



Anti-imperialist?

Women and fundamentalism

By Clive Bradley

IN ITS STRICTEST versions, Islam demands that women be covered from head to foot. Why? The theory is that any part of a woman's body might inflame the passions of men: therefore women, every woman, and all parts of a woman must be kept strictly out of the sight of men!

In practice, most Muslim women do not cover their entire bodies. In the more secularised countries of the Middle East, completely veiled women are usually fundamentalists, and many women wear Western clothes. But the veil, even in its purely facial form, is a dramatic symbol of Islam's essential attitude to women.

Women are to be hidden away, cut off from the world of men. In Saudi Arabia, which claims to be governed by Islamic principles, women do not have the right even to drive.

Of course, many of these supposedly Islamic attitudes to women are not especially different to those of pre-capitalist European Christianity. There is in countries like Britain today an echo of the 'Islamic' argument for the veil in the claim that a raped woman 'asked for it' by the way she dressed.

And 'Islamic' society is no more uniform, either across countries or across time, than 'Christian' society. Most of the women

guerrillas in the Palestinian nationalist movement, or in the once-radical Mujaheddin in Iran (or for that matter 'Marxist' groups) were Muslims. There are elements even in the Islamic hierarchy who have more liberal attitudes on many issues, including women.

But just as there are things common to most Christians and a type of politics associated with Christian fundamentalism, so too with Islam. The fundamentalist groups want to see women wearing veils and returning to their proper role in society.

In Iran since the mullahs came to power in 1979, Islamic law on divorce has been used to semi-officially sanction prostitution. A man can divorce his wife simply by saying "I divorce you" three times. So men pick up women, marry them, have sex, and divorce them immediately.

Here too there are contradictions. Women played an important role in the revolution against the Shah.

Some on the left have argued — and argued at the time — that for women in Iran and elsewhere the veil is a symbol of the struggle against imperialism. Western forms of dress are typical of the middle class — in Iran of the Shah's wife, for example.

This is at best only a half truth, however. Many leftist Iranian women fought against wearing the veil. Indeed, the mullahs used this as one of their first weapons against the left, which in the early days was extremely

powerful.

Fundamentalists in many mainly-Islamic countries today are seeking to turn back the clock on decades of secular reform. From the fifties some countries — like Egypt and Algeria — saw a considerable weakening of the mosque, and far greater freedom for women. Across the 'Islamic world', large numbers of women joined the workforce, a trend which has continued despite the fundamentalists.

Challenging traditionalist attitudes to women was a feature of liberal and leftist opinion — even if the challenge wasn't very thorough feminism. In one of the novels of the controversial Egyptian writer Neguib Mahfouz — who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990 — a woman who is unable to find a husband turns to semi-prostitution and so brings shame on her family. The prevailing social attitudes are witheringly condemned.

'Fundamentalism' — or more accurately the political-Islamic groups — wants to roll back the changes. They hate feminism. Most prominent Algerian feminists are now refugees in France, their lives threatened by the fundamentalist FIS.

It must take immense courage and fortitude for a woman bred in the midst of such bigotry to rise to her full dignity as a human being and fight back. That is why socialists should give Taslima Nasrin every support possible. ☐