic society and lead a worldwide Islamic revolution. However, with the creation of Pakistan, the JI soon evolved into a political party intent on establishing an Islamic state in Pakistan. Maududi, who in large part shaped the future direction of the JI, is credited with being one of the most influential thinkers of the larger Islamic revivalist movement around the world.

During his lifetime, Maududi wrote more than 120 books and pamphlets addressing a range of topics—from Islamic politics to Pakistani nationalism to social and economic issues. His most well-known book on gender roles in Islam, *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam*, was first published in 1972 and provides the ideological underpinning for the JI’s perspectives on gender. In that book, Maududi states that “the problem of men and women’s mutual relationship is indeed the most fundamental problem of civilization.”⁷ He argued that a society’s progress is determined by how effectively it solves the problem that exists between the sexes, and in particular, by how it defines the “appropriate” behavior of women. In his view, the proper role for women is to serve as guardians of the sanctity of the Islamic tradition. This role is routinely assigned to women in Pakistan today—especially by Jamaat activists.

Maududi argued that *purdah*, or the strict segregation of the sexes, is absolutely essential to societal justice and progress, as it permits women to fulfill their roles as Islam’s guardians, and this, in turn, permits men to successfully carry out their jobs in society without being distracted by women. He cites the modern West’s “moral decrepitude” as the “logical consequence of the movement which was initiated in the beginning of the 19th century for the rights and emancipation of women.”⁸ Maududi was categorical about the role he assigned to women in both the private and public spheres. For instance, in the final chapter of his book on *purdah*, which is entitled “Divine Laws for the Movements of Women,” he makes it clear that women may leave the four walls of their house (*char diwari*) only if absolutely necessary. He asserts further that permission to leave the house is strictly limited, as women are forbidden from mixing freely with men in social situations. Exceptions are made, however, for the exigencies of war: Maududi asserts, for instance, that the *purdah* restrictions may be relaxed so that women may offer adequate support to male warriors, such as administering first aid to the wounded and cooking food for them.⁹ While women are not obliged to wage armed jihad themselves, if the occasion demands, they may serve the fighters in the way of Allah.¹⁰

In assigning social roles to both men and women, Maududi was clear about where he thought women should fit in: “The woman’s sphere of activity should be separate from that of man’s. They should be entrusted with separate social responsibilities according to their respective natures, and mental and physical abilities.” He acknowledged the problem plaguing the implementation of this “natural division of labor,”

such as women being deprived of their economic rights, including inheritance. The solution to this conundrum, as Maududi understood it, is not to be found in increasing women's economic independence, but rather in a fairer and fuller implementation of Islamic law. In fact, Maududi blamed what he saw as women's declining economic rights and fortunes in modern times on people's general neglect of their religiously-prescribed home and familial duties. He further argued that as traditional family units have disintegrated with the onset of modernity, women have been ineluctably forced to forsake their role as Islam's guardians and instead been forced into the workplace to earn for themselves. Maududi therefore presents women as the "victims of a vicious process of dewomanization,"¹¹ and as the unfortunate casualties in a series of modernizing societal changes that masquerade as women's empowerment. The challenge, as Maududi framed it, was for true Muslims to resist the creeping Western mentality and practices that purportedly conspire to undermine Islam's tradition.

Political Realities in a Changing Milieu

IN LIGHT OF MAUDUDI'S VIEWS ON PURDAH, IT MAY SEEM STRANGE THAT THE Jamaat-e-Islami movement that he founded has a long-standing women's wing that routinely produces members who stand for election and are represented in Pakistan's parliament. Known as the Halq-e-Khawateen, the Jamaat's women's wing was formed on February 15, 1948, and its role has evolved considerably since its creation. This evolution was made possible largely due to Maududi's changing views on gender. In 1971, for instance, following the JI's failure to gain seats in the previous years' elections, Maududi began to stress the importance of mobilizing women. In a speech before the activist-workers of the JI, Maududi blamed the party's dismal electoral performance on its narrow base of support, and acknowledged that the party had failed to direct sufficient attention to the less educated and poorer sections of society which, because of their numbers, were most likely to affect the vote.¹² Maududi saw a unique opportunity for the Jamaat among women in particular. Because women were provided 20 seats in the National Assembly and 23 in each provincial assembly, Maududi argued that women were an especially important target for the JI's outreach—a constituency that could no longer be ignored.¹³

As such, on the question of women, Maududi demonstrated a willingness to adapt his Islamist ideals to the political realities and opportunities of the day. In fact, despite his many claims of ideological consistency, Maududi modified his teachings frequently throughout the course of his involvement with the JI. His support for the creation of Pakistan soon after its independence, despite having actively advocated

for a united India, represented his first major turnaround. Maududi's support of Fatima Jinnah (the sister of Muhammed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder) as a presidential candidate also demonstrated the malleability of his seemingly clear-cut views on women's place in society. Jinnah was an unmarried and unveiled woman, and the JI couldn't justify supporting her on the grounds of its ideology. In fact, as late as the summer of 1950, the JI had criticized Fatima Jinnah for appearing in public, on the grounds that this violated the norms of *purdah*.¹⁴ Yet, Maududi, who had grown deeply suspicious about the direction Field Marshal Ayub Khan's regime was leading the country, ultimately allied the JI with the Combined Opposition Parties, and believed it was necessary to back their decision to support Jinnah. There was pressure to support the female presidential candidate from within Maududi's party as well: Jinnah was popular among the Muhajirs (the Muslim refugees from India who settled in Pakistan following the subcontinent's partition), who constituted a large share of the JI's support.¹⁵

