

AMSS 35th Annual Conference

**Cosponsored by
Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT
October 27 – 29, 2006**

Abstract Only – Work in Progress

**“Engendering an Islamic Public Sphere:
Women in the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan”**

**By: Amina Jamal
(Ph D Candidate, Concordia University, Canada)**

Although nowhere equivalent to the spectacular role of Islamist women as electors and elected in Iranian and Palestinian politics, the influence of women in politico-religious parties in Pakistan is no longer in question. There is now a discernible space for women within Islamist politics and this is being claimed by an emergent group of middle class women who believe themselves poised to dislodge the leadership claims of modernizing elite women in the public culture. As in other Muslim societies, many of these women are, not as expected, casting off the tropes of culture and religion, such as *pardah* and veiling but defiantly taking them along as symbols of a revitalized Islamic identity. Unlike earlier groups of Muslim women entering the public sphere, a significant number of contemporary Pakistani women justify their political participation not simply through modernist reinterpretations of Islam, but rather through the avowed objective to harness the forces of modernization and bring them into conformity with Islam. No other group of women in Pakistan bears this standard better than the women activists of the Jamaat-e-Islami. The Jamaat-e-Islami is considered to be one of the key transnational movements of Islamic Modernism and reform with a wide appeal among Muslim men and women not only in South Asia, East Asia and the Middle East but also Europe, especially the UK and North America (Reza Nasr 1996; Grare 2001). In Pakistan’s large urban centers it has acquired a significant following among women primarily from the middle class who are inspired by modern Islamic revivalism but seek a moderate way between what they consider to be overly restrictive practices of many Muslim groups and what they reject as the ultra-modern culture of the elite classes. My observations about Jamaat-e-Islami women are based on a two-year project of interviewing and interacting with women politicians, parliamentarians, party activists, workers and supporters of the movement in Karachi and Lahore. This study corroborates some of the contemporary scholarship on what is referred to as political Islam in arguing that Islamist movements in Muslim societies are also the catalysts of modernization, rather than simply its interlocutors (Esposito 2003; Utvik 2003). Jamaat-e-Islami women invoke the tenets of Islam, liberal social and political rights of citizenship, women’s rights and the discourses of development to position themselves as the appropriate agents of a *balanced modernity*. This paper attempts to map the lineaments of a new gendered public space of Jamaat women’s activism and trace the constitutive processes of their self-formation as citizen-subjects.