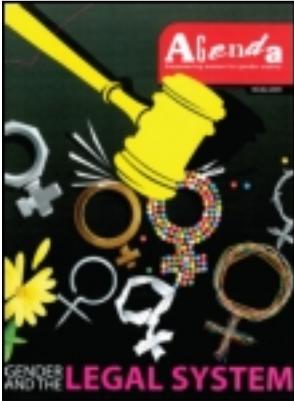


This article was downloaded by: [Brought to you by Unisa Library]

On: 20 June 2013, At: 01:17

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ragn20>

A re-shaping of gender activism in a Muslim context—Senegal

Rizwana Habib Latha Master Degree in English Education^{a b}

^a Department of English Studies, University of South Africa

^b University of Witwatersrand

Published online: 03 May 2011.

To cite this article: Rizwana Habib Latha Master Degree in English Education (2010): A re-shaping of gender activism in a Muslim context—Senegal, *Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity*, 24:83, 55-67

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2010.9676292>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

A re-shaping of gender activism in a Muslim context – Senegal

Rizwana Habib Latha

abstract

Patriarchal power and male privilege are prevalent in Senegal, with strong alliances between the political and religious elite. The women's movement is characterised by its determination and activism, as discriminatory customary norms such as female circumcision and violence against women are still widespread. The situation is exacerbated by male-centred interpretations of religious precepts in this predominantly Muslim country. The Family Code, which came into force in 1973, strengthened the legal position of women to a limited extent. As a result of the efforts of the feminist group, Yewwu-Yewwi, additional reforms were introduced. However, feminist successes in Senegal have proven to be limited and the objectives of gender activism are therefore being continually revised. At present the battle for women's rights is being spearheaded by women's associations such as the Reseau Siggel Djigeeen, which are firmly rooted in this West African socio-cultural and religious milieu and guided by the principles of African-Islamic womanism. The Reseau Siggel Djigeeen focuses on challenging gender inequities by reaching out to women in all sectors of society to try to effectively tackle cultural and religious doctrines which subjugate women and impede formulation of new reforms and implementation of existing ones.

keywords

Senegal, feminism, African-Islamic womanism, politics, religion

Introduction

Although Senegal is a secular state, religion is heavily entwined in national and local politics; 95% of Senegalese are Muslims, and politicians have continued the pattern of cooperation with the powerful Sufi Muslim brotherhoods. Despite the fact that women move freely from the household to the fields or the marketplace and elsewhere, they face many challenges such as a prevailing

caste system based on inherited traditions, a poor economy, as well as the poor high school and university graduation rates for women – 15% and 3% respectively (Adigbli, 2008). French colonialism reinforced subservient roles for women in Senegalese society. As Rosalind O'Hanlon (in Loomba, 1998: 219) comments, colonial history reveals a pattern whereby colonial officials and native men came to share very similar language

and perceptions on the significance of women and their proper duties.

In this article it will be argued that Senegalese gender activists are re-examining the place of feminisms today and are trying to promote women's social, political, economic and religious empowerment by taking cognisance of the specific demands of the West African socio-cultural and religious milieu of Senegal. As Mohanty (1991: 5) points out, "Male violence must be theorized and interpreted within particular societies, in order to both understand it better and to effectively organize to change it". Due to the limited success of feminists, who were often perceived as being too urbanised and elitist, the new movement towards African-Islamic womanism focuses on challenging traditional class and caste hierarchies by reaching out to women in all sectors of society, especially in rural areas, to facilitate positive changes. Their strategies include working closely with government agencies and the powerful male-dominated religious organisations.

Colonial officials and native men came to share very similar language and perceptions on the significance of women and their proper duties

In a country which is dominated by authoritative Sufi brotherhoods and their influential leaders, the marabouts, this type of pragmatic approach is essential. The situation is exacerbated by the recent rise in the number of Islamist groupings in Senegal, which share the desire to 'purify' Islam (Creevey, 2006: 157). Shaheed (1995: 79) makes a distinction between a state that is Islamic, i.e. ordained by religious scriptures, and one that is Muslim (comprised of people who are Muslim). He adds: "This distinction is particularly important when religious idiom is increasingly colouring the political discourse in so many Muslim communities in which ever more strident claims and counter-claims over who is the only true mantle bearer of Islam compete

for popular support and political power".

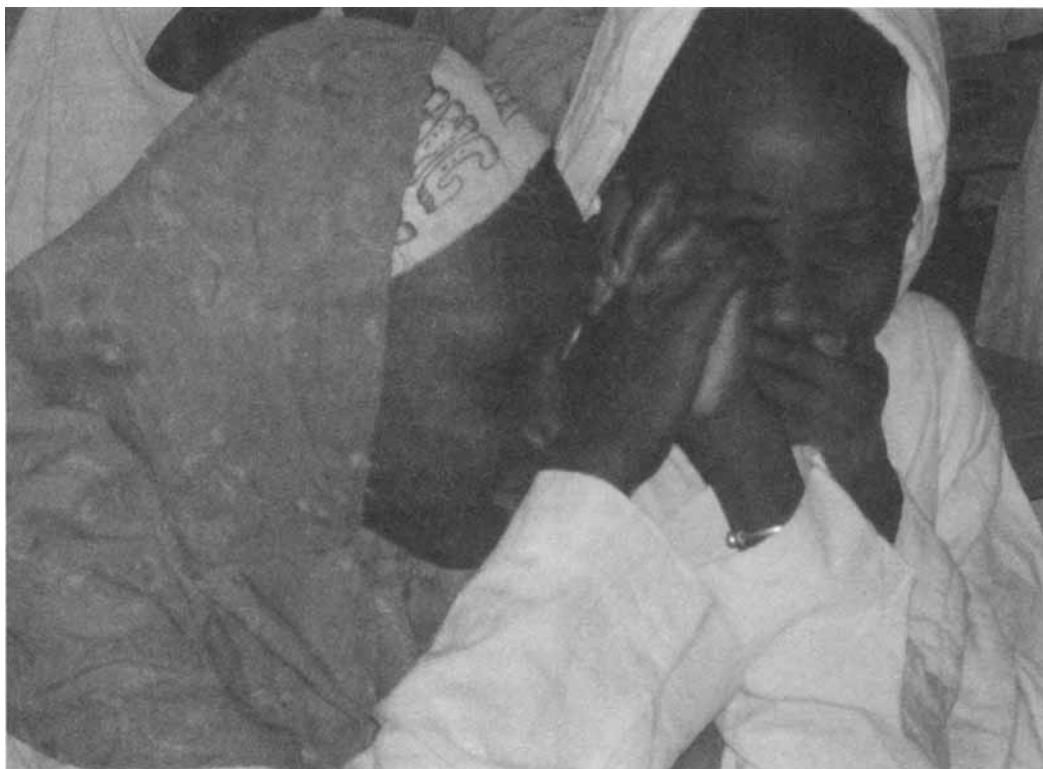
Women are often wedged between these competing religious discourses. As the foundation of real power in Senegal is based on the maintenance of strong relations between the religious and political elite, gender activists have acknowledged that the most efficient way to negotiate better prospects for women is to recognise this reality and to try to work within its parameters to a judicious extent.

Women and the Sufi brotherhoods

In *The Status of Women in Islam: a Modernist Interpretation*, Rahman (1982: 285) affirms that while secularism insists on reform without reference to Islam, Islamic modernity expresses an approach to social reform through a new interpretation of Islamic sources, since women have been adversely affected by the interpenetration of diverse cultural traditions. He contends that the social objectives or moral principles explicitly stated or strongly implied in the Quran must be taken into account to promote reform.

Unlike many of the Islamist groupings, the influential Sufi brotherhoods do permit women to have an independent space to express their spirituality and to play significant roles in the public sphere (Bop, 2005: 1102). Traditionally, a girl belongs to the same brotherhoods as her father and, later, when she marries, she becomes the disciple of the brotherhood to which her husband belongs. Within these brotherhoods, women are very active in the *daaira*, a religious association in which the disciples of a particular marabout assemble regularly to organise religious activities (Rosander, 1995: 8).

Women's increasing empowerment in the religious sphere is evident in the fact that the number of female – dominated *daairas* is growing. As Sieveking (2007: 34) points out: "The frameworks of widespread and socially accepted religious practice allows women to develop agency, expand their room for negotiation and redefine the boundaries of traditional social structures without



AFRICAN PHOTOS

Praying in class, Touba, Senegal.

explicitly putting them into question." Through their financial support of marabouts, women strengthen both their religious leaders and improve their own financial and political situations. In addition to the female-dominated *daairas*, women are involved in practices that include divination, dream interpretation and prayer sessions, which play a vital role in politics, economics and the daily life of most West Africans. Within the brotherhoods some women also act as spiritual leaders and religious teachers (Bop, 2005). At present two powerful marabout women, Ndeye Meissa Ndiaye and Coumba Keita, whose work is publicly recognised, work in Dakar, the capital of Senegal (Gemmeke, 2009: 136).

Within the *daairas*, members include wealthy

businesswomen who provide financial support as well as political backing to candidates with whom they identify. It is through this exchange of influence that women have been able to utilise the status quo to enhance their positions in society (Dunbar in Bop, 2005: 1122). Thus, women's associations play a large role in enabling women to develop agency and empowerment. Rodander (1995: 6) explains:

"Women's associations are fora for work (party preparations) and for social, economic and religious activities. In the villages, all women participate in the female associations; those few who don't will be considered socially non-existing and completely isolated by the others. In the cities the social control is less strong,

and women may be less strictly integrated into female associational networks. Nonetheless, women need their associations to be able to realize themselves as social persons and to finance their ritual and party activities in relation to the *rites-de-passage*."

Most women in Senegal do not belong to issue-based organisations, but many rural women do belong to women's promotional groupings. By 1987 there were 2500 of these women's associations (Callaway et al, 1994: 67-68). They can receive loans from the government (or other agencies), they can act in social gatherings, and they frequently have economic power (*ibid.*, 69). Thus, identifying an association as traditional does not mean that its form and structure are opposed to the transformation and 'modernisation' of society. On the contrary, they have to be considered as important elements in the process of social change.

Women's associations play a large role in enabling women to develop agency and empowerment

Traditions in this context refer to organised actions which occur and are enacted during important family ceremonies (like weddings, baptisms, and burials) as well as within the structure of religious networks (Fall/Gueye in Sieveking, 2007: 34).

Customary norms such as the caste system which continue to prevail in Senegal indicate that these associations work in accordance with hierarchical structures. Nonetheless, since one of the basic tenets of Islam is that no person can claim any superiority over the other based on wealth, there is a link between women's religious associations and a sharing of economic resources. As Filomeana Steady (2006: 128) states: "Muslim women have very pragmatic views toward life and socio-economic development. Islam is an important religious resource for facilitating the

achievement of some of their developmental goals. For many, an important motivation in joining these associations is to mobilise resources through group action that offers material support as well as moral, and religious solidarity."

Voice throwing: Women's activism in Senegal

Mugo (in Kolawole,1997: 6) comments on the Senegalese traditional concept of intrusion or voice throwing known as *Sani Baat*, saying that "the act of throwing one's voice can create an epistemic violence to discourse that will create a space for hitherto unheard voices". The promotion of women's rights in a predominantly Muslim socio-cultural context depends, to a large extent, on what Leila Ahmed (1992: 241) refers to as "an Islam reinterpreted to give precedence to its ethical voice". However, as in other Muslim contexts, there is an absence of consensus about the understanding of particular Islamic laws among various religious organisations and affiliations.

As An-Na'im (1995: 57) points out, "Sharia'h is merely a historically conditioned human understanding of Islam. By emphasizing this, advocates of the human rights of women can assert their own capacity to present alternative interpretations and participate in the development of modern principles of Islamic law in support of the rights of women". In addition to religious considerations, the African customary context of Senegal gives rise to specific needs. *Sani Baat* is necessitated not only by disempowering explanations of the sharia by very conservative members of the clergy, but also by the pervasive acceptance and practice of specific customary traditions which often work in combination to subjugate women.

Fortunately, the women's movement in Senegal is known for its determination and strong activism (Bop, 2005: 1103). In the 1980s the battle for gender equality was initiated by Yewwwu-Yewwwi (a Wolof term meaning 'raise consciousness

for liberation'), a well-known feminist group which consisted of women who had undergone the acculturation process at French schools in Senegal. Their hybrid, multifaceted identities found expression in a mixture of Western, African and Islamic feminist ideals. Despite the criticism by conservatives that the reforms negotiated by Yewwu-Yewwi resulted in the Family Code being a "women's code", their activism did facilitate many positive changes. However, their project of advancing gender equality would seem to have benefitted only a limited sector of educated, urbanised women who were made aware of the Code. Thus, the rate of real changes in the status of the large majority of women continued to be slow'.

The members of this group were accused of being elitist and of adopting an unrealistic 'ostrich-type' approach by refusing to recognise that they were isolating themselves from the rest of society and confining the struggle for women's equality to women alone (International Network of Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML), 1988). Despite their Islamic-feminist orientation, based on the ways in which patriarchal interpretations of Islam have disadvantaged Muslim women, there has been a growing belief among them that this strategy has been ineffective, since very few women are willing to actively seek a more profound knowledge about their Islamic rights. Consequently, they have increasingly turned to secular means to enhance their endeavours. As Dunbar (in Bop, 2005: 1124) notes, feminist groups, though composed of Muslim women, are focusing on objectives outside of and at times in opposition to the powerful religious associations.

