

CONTENTION

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TOLERABLE INTOLERANCE?

SILENCE ON ATTACKS ON WOMEN BY FUNDAMENTALISTS

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PARVIN PAHDAR, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

MAHNAZ AFRHAM, ed. *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

Henry Munson courageously confronts the prevailing tendency in Western academic circles to present Islamic fundamentalists as "benign revivalists." He argues that they are not, highlighting their more unsavory sides. Munson points to their violence against Christian minorities, conspiratorial views of Jews, and attacks on Muslim dissenters. His argument is convincing. What proves surprising is that some of the most compelling evidence — attacks by fundamentalists of women — is missing.

Perhaps this is not so surprising. Most scholarly accounts of political Islam give only brief (if any) attention to their rhetoric on women in spite of its prevalence in the literature of Islamists, and they rarely discuss the role of women in these movements. For treatment of female activists in fundamentalist movements or the movements' pronouncements on women, one must turn to a separate body of scholarship, which is generally produced by women. In the secularized world of academia,

these two bodies of scholarship oddly enough stand apart, segregated as it were.

They are separated not so much by the gender of their authors — there are a few men who write well about women¹ — as the presumptions behind them. Most male observers of fundamentalism, or Islamism, see “the activist” as male and the central message as political or economic. They may not deny the importance of sexual, moral, and family issues but they do not generally stress them either. (This attitude of ignoring fundamentalists’ fascination with gender ideology is prevalent in comparative studies of fundamentalism as well.²) Female observers, on the other hand, look at the Islamist vision and often see gender issues at its core.

It may be helpful to consider two prominent cases of Islamist encounters with women: in Iran and in Algeria. It is important to note, however, that while Islamist activists share an ideological framework and no doubt influence one another, they face their own choices and design different strategies, adjusting to specific social, economic, and political situations. Thus these cases intersect a continuum of political Islam at different points with varying implications for women.

One of the central claims of Parvin Paidar’s recently published *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* is that women’s position has been central to the political discourses of modernity, revolution, and Islamization in Iran.³ During the Revolution, radical ideologues identified women as *the* source of social change. But the new government that took power afterwards targeted women as the first group for suppression: women’s demonstrations were violently broken up and women were forced to veil. A rapid dismantling of family law and a severe erosion of women’s rights followed. The fundamentalists, or Islamizers, saw women as “the markers or the boundaries of the Islamic community and the makers of Islamic identity.”⁴

On first inspection the picture looks grim: the activities of Iranian women have been constrained in the Islamic Republic. But women have not been barred from political and economic participation in society. In the past few years, moreover, Iranian women have rallied, regained some lost ground, and broken new ground in some areas. Women parliamentarians have learned to push aggressively for legislation, reversing some of the losses of the first few years, particularly in the domain of family law. On another level, circles of religious women are scrutinizing Islamic texts in an effort to reinterpret them to their advantage. Women’s

groups meet regularly, new centers for research on women have opened, and women’s journals have multiplied and become an outlet for opinions. On the literary and artistic fronts, women’s prose writing has flourished and a crop of female directors has emerged in cinema. While certain professions remain off-limits, women have a strong presence in such fields as higher education.

Scholars like Paidar, Shahla Haeri, Farzaneh Milani, and Afsaneh Najmabadi have sought to strike a balance in their writings on women in the Islamic Republic and have tried to convey women’s perspectives of their own situations.⁵ Along with others who focus on women and gender in the Middle East, they have attempted to explain why some women are attracted to fundamentalist movements at certain historical junctures and how they sometimes benefit from them. They have contextualized women’s experiences so that women are not seen as oppressed, passive, and powerless under Islamic law or Islamic regimes, but rather as actors with their own ideas. At the same time, they have remained critical of the regime. Those who write on women and Islamism thus walk a tightrope.

The new emphasis by some writers and activists on Muslim women’s rights as human rights is part of a global movement. The arguments for this strategy are laid out with case studies in *Faith and Freedom: Women’s Human Rights in the Muslim World*. Mahnaz Afkhami, the editor of the volume, writes: “For Muslim fundamentalists every domestic issue is negotiable except women’s rights and their position in society. Islamist resurgence . . . insists on singling out women’s relation to society as the supreme test of the authenticity of the Islamic order.”⁶ The Islamists, Afkhami suggests, confuse men’s interpretation of religion with religion itself. Moreover, Islamists have wrapped themselves in the protective cloak of relativism, arguing that women’s human rights are a Western imposition that impinges on Islamic culture and religion; and they label Muslim women who struggle for these rights as enemies of Islam.⁷

This same tendency — to justify local practices by saying that various modern standards and human rights, especially those concerning women, are Western impositions — surfaces frequently in the writings of scholars of the Third World. Munson warns against such relativistic arguments, in particular those that depict fundamentalists as benign, and he gives, as mentioned above, examples of some of the less benign aspects of the fundamentalists. The extreme case of Algeria provides more proof

for his argument as well as evidence that fundamentalists have often theologically targeted women and sometimes physically attacked them.

Karima Bennoune, a lawyer from Michigan, visited Algeria twice in 1994, taking the testimony of women and documenting atrocities. She reports her findings in the volume *Faith and Freedom*.⁸ Bennoune chose to focus on human rights abuses committed by fundamentalists and not violations by the Algerian government (which she does not condone), for "fundamentalist ideology and activity pose a unique and overwhelming threat to the lives of Algerian women." (185) Attacks on women are part of the violent confrontation between one wing of the fundamentalists and the government it is seeking to overthrow. In the course of this confrontation, foreigners, journalists, intellectuals, and government workers, among others, have fallen victim.

Violence against women has taken a number of forms, including rape and gang rape, which Bennoune found to be on the rise. One 15-year-old spoke on national television about her ordeal (itself a sign that the situation was uniquely terrible). She told of being kidnapped from her home, kept in a house for weeks to clean and cook for "God's warriors," and repeatedly raped. (189) Young girls and women have been kidnapped in many towns and cities and used as "sex slaves" by armed groups. A 17-year-old who was held for months by an armed group until she became pregnant described the first rape. "He threatened me with his knife saying that he would slash me and that he would do whatever he wanted to as God would permit him because he is a *moujahid* and he would marry me later. . . ." (190) Some victims do not survive. Armed fundamentalists gang raped two sisters aged 15 and 21 who refused temporary (*muta*) marriage⁹, removed their fingernails and toenails, and cut their throats. (186) Those who have survived have been threatened with punishment; many have gone into hiding or fled to other parts of Algeria after their release or escape. Fear had become pervasive because of the growing frequency of these incidents.

The killing in April 1993 of Karima Belhadj, a 21-year-old typist in a police station, signalled the commencement of a deliberate strategy of targeting women. Her death was followed by the killing of numerous other women, young and old. Some had their throats cut, others their heads cut off. Some have been killed as part of the campaign by the Armed Islamic Group to force women to veil, and unveiled women have been gunned down in the streets. (Islamists are not calling for the "traditional" Algerian veil but a recent import, notes Bennoune, more

proof that fundamentalists are not as "authentic" as they often claim to be or are claimed to be by their defenders.)

While all women face the threat of death if they do not veil, specific women have also been targeted for assassination. These include feminists, activists, and women working in professions labelled immoral by the fundamentalists (i.e., bath attendants, hairdressers, fortune tellers). Some women are vulnerable both as women and as professionals, especially journalists and teachers. Many have gone into hiding. What have the Islamists offered women? One Algerian journalist proposed: "Kidnappings, rape, torture, assassinations, 'dishonor', flight, exile, permanent fear of reprisals, nightmares, hopes and futures broken. . . . Here is a sample of what the soldiers of the Islamic State offer to women and their families, only five years before the dawn of the 21st century." (193) In spite of an atmosphere of widespread psychosis and insecurity, women still struggle to live their lives, to work, and to carry on.

The vehemence with which the fundamentalists in Algeria have attacked women demands explanation. Is this an aberration, a momentary excess? Or is this the logical conclusion to years of marginalizing women and denying them their rights? Bennoune tries to see patterns and meanings in the violence. She finds that many of those women killed have not been accidental victims but rather carefully chosen "because their lives, activities, and voices are a threat to the fundamentalist order." (198) In this case, it is not the fundamentalists who have been demonized, but rather the fundamentalists who have demonized: they have particularly branded activists who champion women's rights.

Many Algerians emphasize, however, that the roots of the violence and violations of women's human rights go deeper. Even prior to the cancellation of elections in Algeria in 1992, which many have claimed marked the start of violence, women had come under attack. This was especially so in the period when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the major fundamentalist grouping, became a legal party and later when it won municipal elections. Incidents include the harassing of professional women on the job, sieges of women's college dormitories, policing of women walking in their own neighborhoods, attacks on women living alone, bans on entering such public spaces as cultural centers, beaches, and unsegregated buses. The attacks on women preceded both the postponement of elections in 1992 and the attacks on male intellectuals and journalists, yet little attention was paid to this violence. This was in part because attacks on women were not seen as political. Still, they should

have been read for what they revealed about the fundamentalists' agenda for women and perhaps as a sign of things to come. (194-197)

Is this violence against women a sideshow in the civil war in Algeria or is it the central drama? It depends on who is telling the story. For women in Algeria, it has great immediacy. One Algerian journalist urged Bennoune in December 1994, "Go and tell them what is happening here. How shocking it is that so many outside do not know, that so many are ignorant and are silent. In Algeria every day women are being kidnapped, raped, mutilated, tortured to death and killed by members of fundamentalist armed groups which the United States government helped to train and with whom it continues to urge the Algerian government to dialogue." (185) