

Women Have Fundamentalist Woes

By Brooke W. Kroeger

Newsday Staff Correspondent

Nairobi — The global resurgence of religious fundamentalism is clashing with the objectives of the women's liberation movement. Some women mind terribly. Some don't.

It is difficult, and in many ways unfair, to consider the Rev. Jerry Falwell and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini fellow travelers. But in the view of many women's rights advocates from various cultures gathered here during the past two weeks, the two religious leaders' objectives mesh when it comes to their impact on women's advancement.

No one involved in the women's movement would say the religions themselves keep women down. Moslem women at the "Forum '85" meeting — both those dressed in black chadors and those coiffed and in high-heels — said the Koran promotes equality between men and women. They say practices such as a man being allowed to marry four wives are actually in women's interest, suffering only from misinterpretation in the West.

Yet in many cases, say feminists and lawyers at the forum, cultural traditions and customs have grown around religious beliefs. The root cause, they said, is that men do not want to promote change.

"All religions have their social and spiritual aspects," said Gita Senn of an international organization based in New Delhi called DAWN — Development Alternatives with Women in a New Era.

She cited the Moral Majority campaign in the United States against abortion as a "classic case of using religion for political purposes."

In her country, she said, fundamentalism was on the rise in the Hindu and minority communities. There is a huge push from the Indian women's movement for a uniform civil code, she said. But among some of the religious communities, the men object.

"The issue is not religion. They don't want women to have the same rights," Senn said. "Among wealthy Christians, a daughter will inherit 5,000 rupees, something like \$500 from her father, while the entire

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estate, except for her dowry, goes to the son."

Senn was a participant in "Forum '85," a 10-day gathering of 11,000 women from around the world held alongside the official UN Decade for Women conference. The unofficial forum ended Friday but the official conference, also in Nairobi, continues to July 26.

On the lawn of the University of Nairobi campus, where the forum was held, there was an extravaganza of cultural, informational and national resistance movement displays. Three black-shrouded Iranian women gave daily workshops in front of a table.

Fatima Huseini, a university student who studied in the United States before returning to Iran, defended the position of women under Khomeini's regime.

She cited Islamic guarantees of complete economic independence for women, her right to control her income, her responsibility for her children and the possibility of asking for a salary for nursing her child. Housekeeping, she said, was done only as a favor to the husband, not a duty.

An Indonesian Moslem woman in modern dress, hair uncovered, took issue with her attitude toward housekeeping, which she said was "a beautiful duty."

They both explained that the right of men to marry four wives required that each wife be treated equally and that he must have the permission of the first wife to marry a second. Basically, they said, it was a better arrangement than the mistress system of the West, both for the wife and the mistress.

About employment in Iran, Huseini said: "There are certain duties a woman can do better than a man — like teaching, medicine, nursing. Women in Iran are encouraged to take up positions more in harmony with their character." She said that in entrance to university, women were given priority admission in fields such as teaching, medicine, child-

care and physiotherapy, and men got preference in the more technical areas and political science.

This raised objections by feminists. Senn explained that the return to fundamentalism was really the result of what she called "the degradation of culture," the destruction of traditional forms of living during the push for importing western culture, which really benefited only the elite. The young and unemployed poor, with their loss of identity, find the need to have a cultural identity. So they go back to their religious roots. "The problem for women," she said, "is that those cultural roots often include traditional mechanisms for restricting women."

Another problem for women with the return to fundamentalism is that customary law has come to be accepted as religious law, even though it may not be rooted in the Koran, said Sigma Huda, an attorney and women's rights activist from Bangladesh.

Since a woman is considered incompetent to give evidence in an Islamic court, Huda has to take her driver to perform her function as a lawyer in court.

Ranjana Kumari of India noted that although India is a secular state with a uniform civil code, for the past 40 years, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist law divides women in religious law.

The government, she said, uses the religious argument whenever it is convenient. When the government wanted to legalize abortion, which was consistent with its family planning program, she said, it ignored the offense this was to members of the Christian community. Or, it will refuse to do something because it contravenes Moslem law.

Back on the lawn, where the Iranians were conducting their lesson, came the inevitable question of the veil. Huseini said the Koran dictated only that a woman cover her head, like many other religious traditions. Iranian women "feel comfortable" in the black, full-length chador, which was for their protection and so that a woman could go to work or apply for a job with no stress on her sexuality, she said.

"I think you look very attractive in that veil," said the Indonesian Moslem woman, smiling. "Not me, I'd look like an egg being painted."