African-Islamic womanism

With feminist successes in Muslim socio-cultural contexts such as Senegal proving to be limited, the perceptions and objectives of gender activism are increasingly being revised. A more recent project aimed at boosting women's empowerment



AFRICAN PHOTOS

Balancing act – woman in Dakar, Senegal.

focuses on utilising strategies in which men and women work together to achieve peaceable gender relations. Waugh and Wannas (2003: 33-34), whose research focuses on the emerging trend towards Islamic womanism among Muslim women in Canada, explain the move away from a feminist orientation:

“While liberal Western feminists have critiqued Islamic feminism as an oxymoron because, in their view, Islam is inherently oppressive of women, Islamic feminists argue that Western feminists usually misperceive Islamic feminism because their faulty assumptions of empowerment cannot be applied to the

perceptions of Muslim women. Muslim fundamentalist sisters also criticize Islamic feminists for attempting to mimic Western movements. The womanist framework provides a mediation and alternative to these contending views.”

Islamic womanism is based on the belief that the true Islamic understanding of gender is one of complementarity and the combined effort of men and women for more affectivity in achieving reforms. In a round-table discussion published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Majeed (2006) asserts that Islamic womanism challenges Muslim women scholars and others to speak holistically about Islam and the diverse experiences of its female adherents, and that the Quran should be viewed both as a divine discourse and a text to be interpreted in time and space.

Womanists believe that spirituality and religious beliefs can help women to actively resist all forms of oppression ...

Commenting on the ideology underpinning the work of Nigerian Muslim woman writer Zaynab Alkali, Johnson (1988: 654-655) states that “womanism is fused with humanist ideals on a background of social development” and adds that womanists enhance the quality of life in their immediate environment and help to accelerate the general development of the society. Womanists believe that spirituality and religious beliefs can help women to actively resist all forms of oppression, and that this need not only originate from empowered women belonging to the elite sector of society, but can be activated from the lower levels of society and can also move upwards. As Zine (2004: 185) states, “Following Foucault’s notion of power as emanating from the microlevels of society and not simply operating as a top-down process, in a faith-centred social

context, religion and spirituality are seen through their possibilities for vitalizing local grassroots movements as powerful spaces of resistance to injustice and oppression”.

In Senegal this ideology is firmly rooted in the African cultural context. Senegalese womanists belong to women’s associations which have very strong links with women in both urban and rural areas. Since the feminist emphasis on gender equality has met with very limited success, these womanists are reshaping gender activism by (inter alia) working in partnership with religious bodies, and by educating women of all castes and classes of society about the rights granted to them in the religious and secular spheres and how to exercise these rights for greater empowerment. Their strategy of working within the framework of cultural and religious realities is aimed at bringing about effective and long-lasting changes within all sectors of society.

Since they recognise the fact that men persist in benefitting from patriarchal power and privilege, they have incorporated the African-Islamic feminist agenda of offering insights and solutions to the problems created by many members of the conservative Muslim religious clergy, who subvert not only religious laws but also secular laws aimed at ensuring that women are not discriminated against.

The Family Code and the role of the Reseau Siggeen

The Family Code, which came into force in 1972, has strengthened the legal position of women and regulates matters linked to marriage, divorce, succession and custody, with a separate section for Muslim succession law. Prior to its enactment, family relations were governed by Christian, Islamic and customary laws, or under a civil code. Leopold Senghor, the first President of Senegal, used the Family Code to reinforce secularism and to promote his ideal of women’s emancipation. As a result of the efforts of Yewwu-

Yewwi and other advocacy groups, a simplified and improved Draft Bill was introduced in 1988 and the Family Code was revised.

Most of the changes were favourable to women and were reinforced by the new Constitution of 2001. Examples of reforms in the Family Code include the fact that women are allowed to ask for divorce, and men entering into marriage have to sign a statement as to whether they have agreed to enter a monogamous marriage or not. A contravention of this commitment can result in a man being legally charged (Stepan, 2007). However, polygyny (the practice of a man having more than one wife at the same time) is proving to be a difficult issue as it is an integral part of Senegalese culture and is condoned not only in customary law, but also as an aspect of Muslim traditional practices. These marriages are commonplace, despite the fact that Islamic modernist commentators assert that particular verses in the Quran clearly indicate that monogamy is the preferred marital arrangement.

As sociologist Fatou Sow points out: "Local culture still gives a much higher status to married women, so women continue to agree to become second wives" (Atryk, 2008). Under a democracy such as Senegal's, until public opinion changes more strongly against polygyny, the practice might be eroded but will not be completely legally abolished (Stepan, 2007: 27). As Palitza (2006: 7) points out, to bring about change, answers need to be found to the basic question of how to integrate culture and African customary law in modern constitutions without sacrificing human and especially women's rights.

At present a large network of 18 organisations working at grassroots and other levels in Senegal under the collective name of Réseau Siggel Djigéen (RSJ) is active in promoting the interests of women at all levels of government and in resisting gender injustices. In Wolof '*siggil*' means 'straighten, raise your head' and '*jigéen*' is 'woman'. The RSJ may also be translated as 'Women Advance'. In

contrast to the confrontational stance of Yewwu-Yewwi, and the notion of equality, the RSJ believes that the concept of rights seems much more appropriate to deal with the prevailing social distinctions and hierarchies (Sieveking, 2007: 43). It acknowledges that some traditions and customary norms can play a positive role in society by affirming aspects of cultural identity, but also creates a strong awareness of particular traditions which disempower women. It has a stance that refers explicitly to Islam in its interaction with large numbers of women at grassroots and rural levels.

Alliances with the religious elite have enhanced the aim of complementary gender activism

While feminists have argued that laws such as the Family Code do not sufficiently address the needs to uphold gender equality, womanists have a more realistic approach by promoting the realisation that the Code does uphold gender equity to a limited extent. They point out that local customs and religious doctrines which are patriarchal often work together to impede its effectiveness. An important aspect of the reform of the Family Code is that it should reflect the women's own viewpoints at grassroots level, as it is clear that women want to see tangible changes to alleviate the social and economic hardships that many of them continue to experience in their day-to-day lives.

The central thrust of the campaign by the RSJ concerns the notion of family authority. It is advocating a change in the Family Code from 'paternal' authority to 'parental' authority, thereby acknowledging both father and mother as responsible for the children (Sieveking, 2007: 38). The RSJ has links with international women's support groups such as Canadian Crossroads International in its attempts improve its communication strategies to collectively and

effectively advocate on behalf of women's rights (bbnc.cciorg.ca/NetCommunity/). The focus is on justice and equity, and the elimination of domestic violence and female circumcisions. There is also an emphasis on equalising economic opportunities for women, and mobilising women to be involved in politics more broadly (Creevey, 2006).

Alliances with the religious elite have enhanced the aim of complementary gender activism, which forms the basis of the type of African-Islamic womanist ideology practiced by the RSJ. The fact that Senegal is a secular country may have assisted President Abdoulaye Wade to adopt a more progressive stance, despite the objections of the leading marabouts, who prefer a more traditional interpretation of Islamic principles (Stepan, 2007). This is evident in the criticism of female genital mutilation by the male coordinator for the largest

choose to emphasise those aspects of the Quran that urge "tolerance as a response to diversity" (Stepan, 2007: 20). The strategy paper was accompanied by two booklets containing an explicit religious argumentation for gender equity – one formulated from a Muslim and the other from a Christian perspective. These were aimed at providing a balanced religious perspective on the issue that would not clash with the Government's secular orientation (Sieveking, 2007: 37-38). President Wade, a devout Muslim, has indicated his support of women's issues by reforms in the Family Code, the important role of his wife in the antiviolence campaign, the selection of a woman (Mame Madior Boye) as Prime Minister, and the formulation of the new Constitution (Creevey, 2006: 162).

... the teachings of Islam contain clear evidence that men and women have equal political rights

Sufi order in Senegal, Professor Abdoul Aziz Kebe, who has publicly stated that it is a cultural practice which is in violation of women's rights, bodies, and health, with absolutely no justification in the Quran or in approved Haddiths (*ibid.*). The necessity of this type of intervention is illustrated by the fact that although the practice has been banned, a jail sentence which was handed down to two village women guilty of circumcising a baby girl resulted in violent protests because local Muslim religious leaders defended female genital mutilation as being part of their tradition (in WLMUL, 2009).

Despite the setbacks, the Government has committed itself to halving gender inequalities through its National Action Plan on Women (1997-2001). This has led to adoption of the National Strategy on Equity and Gender Equality (SNEEG) in 2003. Senegalese religious and political leaders

Gender at the interface of religion and politics

Women function as a pivotal sign in the making and representing of the public sphere in Muslim contexts of modernity (Gole, 2002: 184). In Senegal women comprise 51% of the registered voters and seem to be more organised than men in terms of political activism (de Diop in Creevey, 2006: 158). The fight for greater women's representation has essentially been waged by women and organisations for the defence of human rights, and civil society organisations. With very few exceptions, the political parties have not made a fundamental issue of it (Faye Kassé, 2003).

Jamal Badawi (1976: 142) points out that the teachings of Islam contain clear evidence that men and women have equal political rights. The role of women in this predominantly Muslim country was boosted in 2007, when it was reported that President Wade, who names two-thirds of the revamped parliament, released a list of 65 senators, 36 of them women. There are now 40 women in the 100-strong chamber (WLUMUL, 2007). A report released on Friday 5 March 2010,



AFRICAN PHOTOS

Woman praying, Touba, Senegal.

Africa4women'srights, acknowledged the recent adoption of several laws and policies aimed at improving respect for women's rights, including the following:

"The appointment of more women to decision-making positions, in particular within the legal profession, the introduction of tougher penalties for crimes of violence against women, and The National Strategy for Gender Equality adopted in 2005 for the period until 2015, which focuses on increasing women's social standing, enhancing their potential, raising their economic status in rural and urban areas and setting up workshops to exchange and raise awareness of these issues."

Some significant gains have been achieved by women. Sieveking (2007) asserts that many women are socially and economically active, making up 70% of the informal labour market, and that this enables strong women's groups to form pacts with traditional Sufi authorities, who know that their female disciples may remove their financial support if their wants and expectations are ignored. In terms of the political arena, two women, Arame Diéne and Thioumbé Samb, who would generally have been categorised as illiterate and traditional, managed to gain leadership positions. Significantly, Diéne was the first person to insist on speaking Wolof when she became a deputy in the National Assembly in 1983 (Fall, 2005). The success of these two women is rare

and remarkable, since the vast majority of political leaders of their generation came from the elite male intelligentsia who emerged from French schools.

More recent victories include Marieme Wane Ly, who has headed her own political party and ran for President in 2000. At the municipal level, Senator Aminata Thiam was voted Mayor of Baobab county of Dakar in 2007, and was appointed to the Senate by the President. This is unusual, since generally women are missing at the municipal level. There are a number of barriers, according to Mayor Thiam. "It's not easy for us women in politics, who first have to deal with men who try to shove us aside as 'rebel women'", she said. A Muslim mother of four, Thiam works overtime to fulfill all her responsibilities. She adds, "Everyone in my family is very understanding, no one has bothered me" (Adigbli, 2008).

The fact that Senegal has a secular government has undoubtedly facilitated many of the current gender reforms. On 7 June 2010 the law on gender parity in electoral lists was approved by a large majority in Senegal's National Assembly. This has been welcomed by women from diverse walks of life. However, Momar Dieng, who heads the political desk of a daily newspaper in Senegal, believes that the law has been adopted too hastily. He is quoted as saying: "To vote for this kind of legislation that affects the social, religious, and political spheres, you must establish the broadest possible consensus. Because these are very sensitive issues. Having a majority vote doesn't necessarily mean that anything goes. Social reality must be taken into account" (Diallo, 2010).

Ideals of gender reform vs social realities

Dieng's concerns are valid since, despite the many gains, the ideals guiding gender reforms are undeniably in contrast to the social realities of Senegalese society. Islamic conservatives insist that the reforms regarding women's rights in

the Family Code are too lax with regard to their interpretation of Islamic laws and principles. Progress is also often hindered by the social conditioning which allows women to accept traditional gender-based expectations and class and caste divisions, as well as strong patriarchal figures who collude with the forces of patriarchy (Latha, 2004). While acknowledging the progress made in Senegal, the Africa4women'srights campaign also cautions that despite the ratification of the main international and regional women's rights protection instruments, many of their provisions continue to be violated in law and practice. There is still discriminatory legislation in family law, harmful traditional practices such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation, as well as widespread violence against women. There is also limited access to education, employment, decision-making positions and inadequate health services as well as land rights.

Moreover, although it is assumed that secular and left of centre political parties are willing to encourage women to participate in the public and political spheres, it is clear that some religious parties have also begun recruiting women members in order to endorse their political agenda (WLUML, 2009). This may well have both positive and negative effects in future, since women belonging to some of the very conservative and traditional religious parties may help to promote their principles to the disadvantage of those trying to implement reforms based on a more modernist approach to Islamic religious discourse.

