



**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES**

**Working Paper Series (Cave Hill)**

**Women and Islam in Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:  
An African Feminist Perspective**

**Fatou Sow©**

**Working Paper No.12  
October 2004**

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**ISBN: 976-621-135-3 Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill**

## EDITORS NOTE

Working Paper No.12 is based on a lecture delivered by Senegalese scholar, feminist and activist Dr. Fatou Sow who is also Professor of Sociology and researcher at the SEDET/CNRS, University of Paris and Associate researcher at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal.

Dr. Sow delivered the eight lecture in the series Caribbean Women Catalysts for Change on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2002. Every year since 1995, CGDS mounts a lecture to honour the memory of Dame Nita Barrow, Governor General of Barbados 1990-1995. Dame Nita was an outstanding Caribbean woman whose contributions towards the international women's movement building peace and international development are exemplary. Professor Sow examines the question of Islam in Africa and its impact on African's women's lives.

As a Muslim feminist and researcher, Professor Sow is concerned about the contested political use of Islam as a tool of power, in which women's bodies often become sites of struggle between political forces as in the Northern Nigerian, Muslim States.

Professor Sow examines the five basic pillars of Islam and raises a series of provocative questions related to secularism, modernity, Islamic customs and laws. Does religion shape society? Does it reflects it? What is the role of religion in the making of rules, laws and politics which influence women's lives, their position within society, and gender relations within society

and the family? Why does the State refer to religion in countries claiming their secularisation and their efforts of economic and social modernisation? She argues that the compatibility of Islam with development as modernity has been a debated issue for years within Muslim and Non Muslim intellectual arenas. Can modernity not comply with religion, especially with Islam? What do we today mean by modernity?

Professor's Sow's dissection of the often seemingly controversial role of Islam in Muslim's women's lives is very illuminating. For example she states Ijtihad is a very important process in the making and the application of *Shari'a* in concrete cases. She maintains that *Shari'a* is not a divine law by itself but constructed from four sources. Quoting An-Na'im Professor Sow states, Ijtihad "technically means exercising an independent juristic reasoning to provide answers when the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* are silent." This reasoning allows Muslim women to question the *Shari'a* and its application rather than the *Qur'an*. This paper is a comprehensive analysis of Islamic African societies and will be relevant to a wide cross section of scholars and students. The Centre for Gender and Development Studies, Cave Hill is pleased to add it to our publication of the work of African feminist scholars.