There is little doubt that Maududi viewed his endorsement of the candidate Fatima Jinnah as nothing more than a necessary evil, and nothing suggests that he ever came to terms with the idea of women wielding political power. The action simply depicts Maududi's willingness to override, for the purposes of political gain, what many considered—and what likely had been—his strongly held, religiously-rooted convictions. Nowadays, JI members insist that the party's relationship to women is not merely consistent with Maududi's basic teachings, but that it is a “realization of his dreams.”¹⁶ They explain that the support he extended to Fatima Jinnah was made during extenuating circumstances. The Jamaat also insists that Maududi's support did not represent a compromise in their position, nor in Islam, both of which maintain a flexible position about the possibility of having a woman serve as head of state. The JI's Naib Amir (Vice President), Prof. Dr. Khurshid Ahmed, has acknowledged that support for Fatima Jinnah was an exception rather than a norm, and that it wasn't necessarily the ideal situation.¹⁷ The party's leadership should be dominated by men, he argued, while women should play a supporting role.

But what has since become known as the JI's “monumental doctrinal compromise”¹⁸ on the question of women and political power received widespread national attention. When the JI's leadership threw its support behind Jinnah's candidacy, it ultimately opened the door to criticism from other Muslim groups who claimed that the JI had forsaken the Islamic credentials and morality that the party had espoused from its founding. Some even accused the Jamaat of losing its standing as an Islamic social and religious movement and becoming just another political party.

The JI's stance also provided Ayub's government the opportunity to divide Pakistan's religious parties. Following the 1965 election, the government turned to its

newly-formed alliance with the ulama, calling on them to issue a fatwa denouncing the JI's justification for supporting a woman's candidacy as un-Islamic.¹⁹ Thus, just as the JI compromised its hold on Islamic ideology as an underpinning for its action, Ayub's ostensibly secular government—which had earlier faced criticism from the ulama for its women-friendly reforms of Muslim family law—was quick to use the JI's reversal as an opportunity to declare its own supremacy on religious grounds.

Within the heated political discussion that emerged, Islam remained, at all times, the yardstick with which a party's loyalty to the country of Pakistan as a whole was measured. But while other members of the JI also questioned Maududi's support of Jinnah, with some even challenging his authority as the leader of the party, the majority of the JI "had become sufficiently pragmatic not to be shocked by Maududi's inconsistency in supporting Fatimah Jinnah."²⁰

The JI's early support for a female presidential candidate did not represent, however, a permanent change in the party's views on women and political power. Between 1988 and 1990, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) tried to secure the JI's cooperation to deny Nawaz Sharif influence on the street and to provide her government some measure of Islamic religious legitimacy. Even though it was in the JI's interest to reach an agreement with the PPP, the JI stated that it would, in principle, be willing to cooperate with the PPP but stipulated conditions for this support. One of these conditions was eliminating Benazir Bhutto and Begum Nusrat Bhutto from the party's leadership—solely on the basis of their gender.²¹

Clearly, the degree to which the JI's ideology on purdah is put into practice is at least partly determined by the political realities of the day. In fact, the JI has often found itself following the lead of women's rights' movements and implementing new initiatives in an effort to ensure that the party could lay equal claim to Pakistan's increasingly politically-involved women. For instance, the Islami Jamiat Talebat (Islamic Society of Female Students) was created in response to the emergence of a students' women's rights group in Lahore's Punjab University. The Islami Jamiat Talebat has always worked closely with their male counterparts, the IJT, to extend the latter's influence on university campuses. Like the Halq-e-Khawateen, most of the Talebat members come from families affiliated with the JI or IJT.²² At Punjab University, the Talebat and the progressive women's rights group clashed over the JI's long-standing demand to create a separate women's university. The women's movement feared that such an institution would mean that coeducation at the university level would be done away with and that further segregation would only lead to increased discrimination.²³ The IJT emerged as a vocal supporter of a women's-only university, and lobbied for its creation. It joined its voice with a newly-formed Islamist women's organization, the Majlis-e-Khawatin.

Created in 1983, the Majlis-e-Khawatin had the backing of President Zia ul-Haq,

who led a government well-known for pursuing a broad-based agenda of Islamization within Pakistan. The JI was also quick to support the Majlis-e-Khawatin, and enabled the organization's president, Nisar Fatima, to become elected to the 1985 National Assembly, on the reserved women's seat.²⁴ In 1984, Fatima was also elected to the Commission on the Status of Women, where she wrote a dissenting note to the Commission's majority findings that the promulgation of Islamic laws within Pakistan had been detrimental to women's rights.

In 1986, as a Member of the National Assembly, Fatima sought to move a privilege motion demanding criminal proceedings against derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh), allegedly made by prominent lawyer and women's rights activist Asma Jehangir.²⁵ This move resulted in a heated battle between progressive women's rights organizations and so-called women "fundamentalists," led by Nisar Fatima, with both sides issuing a string of pronouncements denouncing the other. In fact, both groups employed similar methods in their bickering with one another; press statements, conferences, and public protests were common. Nisar Fatima organized a mass demonstration outside the National Assembly in response to an earlier Women Action Forum's (WAF) demonstration against the Sharia Bill.²⁶ Khawar Mumtaz described this as an "action and reaction pattern," explaining that "any action or statement of WAF or a 'non-fundamentalist' women's organization has invited an immediate and vitriolic response from women of the religious right, who accuse the former of being westernized, alienated, and non-religious."²⁷

In fact, Fatima claimed to have represented the wishes and views of 90 percent of Pakistani women, and subsequently charged the progressive WAF with being elitist and too westernized. The progressive women's rights organizations responded to these charges by citing Pakistan's lack of support for the JI, Fatima's party.²⁸ That Fatima was able to use official parliamentary proceedings to publicly advance her agenda, rather than merely working outside the system, suggests the extent to which the JI's cooperation with her was necessary for both groups—groups that eventually melded to become one.

At the same time, thanks to the Islamists' intervention, the WAF became newly cognizant of its potentially-damaging reputation as a westernized, elitist organization. In response to this, the WAF and the progressive women's movement as a whole sought to incorporate Islamic rhetoric into their political activity to the extent that they could. Among other things, they sought to tactically counter the Zia regime's policies of Islamization, which threatened to marginalize the WAF and the progressive women's movement, by reiterating their loyalty to Islam and by introducing Quranic classes for their members. The WAF even solicited the support of the ulama, who had their own suspicions about General Zia and his government's Islamizing agenda.²⁹ However, as the political scientist Ayesha Jalal has explained, this effort

by the WAF “singularly failed to stem the tide of social conservatism. This gave the regime an opportunity to exploit the ideological divide between so-called “Islamic” and “secular” Pakistani women.”³⁰ Once the argument became couched within an Islamic framework,³¹ the JI’s women’s wing, the Islami Jamiat Talebat and the Majlis-e-Khawatin banded together and were able to successfully counter the progressive and more liberal ideals of the women’s rights activists.

The Halq-e-Khawateen Today

THE CONFLICT THAT ERUPTED IN THE 1980S BETWEEN THE MAJLIS-E-KHAWATIN and the progressive women’s rights groups over women and their political representation has lasted in important ways down to the present day, and reflects a central point of contention between Islamist and non-Islamist political movements within Pakistan. In *Transnational Feminism as Critical Practice: A Reading of Feminist Discourses in Pakistan*, Amina Jamal argues that the women’s rights struggle in Pakistan should not be viewed as a struggle between Islam and modernity. Islamists, she argues, rather than denouncing modernity, are in fact attempting to Islamize it from within. Thus the conflict between the progressives and JI over gender must be viewed in terms of two competing visions of modernity, with both parties trying to shape the nation according to their own ideals.³²

This is clearly on display in the actions and ideas professed by the female members of the Jamaat-e-Islami today. They don’t dispute the essentially modern concept of “women’s rights.” Instead, they argue that the rights and interests of women will best be served through an Islamic state and the imposition of Sharia. They believe, or at least purport to believe, that the Jamaat represent the true advocates for women’s rights, correctly understood. They further blame the societal ills that women face in Pakistan on failed efforts at westernizing the country that have denigrated the true nature of Islam. The Halq-e-Khawateen’s website—which, like the JI’s main website, is impressive in its scope and the frequency with which it is updated—has emerged as a major vehicle for spreading these Islamist perspectives on women. On the website, the Halq-e-Khawateen claims to be the “largest progressive women’s organization in the world.”³³ It asserts that for women’s rights to be completely protected, Pakistan needs to adhere strongly to its identity as an Islamic state and must resist all attempts at westernizing society.

Today, the Halq-e-Khawateen operates as a separate, sovereign entity within the Jamaat’s larger organizational structure. The women’s wing is responsible for its own funding and decision-making, but it operates in conjunction with the main Jamaat body while working towards the same goals; it is governed by the same mandate

and has the same *amir* (currently Munawar Hasan). The vertical division within the women's wing is decided upon by the female members themselves, while the central wing provides "guidance" to the women.³⁴ Although they have no leader of their own, the women's wing has its own seminary, the Jamiatul-Muhsinat, or Society of the Virtuous, which trains women to be preachers and religious instructors.³⁵ One of the main functions of the women's wing is spreading the JI's message among Pakistani women. It also affords women an opportunity to participate in the political process, including serving in national and provincial assembly seats reserved for women. During the 2002-2008 government, when the coalition of six religious political parties—the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)—had a strong presence in the parliament, the Jamaat-e-Islami had six female members in the national assembly representing their views.

The separate structure of the women's wing is enthusiastically endorsed by both male and female members of the JI, who commonly insist that it provides women the opportunity for complete decision-making and responsibility over their own affairs. Women members are insistent that they do not consider themselves "beneath" the main body, since they have their own *shura*, or deliberative council, and attend joint meetings with the JI's male members when necessary.³⁶ Yet the structure of the women's wing as a parallel, semi-autonomous body within the JI is seen by many as a means of separating women—and women's issues more generally—from the mainstream party rather than incorporating them. According to a report jointly compiled by UNDP-Pakistan and Aurat Foundation, "The women's wing of Jamaat-e-Islami is a totally separate entity, since women have no presence or representation in the main body, other than the general secretary of the women's wing, who is ex-officio member of the central consultative committee of the main party."³⁷ The report raises an important point: while perhaps not "beneath" the main *shura*, the women's wing is indeed merely a part of it. Thus, using the terms "male" and "female" wings—which a parallel system of governance would suggest—is inaccurate. However, to the Jamaat members, such a separation is not an indication of inequality but rather a sign of the implementation of religiously-mandated gender segregation—i.e., of *pardah*.³⁸

The secretary general of the women's wing is on par with the secretary general of the main party, and she attends the party's main executive meetings. There are 25 executive members of the women's wing, and each province has its own female *nazim*. Estimates suggest that there are over 900,000 form-filled registered members, with the lowest rung of members comprising the "workers" (*karkun*), the second the "nominees" (*jamudwar*) and finally, the "pillars" (*rukun*). The 3000 *rukun* of the Halq-e-Khawateen form the nucleus, or core, of the party. The *karkun* are asked to focus their attentions on religious learning, and emphasis is placed on making them "better

