

Introduction

This paper looks briefly at signs of religious fundamentalism in the historical and social context of the Gambia. It also makes an analysis of how practices outside the media are manifested in public broadcasting in particular. In this discussion, fundamentalism is understood to mean individuals or groups using coercive means to force their interpretation of Islam onto others. Such an approach does not tolerate alternative views from other Muslims, for instance from some Muslim women, who may have a different interpretation of Islam, and whose rights as citizens should be respected. A similar view is noted by Norani Othman:

The current re-politicisation of Islam which began in the 1970s has seen the emergence into international prominence of Islamic fundamentalists voicing the claim that there is only one all-embracing culture, Islam, that is valid for all times, places and peoples. Yet these countries that call themselves Islamic are culturally diverse and until recently they have all subscribed to their own culturally distinctive variants of Islam.¹

The Gambian context

In the Gambia over ninety per cent of the population are Muslims, who have cohabited with the minority Christians and animists for many centuries. Having a non-Muslim neighbour or family member has never been perceived to interfere with one's spiritual duty. There continue to be marriages between Muslim men and Christian women.² Muslim converts continue to interact with their non-Muslim family members in non-spiritual events.

The Gambia's defence of human rights led to the African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies being established here. The Gambia is a signatory to many international conventions to protect the rights of women and children, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which it signed in 1984, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed in 1990. Government and women's NGOs have represented the Gambia in most international fora to protect the rights of women and children as citizens of the state. In 1999, the Gambia's National Assembly ratified the National Policy for the Advancement of Gambian Women.

However, in 1994 the military government approved the building of a mosque at State House. Some saw this as licence for the State House *Imam* to wage war against women's empowerment in his Friday sermons, especially where such empowerment concerns women's self-determination over their sexuality - the right to use contraceptives and campaign against the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), the right to access to information through awareness creation programmes and general empowerment themes.

Special broadcast times have been accorded to the State House mosque, separate from the traditional coverage of Friday prayers from the central mosque. This has allowed the *Imam* to give *hutba* (Friday sermon) on any issue without interruption, promote FGM as an Islamic act, equate the use of contraceptives to abortion and promotion of promiscuity,

promote early marriage of girls, and blame women's rights activists and western ideology for the increase in divorce. On the odd occasion when girls' education is promoted, the focus is on Arabic/Islamic education.

The State House *Imam's* views are relayed free of charge over both national radio and television. Frequently his sermons have contravened government policy on women's empowerment.

However, while extremist scholars demonstrate their hatred for anything to do with women's empowerment on the grounds that this is due to Western influence, what they preach over the media is different from the lifestyles they are engaged in. They enjoy modern technologies from the West such as the latest models of cars, and computer technology; their houses are furnished with modern facilities such as radio and television, and they flash around with mobile phones. Some of these scholars actually send their children to school in the USA and Europe, the very places considered a bad influence on Gambian women's rights activists.³ Some of these extremist scholars are university graduates from the Arab world. However, they do not promote Islam's emphasis on the importance of education and seeking knowledge, even if it means Muslim women have to go up to university to gain it. Their main concern is that Muslim women should dress conservatively and restrictively, should acknowledge the over-archingly important role of marriage, and should not take decisions on issues such as control over their own reproductive health without the consent of their husbands. Their attempts to control women's freedom are couched in statements like 'a married woman should not go outside the marriage home without the consent of her husband, even to attend her parent's funeral'.

There are, however, other categories of Islamic scholars who are referred to as 'traditional religious leaders'. Most members of this group of scholars have not gone through the formal Arabic Islamic schooling. Most of them gain their knowledge from other known traditional religious scholars in the country or the sub-region, in countries like Senegal, Mali or Guinea. They create *karanta* or *dara* in their own communities.⁴ These scholars are well respected by the public, yet they are not heard in public debates on women's issues. During the annual *gamos*,⁵ their contribution comes in the form of sermons to the effect that Muslims 'do good and go to heaven, do evil and go to hell'. Until recently, these sermons were broadcast free over national radio. One does not feel that such scholars are controlling Muslims, women in particular.

The media and women's empowerment

The national broadcasting service in the Gambia - Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS) - has always broadcast religious programmes for both its Muslim and Christian audiences. Muslim religious programmes have been part of national broadcasting along with non-religious programmes for over three decades. Their audiences were considered to enjoy traditional entertainment programmes as well as to want to be informed about religion.

However, since the State House *Imam* began broadcasting in 1994, radio and television space for anti-misogynist views has been very much reduced. Most vocal amongst the group of Islamic scholars who promote women's rights in Islam is the *Imam* of Kanifing Estate mosque. He is not accorded the privilege of having his sermons broadcast like the State House *Imam*, though newspapers such as *The Independent*, *The Daily Observer* and *The Point* do occasionally carry reports of his sermons. Sometimes he is portrayed as an opponent of the State House *Imam*, who has in fact accused him of being paid by women's groups or of being critical of the government. These accusations – made by the State House *Imam* during his broadcast sermons - have led the state intelligence, the National Intelligence Agents (NIA), to detain the Kanifing *Imam* at least once.⁶

Constitutional provisions are meant for all citizens, but in the state media women are being denied their rights. For instance, women activists were banned from discussing FGM on national state radio and television, but conservative Islamist scholars have been allowed to continue their broadcasts on the issue. Although private radio stations such as Radio One FM, Citizen FM and Sud FM give women activists the opportunity to share their views, these private radio stations also share the trend for popularising so-called 'Islamic' knowledge. The difference is that the private radio stations also allow other views to be expressed.

