Comparative Women and Gender
Preliminary Examination Questions

April 2009

Please answer ONE question from each of the following sections. Your answers should
be in full sentences and paragraph form.

Section One:
Please answer ONE of the following questions:

1. Eleanor Abdella Doumato writes, “The Shari‘a is ambiguous not only because it is
uncodified in written statutes, but because it is subject to the interpretation of the ‘ulama’.
. . . From the standpoint of the rulers, the ambiguity of rights in the Shari‘a offers the
flexibility needed to bend with the political wind, so that Islam can be evoked either to
liberalize opportunities for women, or to levy new restrictions on them.” On the other
hand, Azar Tabari writes, “There is a common, basic, unified doctrinal and legal core to
Islam. A number of fundamental pillars of Islam are shared by all, and these are what
define Islam in contrast to other religions and to other political or legal systems. No
amount of ‘interpretation’ or historical contextualization can dilute this doctrinal core.
The Qur’an is quite explicit about the rights of men over women. . . . That women are
only half as equal as men in legal and financial matters is specified with great precision.
. . . For those who accept the authority of the Qur’an, these injunctions cannot be avoided
or argued away.”

How flexible/ambiguous is the Shari‘a with regard to women’s rights in marriage,
divorce, child custody, and inheritance? How important is Islamic law in everyday life?
What moves, if any, have been made toward reinterpretation of the law in recent decades,
and are such moves beneficial to women?

2. How unified is the Muslim world in its perspectives on the importance and nature of
gender as an organizing principle of society? Are there particular perspectives that can
be attributed to Islam per se, or are social factors more important in shaping attitudes
toward women and the extent to which social roles should be determined by gender?

Section Two:
Answer ONE of the following questions:

1. How does the history of the household contribute to our understanding of early modern
Europe? What is the relationship between the household and the history of women and
gender in early modern Europe?

2. How useful is the category “woman” in early modern Europe? What other social or
cultural categories existed and how did they interact with gender? Where differences
more important among women or similarities? Discuss with reference to the relevant
historiography.

Section Three:
Answer ONE of the following questions:

1. One of the early promises of women’s and gender history was to challenge the reigning periodization of history. To what extent has the field fulfilled this promise? What new issues and insight into periodization is offered by your comparative reading in women’s and gender history?

2. Defining the modern age as the period that witnessed the rise of the nation-state and industrialization (which would be at different times in different places), compare the impact of modernity on the status of women in Europe and the Middle East.