Muslims”—that is, aware of Islamic fundamentals. After having arrived at a certain level of religious knowledge, Jamaat workers may be nominated to become rukun—but only after a thorough check has been made of their daily living habits and lifestyles. This lifestyle check includes such issues as whether or not the woman offers daily prayers, whether she is under purdah, and whether she can adequately demonstrate her belief in Islam.³⁹ The promotion from a karkun to a rukun can take many years and requires the Jamaat to monitor the women closely so as to ensure that their homes and mindsets are “ready” and do not transgress Islamic principles.⁴⁰

The party’s monitoring of a woman’s personal life as a prerequisite for participation in the party is indicative of similarities between the JI’s women’s wing and other Islamist groups, such as the missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat. In fact, much of the JI’s recruitment is achieved through *dars*, or an occasion in which religious principles are explained to an audience.⁴¹ During parliamentary sessions, the JI’s representatives in the National Assembly would even set up *darisat* (plural of *dars*) in the women’s lounge of the parliament, and they would urge women parliamentarians of all parties to attend.⁴²

The main role of the Halq-e-Khawateen consists of spreading religious knowledge among housewives. Its political role is secondary. This contrasts starkly with the Jamaat-e-Islami’s central shura, where religion and politics are much more clearly intertwined. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that even though the JI is a political party, the central basis for participation in the Jamaat is religious belief. In her analysis of the Jamaat’s influence among rural women in Bangladesh, Elora Shehabuddin argues that the Jamaat tried to improve its election record by convincing voters that a vote for the Jamaat was equivalent to a vote for God and Islam. By supporting the Jamaat, it was argued that the voters were guaranteeing themselves a place in heaven.⁴³ Similarly, in Pakistan, the Jamaat has been accused of being a party that acts not on behalf of the people or their material interests, but rather on behalf of what it determines to be God’s interests.⁴⁴ Thus, religious belief remains a primary motivating factor for women who decide to join the JI. After their initial entry into the party, a woman’s participation in politics, beginning at the provincial level, appears to be a natural corollary of the structure that has been set up.⁴⁵

Male Proxies or Autonomous Individuals?

THE OTHER SOURCE OF HEAVY RECRUITMENT FOR THE HALQ-E-KHAWATEEN IS among female relatives of the JI’s male membership. Many offer this as proof that the women’s wing is simply a mouthpiece put in place to advance the JI’s male-driven agenda. For example, an opinion piece in Pakistan’s English newspaper *The*

Daily Times argued this point by suggesting that while the women's wing has "been accepting of its 'B' status and unapologetic for it ... they have historically taken very informed, radical positions on women's issues, particularly sexual oppression of women by men ... Unfortunately, when they were made proxies, they were unable to adhere to this ideological position, evident in their silence on the Mukhtaran Mai case" (involving a victim of gang rape whose ordeal became the focus of national attention—though not for JI). The article concluded, the JI's women's "agenda has not become any less regressive, yet they have learned the art of fitting in with a state that is likely to always remain patriarchal."⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the women's wing of the Jamaat differs substantially from that of other political parties in Pakistan today, and has little in common with the country's other significant religious party, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islami—Fazlur Rahman (or JUI-F, the rurally-based Deobandi movement). In fact, the JUI-F had no women's wing to speak of until 2004, and JI women parliamentarians take pains to distinguish themselves from the parliamentarians of their former coalition partners. While the general impression held by many political observers in Pakistan about women parliamentarians of religious parties is that they came "straight from the kitchen to the national assembly,"⁴⁷ this description is hardly accurate of the JI MNAs. Their women parliamentarians are mostly professional women with relevant educational backgrounds. Far from accepting the family connections inherent in Jamaat membership (of the previous female MNAs, four have been related to Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the former JI amir), Jamaat members hold up their internal structure as an indication of their party's true democratic nature—which contrasts sharply with the mainstream parties. The voting structure for *zila*, district, provincial and national representatives is democratic, with a ballot system in which secret and silent ballots are passed around.⁴⁸

Even though women members have the right to vote and could potentially be seen as equal members in the Jamaat-e-Islami, they are nonetheless expected to act within certain boundaries, ever cognizant of their respective roles in the party's structure. Simply put, this means that the women's wing is limited to playing leadership roles only in certain facets of the JI's overall program. Of these, social work is high on the list. Even a cursory look at the Halq-e-Khawateen's publications would indicate that social work is the mainstay of the wing's role within the larger party structure. Indeed, the women's wing focuses its efforts in the fields of education (they run a number of schools and madaris), health, legal aid, the provision of inheritance, and providing a true picture of Islam through cross-cultural dialogue.⁴⁹

Women's issues also comprise an important part of the Jamaat's mandate. Both the women's wing and the central secretariat routinely express their concerns over the economic exploitation of women, the lack of health opportunities provided to

them, as well as their frequent sexual exploitation. Parliamentary records indicate that both male and female JI senators have taken the government to task on the increased incidents of violence against women. A news report, for instance, stated that JI members “Babar Awan, Prof Khurshid Ahmed and Latif Khosa grilled the government on the growing trend of sexual harassment of women at workplaces, and for protecting police officials involved in such cases. They stated that not a single police official has been convicted in any such case so far.”⁵⁰ Despite this advocacy, the Jamaat stands by its position that the problems women allegedly face in the country are widely exaggerated and part of a ploy against Islam by the West and westernized elements. When confronted with statistics and stories related to gang rape, honor killings and other societal ills, JI members routinely respond that while such instances may happen occasionally, the “reality isn’t that bad.”⁵¹ More pointedly, they claim that the news reports and statistics on violence against women in Pakistan is nothing more than “NGO propaganda” with which the western-dominated media bombards Pakistanis.