When issues are discussed in English, this is perceived to be less threatening than when activists advocate on issues like FGM in Gambian national languages. For instance, in 1997 GRTS broadcast a series of programmes in English in which Imam Al Badawi, an Egyptian-born Canadian, discussed FGM, marriage and other issues to do with women in Islam. During this period, GRTS staff were served with a directive not to broadcast any 'negative' alternative view to what some of the Islamist scholars were saying in the national languages - i.e. they were prevented from translating Badawi's comments into the national languages. This was a denial of information to non-English speaking women on the issues being debated. Those who could understand English and could benefit from Badawi's discussions are those who are likely to have access to other sources of information already, and therefore already in a better position to make informed choices.

Extremist discourses on women

Extremist groups and scholars in the Gambia measure a 'good' Muslim woman by her dress. Consequently, there has been an increase in women wearing scarves in the style mostly associated with Arab and Asian women. More women are also accepting domestication. Some Islamists do argue that women can get paid jobs, or have their own businesses, but they emphasise that husbands must give permission for work outside the home. This denies women's right to employment as equal citizens with men, as well as implying that work outside the home is optional for women. Some young men spread this ideology through home visits and what they call *da'wa*.⁷ Some young men believe they have rights of control over women, girls in particular. There have been several incidents of verbal harassment and the physical beating of girls in public places, including car parks in urban and peri-urban areas like Serekunda and Brikama.

On 4 August 2002, four young men assaulted three girls at Brikama car park for 'being indecently dressed'. The young men were bailed with a bond of ten thousand *Dalasi* with a Gambian surety, because the offences were 'bailable'.⁸ The court proceedings continued for two months. The principal magistrate at Brikama court, Abubacarr King, ruled that all four accused be sentenced to three years with hard labour with no option or fine. In addition they were to compensate the victims five hundred *Dalasi* or in default spend an extra year in prison.⁹ In an interview with a GRTS reporter, magistrate King stated that it was necessary for ...

... people who go about propagating Islam, or any other religion for that matter, to ensure that they do the propagation within the confines of the law. The law would frown on anyone who takes up such indecent acts in the name of religion, no one would tolerate it ... Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. This is what we know and this is what we practise.¹⁰

This ruling is very important for gender activists and those Muslims who do not agree with the extremists' ideas of Islam.

But intolerance is a growing phenomenon. When the rains came late in 2002, some Conservative scholars blamed it on the immoral behaviour of women and girls and their un-Islamic way of dressing.¹¹

The current focus of extremist groups and individuals is on getting women and young girls to wear *hijab*, interpreted as covering themselves from head-to-toe. A specific 'Arab' style is considered proper, and it is used by all girls in private Arabic schools. Even girls in non-Arabic schools have started wearing this particular style to school, as well as individual women in offices and in public places. There are also a few women dressed wholly in black who cover their faces with black veils. In programmes like *Islamic Forum*, in Mandinka, broadcast every Friday night at 11pm on GRTS radio, women are advised to stay at home and take care of the family, children and husbands. The traditional singing and dancing associated with naming ceremonies, weddings, circumcision ceremonies or merely for women and girls to entertain themselves are considered 'acts of Satan' and publicly castigated through the media.

After a meeting with a group of Muslim religious leaders in January 2001, it was reported that the President allegedly promised them he was going to change the Gambia into an 'Islamic' state. This was after a raid on young women at an alleged brothel. The President's statement prompted reactions from different groups: the Christian community, opposition politicians and activists.¹² The State House press officer at the time denied it, and the news editor at GRTS radio was dismissed for maintaining that the President *had* made the statement. The political wing of the government, the APRC, published on its website that the Gambia promotes the individual's right to practise their religion of choice: 'The constitution guarantees freedom to all to practise their religion of choice'.

However, the president's meetings with representatives of 'religious' leaders are seen by some people as politicising Islam, especially when the proceedings are broadcast over national media and he is shown telling the 'leaders' they have the power to set the moral standards for society in an 'Islamic' way. From the perspective of some observers, however, these broadcasts also enable the public to hear the unmediated statements of the head of state and draw their own conclusions.

Conclusion

The use of communication technology by modern Islamist scholars is a priority for them to be heard and seen. They scramble for airtime on radio and television. Women's rights activists should be aware of the issues under discussion in the media, so they can counteract misconceptions. Does Islam allow women to be heard? Did the Prophet listen to the concerns of women? 'Yes' and 'yes'. Fundamentalists should be challenged on these and other issues so as not to silence women.

The unprecedented ruling by principal magistrate Abubacarr King demonstrates that individuals can make a difference in upholding women's human rights as citizens, and no man should take the law into his own hands to inflict bodily harm on any girl or woman. Women's rights activists in and outside the media need to be equipped in order to discern when so-called 'Islamic knowledge' is being used politically. We cannot afford to keep quiet until we are overtaken by events. However, with national broadcasting commercialised and in the absence of women-owned media houses, women are faced with more challenges to reach their constituency, most of whom cannot read or write and need programmes in languages they can understand.

Endnotes

¹ Norani Othman (ed., 1994) *Sisters in Islam*, p. 124.

² There is unconfirmed information, but few publicly known cases, of Muslim women married to non-Muslim men.

³ One is tempted to ask, why are they not sending them to Saudi Arabia?

⁴ *Karanta* and *Dara* are Mandinka and Wolof respectively and mean an informal religious school in a community.

⁵ Celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday, also called *Maulud Nabi*.

⁶ *The Point*, 9 July 2001.

⁷ Proselytising through persuasion and good works.

⁸ *The Daily Observer* (Banjul), 29 August 2002.

⁹ The pound sterling was thirty-five *Dalasi* in October 2002.

¹⁰ GRTS-TV news bulletin in English, 24 October 2002.

¹¹ Friday sermons as reported in local newspapers.

¹² *The Independent*, 22 January 2001.