

PHD STUDENT, RELIGION, JORDAN

Elizabeth H. White offers the provocative hypothesis that "...women's educational achievement and participation in economics activities in Muslim Countries varies with enforcement of Islamic restrictions on women." She maintains that the societies that are the "most" Muslim, in that they enforce Islamic legal restrictions on women, will have the lowest rates of female education and labor force participation. She compares 21 Muslim states using nine indicators: "the establishment of a minimum legal age for marriage; the establishment of a registration requirement for marriage; the provision to request dissolution of marriage; reform in inheritance laws; regulation of polygamy; abolition of men's rights of unilateral divorce; abolition of polygamy; establishment of secular inheritance law to replace religious inheritance laws, and secularization of all personal law..." White concludes that the evidence supports her hypothesis that those states that have "reformed the laws most inequitable and restrictive to women have higher female literacy, school enrollment and reported female participation in economic activities." (p.66.) Conversely, she finds that those with the least legal reforms have lower rates of literacy and economic participation.

In my dissertation, I propose to test White's hypothesis and findings by looking at the recent developments in the legal, educational and economic status of women in the Middle East. My field research will focus on Jordan, where I will examine the relationship between legal status and women's opportunities to participate in education, employment, and civic life. I chose Jordan because of the strides women have made in the past two decades. Important changes took place in women's legal status through the Code of Personal Status (1976, further amended in 1977, 80, 85 & 87) which modified the code of 1952." The amended code reinterpreted certain provisions of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence in ways that were less restrictive for women. According to Welchman, there is a tendency in these new amendments towards achieving equality between men and women in the area of family law. The author gives numerous examples of this "equalizing tendency," one important is the area of marriage situations. Prior to the enactment of the new laws, a women could make only one specific stipulation and that was that her husband might not take another wife while married to her. The Jordanian Law of Family Rights of 1951 and all subsequent amendments have given both spouses the option of inserting "lawful" stipulations into the marriage contract which are legally binding. This is particularly important for women given the concept of *ta'a* or obedience found in *shari'a* law from which family law is derived. Women seeking to continue their education or take a job outside of the home or reside in a specific place can so stipulate this in their marriage contract. This was not possible in Jordan before the amendments cited above were made. (Welchman, 874-876.)

Data on education from 1985 and 1990 indicates that female enrollment in elementary education was almost universal, enrollment for girls in secondary schools was at least eighty percent, and two thirds of adult women were literate. These rates were significantly higher than neighboring Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria, and represented a notable improvement over female education in Jordan a decade earlier. There have been important developments in women's level of contribution to the labor market. Women now work in the fields of mechanized agriculture, mining, construction, trade, tourism, real estate, finance, education, health and social services. There has been an increase from 8 percent of the total work force in 1980 to 15 percent in 1993. Women represent 46.6% of the nation's specialists and technicians, 20.8% of clerical staff, 14.2% of the services, trade and professional employees, 5.1% of upper management, 4.1% of primary professions, and 7% of skilled agricultural workers. Women gained the right to vote and run for elected office in 1974. The first woman was elected to the parliament in 1993, and there are now two women in the Upper Chamber of Jordan's Bicameral Assembly and one woman in the Lower Chamber. In this year (1995), 27 year old Iman Ahmad Hussein Futeimat became the first woman mayor of a Jordan town. She defeated her four male competitors to become the head of the Local Council in AL-Wahadned Town.

In my research, I will seek to understand whether this is a correlation---and even a casual relationship---between the widening opportunities for women and their legal status in the country.

I have received a four-month grant from the American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR) for May through August _____. I will use that period to (1) collect written documentation and statistics from Jordanian government offices, including census and demographic materials, (2) make contacts for subsequent interviews, (3) improve my Arabic speaking skills and (4) finalize the reach design. I will then be well positioned to undertake intensive field research under the Fulbright award. During that time I will study the relationship between the legal changed and women's own perceptions of their situation. I will examine studies conducted by the Women's Center,

the Women's Union and other groups concerned about these issues. I will spend extensive periods of time with the female students, academics, women elected officials, heads of governmental and non-governmental agencies, employed women, and others who are willing to meet with me formally and informally. Whenever appropriate, I will interview these women on their educational experiences, work force preparation, and political and civic involvement. Equally important will be the time spent living in and observing the culture, seeing how women live their lives and experience agency in their homes, schools, and workplace. An extended period of living in Jordan will greatly augment what I have learned from four years in graduate school and attending conferences in the U.S. on Islam and women as well as interacting with women students and professionals from the Middle East and other parts of the Islamic world.

I visited Jordan during the fall of _____, where I met with women who work on equity issues and spoke to them about my plans for research: Dr. Arwa-alAamiry, Professor of Psychology at the University of Jordan and Director of the University's Women's Center seemed interested and is being asked to serve as my academic sponsor for this project. I also met at length in _____ with Att. Asma Khader, President of the Jordanian Women's Union, and Ms. Leah Sawalha, a public health consultant and educator. They both agreed to make introductions, help me set up meetings and interviews, and accompany me to women's gatherings and homes whenever possible.

Both within and outside my formal classroom work, I have read extensively about the status and life of women in the Middle East (please see enclosed bibliography). I recognize the risk of generalizing from one case study and anticipate conducting comparable research in the future in Syria or Egypt, if research conditions make the feasible. A full year as a Fulbright Scholar investigating the situation of women in Jordan and improving my language ability will be invaluable in order to realize my goal of becoming scholar of contemporary Islamic studies. I have not taken my comprehensive examinations. I plan to take these after my four month ACOR grant in early September _____. Dissertation proposals are only formally accepted after the successful completion of the comprehensive examinations in the Religion Department at Temple. While there has not been formal acceptance, I have shared my plans with both faculty and advisors in the Islamic and Women's studies programs. I have received encouragement in both departments and I am confident that my proposal as described above with any modifications made due to increased knowledge gained on the ground in Jordan will be accepted. I would hope to depart for Jordan during the latter part of September after I take my exams.