In fact, Jamaat members argue that the situation of women is comparatively much worse in the Western world, where domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment in the workplace is purported by the Jamaat to be endemic. In a recent interview, a Jamaat rukun boasted that while only 20 percent of women in England are aware of their husband’s incomes, 80 percent of women in Pakistan know about their husband’s financial situation and this, to the JI, indicates a way that women are “dominant” over their husbands.⁵²

According to a publication entitled “Human Rights for Women,” issued by a JI-affiliated NGO called Women Aid Trust, “centuries old customs and traditions firmly entrenched in feudal and tribal culture” do occasionally result in “honor killings [happening] every now and then.”⁵³ But on the whole, the pamphlet emphasizes the positive role played by the traditional Pakistani family structure:

The brothers make sure that their sisters are given due respect and they are well protected, while fathers bend over backwards providing safe shelter to their daughters. As the sons leave no stone unturned to treat their mothers with deference trying to seek heaven under their feet and the husbands make every effort to fulfill their obligations towards their wives. Similarly, at public places it has been witnessed that on the whole women are treated with respect.⁵⁴

The JI’s agenda on women’s issues, therefore, is predominately economic in nature; the lack of safe drinking water, for instance, is frequently cited as the number one problem facing women in Pakistan. Additionally, much of the JI’s political work on

gender is reactive rather than proactive in nature; it is intended to counter bills passed by “westernizing” elements and that represent efforts to degrade what the party perceives as the essential Islamic nature of Pakistani society. Thus, the JI’s emphasis on women, particularly in the political sphere, is largely a response to actions perceived to have a negative impact on family responsibility and “traditional” societal roles.

The JI’s Women Parliamentarians

WHILE SOCIAL ISSUES REMAIN THE MAIN FOCUS OF THE HALQ-E-KHAWATEEN (and one which JI members as a whole appear most willing to speak about), their presence in the last parliament lent them a very visible political role as well. The 17 percent representation of women in Pakistan’s National Assembly and Senate, as well as provincial government, and 33 percent in the three tiers of local governance, was widely hailed as a step forward in the eventual realization of women’s rights in Pakistan. The 2002 government saw 60 women enter the National Assembly on reserved seats, while 12 were given general tickets. Of the 60 reserved seats, 13 were members of the MMA and six of these were Jamaat-e-Islami members.

In part due to their party’s ideology, JI’s women parliamentarians fail to acknowledge any explicit link between women’s rights and women’s political representation. In fact, most women members of the Jamaat-e-Islami insist that reservations of 17 percent and 33 percent in national and local levels of government respectively are unnecessarily high. Their arguments for this position range from the assertion that women’s problems will not be solved simply by putting more women in parliament, to claims that are merely indicative of their party position—i.e., that women’s political representation should not be a goal in and of itself. Why these women choose to seek these parliamentary seats, despite their beliefs, betrays a contradictory attitude; it also indicates the extent to which their representation has been party-determined and their mandate, once in office, party-driven. Jamaat members stand by their position that women’s participation in political life should be a natural and gradual process, keeping in mind the norms of society and culture and the respective roles of men and women.

The JI’s women parliamentarians have been accused of being biased and contradictory by members of other political parties. In 2005, for instance, the JI banned women from standing in local elections in Dir, prompting a human rights activist to complain that “If Jamaat-e-Islami chief Qazi Hussain Ahmad’s daughter sits in the assembly, it is Islamic and ‘very good,’ but if a woman contests elections in Dir, this is un-Islamic and banned.”⁵⁵

Female MNAs of different parties have also clashed with JI parliamentarians over issues related to women's rights. Sherry Rahman, a well-known MNA from the Pakistan's People's Party (PPP), while speaking about the lack of support among JI and others for a progressive women's bill that she introduced, stated,

While it is true that many women colluded in opposing my Empowerment of Women Bill or even our Honour Killings Bill, they did so as members of political parties, bound by the regressive political culture of their organizations. Some did it out of misplaced ideological commitments, like the MMA women for instance, who seem to have little voice in their own parties' decision-making bodies but are used as shock troops by their own male party leaders to attack progressive women and all the baggage of reform we try to bring with us into parliament.⁵⁶

While Sherry Rahman's remarks may be debated, they bring to light a central issue: the need for women to play a leadership role within their respective party structures prior to their entering the political sphere. Dr. Farzana Bari has argued that a lack of training and experience leads women political members to rely on their male counterparts. She states, "In the absence of their own constituency, and political training, it is highly likely that they will be dependent on the male leadership of their political parties." These arguments are certainly tenable, and members of all parties have generally demonstrated a strict adherence to party policy. Nonetheless, if the party mandate were something in which women party members had a larger, more definitive say, then the question about whether or not they are carving out an autonomous role would nearly become a moot point. Their very presence would indicate that they are not mere party partisans or male proxies. Yet in the case of the Jamaat, questions about whether women have the authority to contradict or disagree with male members on party issues are easily countered: because the party is ideologically-driven, and because the source of authority for all JI members is the same (the Quran and Maududi's writings), there is no room for disagreement.