Many of these factors have led Codou Bop², a Senegalese feminist, to state her conviction that secularism is the most significant and speedy strategy in the attempt to transform gender and class relations within Senegalese society. She says that traditional cultural patriarchal norms continue to be widespread, and that these undergird conservative interpretations of the Quran, despite the attempts by Islamic feminists to develop progressive readings. However, in

his discussion of women's human rights in the Muslim world, An-Na'im (1995) posits the view that secularism cannot operate independently of religious discourse, since both are necessary for changes to be significant. He states that the advocates of human rights in societies with a predominantly Muslim population should not negate the centrality of religious discourse. For added effectiveness in ensuring women's human rights, he believes that diverse and numerous approaches should be adopted, which include both secular and religious strategies.

At present, the womanist movement in Senegal is trying to incorporate both types of strategies. Waugh and Wannas (2003: 25), who strongly affirm the positive aspects of the African value system, state that Islamic womanism will continue to evolve as a theoretical framework within which to understand the lived experiences of Muslim women, especially since it is not couched in Western terms.

Conclusion

Although gender discrimination continues in Senegal, gender activism remains at the forefront of public debates. The fact that the Government is secular does enable it to make vital changes, and it is significant that legislation focusing on a particular number of gender reforms is already in the statute books.

The Islamic-womanist movement in Senegal with its wide support base operates on the principles of Islamic modernity, which encompasses the social objectives and moral principles explicitly stated or strongly implied in the Quran. The movement works within existing paradigms by recognising the fact that a number of traditions and customary norms can play a very positive role in society. The RSJ also assists in promoting an acceptance of the reality of gender reforms in the Family Code, as well as an understanding of these reforms, especially at grassroots level. With its ever-increasing influence among women, it also works at obtaining support



Entrance to Kermel Market, Dakar.

for additional reforms in the Code. Thus, while Islamic-womanist groups acknowledge that women continue to face many challenges and obstacles, they are re-shaping gender activism by (inter alia) working in partnership with religious bodies, creating productive linkages among women at all levels of society, and educating them about the ways in which the agenda of women's empowerment can be advanced.

Feminist groupings continue to place emphasis on the concept of gender equality. Although their methods and ideologies are more controversial in the traditional socio-cultural and religious context of Senegal, Yewwu-Yewwi paved the way for the present-day Islamic womanist movement by moving the debate about women's rights to

the centre of the public sphere. Their focus on patriarchal interpretations of Islamic laws and the shortcomings of the Family Code resulted in many constructive changes. Likewise, the contention by some gender activists that only secularism will lead to the transformation of Senegalese society also has a certain amount of merit, especially since there is an absence of consensus about the interpretation and implementation of Islamic laws among various religious organisations and affiliations. However, although these feminists are trying to promote their individual political, economic and social agendas outside the parameters of the religious establishment, the argument that this strategy will lead to real transformation does not seem to be a viable proposition in a country in which religious practice plays such a central role in everyday life.

At present, the most pragmatic and effective strategies for gender equity are being spearheaded by women's associations such as the RSJ, as they are firmly rooted in their West-African socio-cultural and religious milieu and advocate for men and women to work together to promote gender equity. Gender activism will continue to evolve in Senegal, and its efficacy will always be measured by the levels of empowerment attained by women at all levels of society and the benefits they enjoy in their day-to-day lives.

Footnotes

- 1 The Statistics and Forecasting Bureau indicates that women make up 30% of the workforce: 70% of rural workers (where they account for 80% of food processing labour), 70% of the informal labour market, 15% of public administration workers and 4% of formal private sector workers (Adigbli, 2008).
- 2 Both Cadou Bop and sociologist Fatou Sow belong to The Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes at Les (GREFELS), a Senegalese feminist group that is a partner of the International Network of Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML). The network is very active in opposing the conservative Islamist groupings in their quest for an interpretation of Muslim laws that do not pay sufficient heed to concerns about women's human rights.

