



Copyright 2005 Newsweek
All Rights Reserved
Newsweek

December 12, 2005
U.S. Edition

SECTION: COVER STORY; Pg. 33

LENGTH: 555 words

HEADLINE: Reform: Not Ignorant, Not Helpless;
The West is focused on the extreme cases of oppression against Muslim women. But there's another world out there.

BYLINE: By Lorraine Ali

BODY:

If I'd never known a Muslim woman, I'd probably pity any female born into Islam. In America we've come to see these women as timid creatures, covered from head to toe, who scurry rather than walk. They have no voices, no rights and no place outside the home. But I grew up around secular Muslims (my father was an Iraqi Shiite) in Los Angeles, stayed with ultrareligious relatives in Baghdad and met dozens more Muslim women on travels through the Middle East. I've watched them argue politics with men at the dinner table in Baghdad, slap husbands on the back of the head for telling off-color jokes in Egypt and, at a recent Arab Women's Media Conference in Amman, fiercely debate their notions of democracy from under higab s and J. Lo-inspired hairdos.

The West's exposure to Muslim women is largely based on Islam's most extreme cases of oppression: Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, Wahhabi-ruled Saudi Arabia and postrevolutionary Iran. Under those regimes, women were and are ordered to cover. Many Afghan women are forbidden to attend school, and no Saudi woman is allowed to drive. Yet despite the spread of ultraconservative versions of Islam over the past few decades, these societies are not the norm in the Muslim world. In Egypt, female cops patrol the streets. In Jordan, women account for the majority of students in medical school. And in Syria, courtrooms are filled with female lawyers. "Women are out working, in every profession, and even expect equal pay," says **Leila Ahmed**, Harvard Divinity School professor and author of "Women and Gender in Islam." "Though the atmosphere in Muslim countries is becoming more restrictive, no matter how conservative things get they can't put the genie back in the bottle."

Still, Muslim women are feeling like pawns in a political game: jihadists portray them as ignorant lambs who need to be protected from outside forces, while the United States considers them helpless victims of a backward society to be saved through military intervention. "Our empowerment is being exploited by men," says Palestinian Muslim Rima Barakat. "It's a policy of hiding behind the skirts of women. It's dishonorable no matter who's doing it." Scholars such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, an expert on Islamic law and author of "The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From the Extremists," says this is an age-old problem. "Historically the West has used the women's issue as a spear against Islam," he says. "It was raised in

the time of the Crusades, used consistently in colonialism and is being used now. Muslim women have grown very, very sensitive about how they're depicted on either side."

Surely the late feminist Doria Shafik felt the scorn of men--Arab and British--while fighting for the right to vote in 1940s Egypt. Yet Shafik persevered and cast her first ballot in Cairo in 1956. "I render thanks unto God to have been born in the land of mysteries," she later wrote. "To have grown up in the shadow of the palms, to have lived within the arms of the desert, guardian of secrets... to have seen the brilliance of the solar disk and to have drunk as a child from the Nile sacred river." Millions of Muslim Arab women still love the societies they're born into, regardless of jihadist manipulation or American intervention. If reform is to come, they will surely be the ones who push it forward.

GRAPHIC: All styles: At an engagement ceremony in post-Taliban Kabul

LOAD-DATE: December 6, 2005