For their part, the JI's women parliamentarians have not been a silent presence in the National Assembly. Parliamentary records are replete with statements made by Jamaat MNAs and Senators. Because the JI's position is that women's problems in Pakistan are widely exaggerated, and because they are ideologically committed to resisting anything that smacks of "westernization," their positions in parliament have often been in counter response to other member's bills, and they have frequently behaved as adversaries to the other reserved seat women. For instance, birth control became a hotly debated issue in parliament, where "liberal" women were

pitted against “conservative” women of the JI and other religious parties. Dubbed a “nefarious plan by the West” to reduce the number of Muslims in the world, family planning was portrayed by the Jamaat as just another example of Pakistan’s attempted emulation of the West.⁵⁷ Women JI parliamentarians loudly contested the provision of birth control methods at local chemist stores, and demanded that women seeking any of these be required by the chemists to show their *nikah namaah* (marriage certificate) as proof of their marriage.

In some debates, women’s rights within the ambit of Islam were addressed by JI’s female parliamentarians. While they accused “secular” parties of trying to get rid of Islamic influence in Pakistan, the Jamaat members tried to advance new policy proposals within the context of Islamic values. For instance, the Jamaat’s MNAs tried to set up a system of providing transport for working women. This was aimed at giving women the support they need in an environment which is not necessarily suited to them. Rather than attempting to change the environment, which was hostile to women, the JI instead tried to ease the situation for women in the status quo.

During her time in the senate, the secretary general of the JI’s women’s wing, Dr. Kauser Firdos, proposed five bills, two of which related to women. One of them dealt with providing greater opportunities for women’s employment on a part-time basis. According to Dr. Firdos, 70 percent of newly trained doctors in the country are female, but only a much smaller percentage of these trained medical personnel are joining the workforce. Therefore the Jamaat-e-Islami’s position was that the state was investing in these women’s education without reaping any social returns. Of course, by requiring women to work on a full-time basis, the state would effectively be encouraging them to neglect what the JI believes is the women’s primary duty as homemakers. In line with their ideology, therefore, the Jamaat recommended increasing part-time employment opportunities (as opposed to full-time) so that women can work (if they so desire) while also fulfilling their home responsibilities as their first priority.

In this way, the women parliamentarians, like the women’s wing, sought to bring the general discourse on women’s rights and legislation within the ambit of Islam. Nonetheless, JI members made clear that the ideal situation was one in which men were the leaders, exceptions notwithstanding. The overall refrain was straight out of Maududi’s texts: women’s first priority is the home and her family and her political responsibilities shouldn’t intervene with this responsibility. Women should remain within *purdah*—they should refrain from speaking loudly and out of turn in the presence of men, and they should avoid work unless it is necessary.

The disconnect between theory and practice, however, was obvious. Jamaat MNAs admitted that it was difficult to juggle both their party responsibilities and their family responsibilities. But they insisted that Pakistani culture and tradition allowed

for this because their female relatives were always present to help out in the home. In addition, parliamentarians routinely argued that their political work was essentially religious in nature and on these grounds, it was justified to spend time away from the home and involved in such activities. To justify the women's wing's frequent protests on various social and political issues on the streets of Islamabad and Peshawar, for example, Dr. Firdos was quoted as saying, "Quran allows women to come out of their homes to fulfill religious obligations, as guarding Islam is both the duty of Muslim man and woman so women in great number will come out of their houses to prove to the world that the US wicked action has hurt their feelings."⁵⁸

The Women's Protection Bill

IN RECENT YEARS, ONE OF THE MORE CONTROVERSIAL BILLS DEBATED IN PARLIAMENT was what became known as the Women's Protection Bill. It was passed by the National Assembly on November 15, 2006, ratified by the Senate on November 23 and signed into law by President Musharraf on December 1, 2006. The bill was proposed to amend passages of the Hudood Ordinance, which, since its promulgation in 1979, has been a focal point of much agitation between religious parties and women's rights activists. The Hudood Ordinance is seen as particularly controversial for its failure to differentiate between *zina* (adultery) and *zina bil jabr* (rape). If a rape victim is unable to provide four witnesses to the crime, as required under the Ordinance, she can be tried for adultery. The punishment for adultery is lashings and stoning, neither of which has ever been implemented in Pakistan, although women continue to languish in jail because of this law.

The Protection of Women Act of 2006 was the first actual change ever made to the Hudood Ordinance, and although far from being a total repeal of the law, was nonetheless resisted fiercely by JI members and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) coalition as a whole. Vowing to boycott the assembly if the bill was passed, the MMA created an uproar, taking two approaches. The Jamaat/MMA challenged the bill on the basis that it was a revision of the divine word of the Quran and therefore unconstitutional. It cited articles 2a and 227 of the Constitution of Pakistan, which state respectively that "Islam will be the state religion" and "No laws will be passed which are repugnant to the Koran and the Sunnah."⁵⁹ (If JI members admitted that problems did exist in the Hudood Ordinance, they were described as merely procedural and thus, the ordinance was harmful to women only in its implementation, not in principle. Members of the Jamaat were willing to acknowledge revision of some of the lacunae in the ordinance, as long as they served only to make procedural, rather than substantive, changes.)