References

- Adigbli K (2008) 'Ms Mayor, Ms Prefect', IPS, [online] 10 October, available at <http://ipsnews.net/news>, site accessed on 29 October 2009.
- Africa4women'srights (2009) 'Women's rights protection instruments ratified by Senegal', available at <http://www.africa4womensrights.org/public/Dossier>, site accessed on 22 September 2010.
- Ahmed L (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- An-Na'im A (1995) 'The Dichotomy Between Religious and Secular Discourse in Islamic Societies' in Afkhami M (ed.) *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*. London: IB Taurus Publishers.
- Atryk N (2008) 'Muslim feminists confront a world of obstacles', WeNews[online] 9 December, available at <http://womensenews.org/story/religion/081209>, site accessed on 8 October 2010.
- Badawi J (1976) 'Women in Islam' in Ahmad K (ed) *Islam - It's Meaning and It's Message*. London: The Islamic Foundation.
- Bop C (2005) 'Roles and Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73(4): 1099-1119.
- Callaway B and Creevey L. (1994) *The Heritage of Islam: Women, Religion and Politics in West Africa*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Canadian Crossroads International (2008) 'Working together to improve the status of women in Senegal', available at <http://bbnc.cciorg.ca/NetCommunity/>
- Creevey L (2006) 'Senegal: Contending with Religious Constraints' in Bauer G and Britton HE (eds) *Women in African Parliaments*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Diallo MB (2010) 'Door to Public Office Opens for Senegalese Women' IPS [online] 7 June, available at: <http://ipsnews.net/news>, site accessed on 5 October 2010.
- Gole N (2002) 'Islam in Public: New Visibilities and New Imaginaries' in *Public Culture*, 14(1): 173-190.
- Gemmeke A (2009) 'Marabout Women in Dakar: Creating Authority in Islamic Knowledge', in *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, 79(1): 128-147.
- Iknowpolitics (2009) 'International: Impact of religion on women's leadership roles', available at: <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/files/Consolidated/>, site accessed on September 23, 2010.
- Johnson R (1988) 'The Social Vision of Zaynab Alkali' in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 22(3): 649-655.
- Kassé AF (2003) 'The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences', paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/ Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA)/Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary

- Forum Conference, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Kolawole MEM (1997) *Womanism and African Consciousness*. New Jersey: Africa World Press.
- Latha RH (2004) 'Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter and the Educational Empowerment of Muslim Women', in *Acta Academica*, 36: 54-83.
- Loomba A (1998) *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge.
- Majeed D (2006) 'Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be Womanist? [with Response] Author(s): Monica A. Coleman, Katie G. Cannon, Arisika Razak, Irene Monroe, Debra Mubashshir Majeed, Lee Miena Skye, Stephanie Y. Mitchem, Traci C. West' in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 22(1): 85-134.
- Mohanty CT (1991) 'Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', in Mohanty CT, Russo A and Torres L (eds) *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Rahman F (1981) *Islam and Modernity, Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rosander E (1995) 'Female Linkage in Morocco and Senegal', paper presented at the Third Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, Finland.
- Shaheed F (1995) 'Networking for Change: The Role of Women's Groups in Initiating Dialogue on Women's Issues' in Afkhami M (ed.) *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*. London: IB Taurus Publishers.
- Sieveking, N (2007) 'We don't want equality: we want to be given our rights: Muslim women negotiating global development concepts in Senegal', in *Afrika Spectrum* 42(1): 29-48.
- Steady FC (2006) *Women and Collective Action in Africa*. Palgrave: Macmillan.
- Stepan A (2007) 'Rituals of Respect: Sufis and Secularists in Senegal', Unpublished paper, University of Columbia.
- Waugh EH and Wannas J (2003) 'The Rise of a Womanist Movement among Muslim Immigrant Women in Alberta, Canada' in *Studies in Contemporary Islam*, 1(2): 5-36.
- WEDO (2007-2008) 'Case Study: Gender, Human Security and Climate Change in Senegal' (2007-2008), Chapter excerpted from the study, 'Gender, Climate Change and Human Security', commissioned by the Greek chairmanship (2007-2008) of the Human Security Network, available at <http://www.wedo.org>, site accessed on 24 September 2010.
- International Network of Women Living under Muslim Laws (1988) 'Dossier 4: Debates on feminism in Senegal – visions vs nostalgia', August/September, available at: <http://wlumi.org/english/pubsfulltxt>, site accessed on 15 September 2009.
- International Network of Women Living under Muslim Laws (2009) 'Senegal: Six months jail for female circumcisers', May 2009, available at: <http://wlumi.org/node/5273>, site accessed on 10 November 2009.
- Zine J (2004) 'Creating a Critical Faith-Centred Space for Antiracist Feminism: Reflections of a Muslim Scholar-Activist' in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 20(2): 167-187.

RIZWANA HABIB LATHA is a lecturer in the Department of English Studies at the University of South Africa. She obtained her Masters in English Education from the University of the Witwatersrand and has published in the areas of African women's writing and the promotion of multi-literacies in the teaching of English literature. She is currently enrolled for her PhD, focusing on Senegalese women writers.

