

Book reviews

Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World

Edited by Mahnaz Afkhami
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"Few words in contemporary political and ideological lexicons have been as misused and abused as 'Islam' by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike" (p.33). With this statement, Fatima Mernissi, the noted Moroccan sociologist, begins her contribution to *Faith and Freedom*. Her brief comment captures the spirit of this volume as a whole. Under the leadership of Mahnaz Afkhami, ten women and one man come together from varied ethnic and disciplinary backgrounds to challenge both Muslims and non-Muslims to re-assess their opinions and re-examine their perspectives concerning the current status of women's human rights in the Muslim world.

This volume is the fruit of a conference entitled "The Washington Dialogue". It was presented by the Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI) in September 1994 in preparation for the 1995 UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing. In her powerful introduction, Afkhami, who is the Executive Director of SIGI, first pauses to acknowledge the great diversity among the now half a billion women living in the Muslim world before speaking of their common struggles in the face of Islamist intransigence. This book is about their struggles, which Afkhami refers to as the "casting off of a tradition of subjection" through a process of rewriting women's identities. Islam denotes a submission to Allah, not to men. Afkhami condemns the flawed use of the concept of cultural relativity in debates concerning Muslim women's rights, whether invoked by Westerners or "fundamentalists". Her critique, while not original, is clearly and concisely articulated and speaks to the heart of the matter.

Faith and Freedom is divided into two distinct but complementary sections. The first is entitled "Women, Islam and Patriarchy" and focuses on the patriarchal structures that have led to the presentation of Islam as incompatible with or contradictory to women's human rights. Afkhami notes that

"increasingly, women are questioning the framework within which Islamic discourse has developed. The primary question is no longer what Islam has said, but who has said what on behalf of Islam and why. Thus, increasingly, the politics of achieving the rights to interpret Islamic texts becomes salient" (pp. 13-14). Here, women's calls for change resonate mostly from within Islam; the respect and protection of women's rights are viewed as part and parcel of a rich Islamic tradition. The book's contributors attempt to expose the existing disparity between what religion advises and what those who hold power say, and also examines the confusion which results when the two are presented as one and the same. The book's analyses center on the issue of power and its uses in contemporary Muslim societies.

In her review of the politics of gender in the Middle East, Deniz Kandiyoti surveys Western influences on Muslim women's rights from post-colonial state-building to present-day Western aid and IMF policies. Fatima Mernissi's critique of the attribution of the quality of "rationality" to the West and democracy and "irrationality" to Islam is insightful, albeit best formulated in her endnotes rather than in the body of her text. Mernissi confesses her contribution to this volume may have been something of an exercise in therapy, and her first few pages certainly convey that flavor. After the confusing introduction, however, she very effectively articulates her views on the true nature of the Muslim World's resistance to the "outside world".

For his part, Abdullahi An-Na'im's presentation is one of action: although the dichotomy between religious and secular discourses on women's human rights in Islamic societies have been, in his words, "somewhat false or grossly exaggerated", he nevertheless acknowledges its very tangible impact on reality. His reflections are positive and well-balanced as he stresses the importance of activists engaging in Islamic discourse in order to counter-act fundamentalists, and further, the necessity for women to formulate their own Islamic justifications for women's human rights.

Bouthaina Shaaban's examination of the contribution of women interpreters in the history of Islam and the position they are given today

presents an inspiring model for readers. Farida Shaheed's promotion of a complementary mode of action, networking, is convincing. She explores its effects on fostering empowerment among women while respecting the complexity and diversity in backgrounds and aspirations of the immense population of the Muslim world. Both Shaaban and Shaheed reemphasize the essential perspective of the book, i.e., that Muslim women should define their own identity for themselves within the context of the rich Islamic tradition.

The first section closes with a comprehensive view of the international scene in Ann Elizabeth Mayer's clever juxtaposition of the forms of rhetoric employed by Muslim countries, the U.S. Government, and the Vatican vis-a-vis women's equal rights. Her analysis is as thorough as one could wish to see expressed in 25 pages and successfully demonstrates that Islam presents no unique obstacles or hindrances to the achievement of women's human rights.

The second section deals with women and violence by surveying the experience of women in Saudi Arabia, "political rape" victims in Pakistan, the war against women in Algeria, the plight of refugee and returnee women in Afghanistan, and Toujan al-Faisal's recent experiences in Jordan. The cases chosen provide concrete examples of the kind of physical intimidation and oppression many women experience as daily realities in some Muslim countries. As Mahnaz Afkhami observes: "The stories generally corroborate Ann Mayer's thesis that Muslim women's predicament is significantly exacerbated by governmental hypocrisy" (p.9).

Eleanor Abdella Doumato's chapter analyzes women's relative successes in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the academic field, as direct challenges to the prevailing conception of women's inferiority in the Muslim world. She, too, places her hopes for the future in the very quality of the shari'a (Islamic legal code) which she describes as being used to justify the oppression of women: its ambiguity.

Shahla Haeri defends her claim concerning the existence of "political rape" in Pakistan as a modern expression of "feudal honor rape" by presenting as cases in point the rapes of women associated with Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party in 1990. Sima Wali likewise takes an example from this corner of the world, this time from Afghanistan. She reminds us of the forgotten ones: refugee, returnee, and displaced women, emphasizing that approximately 80 percent of the world's 20 million refugees are Muslim, 75 percent of whom are women and

their dependent children (p.176).

Mahnaz Afkhami's editorial approach is inclusive. This is reflected in the structure as well as in the tone of the volume. Concerned with developing a concrete plan of action that will lead to the empowerment of Muslim women and the protection of their human rights, she calls for the contribution of people from all social strata, from Muslims and non-Muslim societies, from the North and from the South. She offers a straightforward list of realistic actions that she believes must be undertaken by Muslim women and "women from the North" in a cooperative effort if such goals are to be accomplished (see specifically pp. 5-6). The reader's only regret here is that these points are still not regarded as self-evident on any significant scale. The contribution by Karima Bennoune best captures this cry for cooperation and respect between Muslim and non-Muslim women.

One of the first steps toward achieving a better understanding of the situation of women in the Muslim world may be the very act of reading this important volume. The book's language is clear, the arguments are well-structured, and although it contains many references to historical events and conventions, the volume is extremely well-annotated and may therefore serve as a good tool for those interested in exploring these issues more closely. The volume would make an excellent text for a course on women's issues in the contemporary Muslim world.

Faith and Freedom certainly should be read by Western, non-Muslim women activists interested in helping their sisters in the Muslim World (it would certainly help to dispel misplaced fears of political incorrectness!). For those who may already be familiar with the positions expressed in Faith and Freedom, the volume should not be dismissed too quickly. The combined efforts of these competent scholars have generated a well-balanced survey of the most important facets of the issues while providing realistic articulations of the possibilities for future coordinated action between Muslim and non-Muslim women. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice the differences in positions expressed on certain details (for example, when Bouthaina Shaaban recriminates Fatima Mernissi on her lack of acknowledgment of Nazira Zin al-Din's work in her own studies). These women are not interested in parrotting one another. It is admirable and exemplary that, despite occasional differences, they have still come together and remain standing together in their fight for women's human rights. In this sense, the authors practice what they preach.