Secondly, the Jamaat argued that there was, in the end, nothing in the proposed Protection of Women Act that was designed to “protect” the sanctity of women in their roles as guardians of Islamic tradition, and that, as a consequence, its passage would result in the creation of a “free sex zone” around the country. In this second line of argument, the JI cited procedural changes that were made to the Hudood Ordinance that would serve to worsen, in their minds, the plight of rape victims. For instance, the bill requires rape victims to register not with the police but with the courts, making it more difficult for women from rural areas to reach these courts. When they did, they would be faced with a much more bureaucratic system. Additionally, Jamaat members argued that changing the legal age of an adult to 18 years old meant that women who are raped below that age cannot file their cases as adults, making it much harder to protect their rights.⁶⁰

Throughout the parliamentary debates, the JI steadfastly maintained its position that linking the Hudood Ordinance to the suffering of women in the country was unfair and that, in fact, violence against women in Pakistan was somewhat of a non-issue. The JI repeatedly denied the existence of violence against women, deeming such reports as products of a Western conspiracy against the Islamic tradition and identity of Pakistan. When questioned about honor killings, or instances of gang rape (such as the widely publicized case involving the gang rape of Mukhtaran Mai), JI women members were quick to argue that such instances are rare and hardly indicative of a general societal ill.⁶¹ Blaming a Western-inspired “NGO conspiracy,” JI parliamentarians also dismissed arguments that women were languishing unjustly in jail on the basis of the Hudood Ordinance. As one MNA argued, “Women are in jail for lots of other issues too. Drugs. Smuggling. And no one has gotten tried under the Hudood. There are other major laws, why not focus on those instead?” The bill to protect women, JI members argued, aimed to eliminate the Islamic character of Pakistan and divert public attention away from “real issues” faced by women, such as inheritance, price rises, unemployment and lawlessness.

The debate surrounding the Women’s Protection Bill reflected the divergent worldviews between the religious political parties, on the one hand, and the so-called secular parties on the other. In effect, the debate over the Women’s Protection Bill became a function of these two competing views: it was deemed important not because of the changes it made in the daily lives of women, but because of what it represented about the role of the West and modernity in Islamic Pakistan. The epicenter of the discussion was not what would be in the best interest of women, but whether the Hudood Ordinance and its modification was Islamically-sanctioned or not. A Jamaat MNA argued, “If we don’t know about a law, we shouldn’t talk about it.”⁶² During parliamentary proceedings, a male MMA senator similarly stated that they would be held accountable before God for the promulgation of anti-Islamic

laws. By bringing the practical discussion over how to improve women's lives so firmly into the realm of religion, therefore, the issue of how to advance women's rights was avoided entirely by the JI.

Conclusion

THE WOMEN MEMBERS OF THE JAMAAT-E-ISLAMI, AND THE VERY EXISTENCE OF women in Pakistan's religious right as a whole, pose a fundamental conundrum for feminists who would prefer to see the women's rights struggle as one between oppressed women and oppressive men. JI women seek to explain the problems facing women in Pakistan as a result of the creeping penetration of Western influence, and they routinely downplay abuses against women, pursuing instead an agenda steeped in the ideology of purdah, or segregation of the sexes according to an idealized view of the Islamic past.

The competition between these Islamist and progressive ideals, and the rise of women in the Pakistani religious right over the last several decades in particular, reflect a fundamental dichotomy of modernity and tradition that has deep intellectual roots. In his book *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam*, Maududi argued that "the people who oppose purdah in our country and in the other Eastern countries have a somewhat similar concept of life in their minds."⁶³ He explicitly linked these so-called "modern" people in the East with a Western way of life and mentality that, as he saw it, was conspiring to undermine Islamic tradition. He further sought to establish the JI as the guardian of this idealized Islamic tradition, and thus placed the movement in stark opposition to the "Western" groups within Pakistani society who have, among other things, advocated for greater women's rights.

Throughout its history, the JI's relationship to women has remained largely contradictory, as it has been based more on responding opportunistically to various political developments than on strict adherence to its Islamist doctrine. The organization's recognition of the political utility of bringing women into their sphere of influence and providing a place for them within their religious ideology and political activities coincided with the growth of the women's rights movement. In this way, the JI has learned to operate, sometimes with great effectiveness, to advance its Islamist agenda within the context of the modern political system. Nonetheless, the JI tends to define these deviations from its ideology as necessary evils undertaken for the advancement of its Islamist agenda rather than as changes to its core belief system, including its ideology of purdah.⁶⁴

The Islamist and progressive sides in debates over women's issues have since been involved in a tug-of-war, each attempting to stake their claim on the lives of

Pakistan's women.⁶⁵ Women's involvement in religious movements has historically taken different forms, not all of which are extremist in nature (as illustrated by the general case of JI). However, this involvement is reflective of a larger trend within Pakistani society toward a political orientation rooted in religious principles. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism—increasingly among women—is intricately related to a communal and collective failure to understand the motivations to join these ranks. In important ways, this struggle between Islamist and modern conceptions over women's roles and place in society is central to a much larger discussion over Pakistan's future. In a nation increasingly torn apart by disagreement about the relationship between religion and political life, much will depend on whether influential religious parties like the JI can rethink the manner in which they choose to function within a modern and plural political system.

In the end, by failing to hold Islamists accountable for their actions—as was clearly evidenced in the JI's response to the Taliban's violence against the teenage girl in Swat—the JI reveals that it is committed to a political course that effectively places Pakistan's modern achievements at risk. And moreover, by moving the public conversation away from one rooted in individual rights to allegations of Western conspiracies against Islam, the JI has also contributed to a wider Pakistani political culture of victimhood that habitually shirks responsibility for dealing honestly and effectively with the country's own problems. Ultimately, this kind of politics will deal nothing but more damage to the position of Pakistan's women, and to the nation as a whole.

NOTES

1. Walsh, Declan. "Taliban hands out 37 lashes to girl seen with married man." *The Guardian*. April 2, 2009.
2. "Flogging of Swat girl condemned." April 5, 2009. *The Daily Times*. Available at URL: http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009\04\05\story_5-4-2009_pg12_2 (accessed August 13, 2009).
3. *Ibid.* p. 231.
4. Mumtaz, Khawar, "Identity Politics and Women: 'Fundamentalism' and Women in Pakistan." In *Identity Politics and Women*, edited by Valentine M. Moghadam, (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc, 1994) p. 238.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Ahmad (1991/1994). *Ibid.* p. 459.
7. Maududi, Abul A'La. *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam* (Lahore: Metro Printers Lahore, 1972).
8. *Ibid.* p. 58.
9. *Ibid.* p. 213.

10. Ibid. p.149.
11. Ibid. p.29.
12. Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft9j49p32d/>.
13. Ibid.
14. Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Available on the World Wide Web at URL <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft9j49p32d/>.
15. Ibid.
16. Author interview with Prof. Dr. Khurshud Ahmed, Naib Amir of the Jamaat-e-Islami. Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad. July 7, 2008.
17. Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Mumtaz (1994). Ibid. p. 237.
23. Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987). Ibid. p.86.
24. Mumtaz (1994). Ibid. p.237.
25. It appears as if there were other smaller and lesser known women's organizations with similar views to the Majlis-i-Khawatin at the time. A newspaper account from the period reads, "Meanwhile twelve women's organisations on Saturday demanded a ban on Women's Action Forum (WAF) and the trial of its leader Asma Jilani by the Shariat Court for her alleged derogatory remarks against the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him). They alleged that the government was patronising the WAF. The organisations are Pak Anjuman Khawateen-i-Islam, Halqa-i-Baseerat, Mijlis-i-Fikro Amal, Ladies Club, Women Social Service Organisation, Halqa Darso Tadrees Barai Khawateen, Anjuman Afghan and Al-Muslimaat." "Move against Asma Jilani Denounced." *Pakistan Times*, 1986. <http://www.wluml.org/english/pubs/pdf/dossier3/D3-08-Pakistani-Press.pdf> (accessed December 1, 2007).
26. Mumtaz (1994). Ibid., 238.
27. Ibid.
28. Women Living Under Muslim Laws, "From the Pakistani Press" (A collection of articles from the Pakistan Press 1986). <http://www.wluml.org/english/pubs/pdf/dossier3/D3-08-Pakistani-Press.pdf> . (accessed December 2007).
29. Jalal (1991). Ibid. p.105.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Jamal, Amina. "Transnational Feminism as Critical Practice: A Reading of Feminist Discourses in Pakistan." In *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. 5 (2): 65.
33. Jamaat-e-Islami Women's Wing. Available at URL: <http://jamaatwomen.org/index1.php> (accessed July 2009).
34. Author interview with Senator Dr. Khurshid Ahmed, Naib Amir, Jamaat-e-Islami. Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad. July 2008.
35. Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft9j49p32d/>.

36. Author interview with Jamaat-e-Islami members. Mansoorah, July 2008.
37. "Political and Legislative Participation of Women in Pakistan: Issues and Perspectives." *United Nations Development Programme*. Islamabad, Pakistan, 2005.
38. Interview with women members of the Jamaat. Mansoorah, June 2008.
39. Author interview with NWFP MPA Zainab Khatoon. Peshawar, July 2008.
40. Ibid.
41. Author interview with MNA Inayat Begum. Islamabad, July 2008.
42. Author interview with MNA Dr. Donya Aziz. Islamabad, June 2008.
43. Shehabuddin, Elora. "Beware the Bed of Fire: Gender, Democracy and the Jama'at-I Islami in Bangladesh." *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 10 No. 4. 1999.
44. Author interview with Khalid Masud, Chairman, Council of Islamic Ideology. Islamabad, July 2008.
45. Author interview with Senator Afiya Zia. Parliamentary lodges, Islamabad, August 2008.
46. Shehrbano, Afiya. "Women in Male Politics – the 'B' Team." *The News*.
http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial_detail.asp?id=72575 (accessed November 25, 2007),
47. Author interview with Dr. Donya Aziz, PML-Q MNA. Serena Hotel, Islamabad, May 2008.
48. Author interview with Jamaat members. Mansoorah, July 2008.
49. Ibid.
50. "Opposition Slams Government on Increasing Violence Against Women," *Daily Times*. August 11, 2007.
51. Author interview with MNA Samia Raheel Qazi. Mansoorah, June 2008.
52. Ibid.
53. Women Aid Trust, "Human Rights for Women." Badban Series Publication-4, May 2007.
54. Ibid.
55. Rashid, Haroon. "Protest at Women Candidates Ban." *BBC News*, July 18, 2007.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4693035.stm (accessed December 15, 2007).
56. "Interviews of Women Parliamentarians." *Newsline*, March 2005. <http://www.newsline.com.pk/News-Mar2005/sherry.htm> (accessed November 22, 2007).
57. Author interview with Dr. Donya Aziz. Ibid.
58. Yousafzai, Iqbal Hussain Khan. "MMA Women Wing to Protest Against Quran Desecration." *Asian Tribune*. May 25, 2005.
59. Hasan, Syed Shoaib. "Strong feelings over Pakistan rape laws." *BBC News*. November 15, 2006. Available at URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6152520.stm (accessed August 2009).
60. Author interviews with Jamaat members. June/July 2008.
61. This attitude isn't reserved solely for religious parties. The ruling parties, too, often use this line of reasoning to argue that "bad elements" in the country and abroad are trying to dampen the reputation of Pakistan.
62. Author interview with MNA Inayat Begum. Ibid.
63. Ibid. p. 73.
64. It is important to note that the JI has been able to diverge from its ideology because it necessarily presents Islam as an active ideology in which *ijtihad* is an ongoing process.
65. Ahmad, Mumtaz. "Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: The Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat of South Asia." In *Fundamentalisms Observed*, Edited by Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991/1994) p 459.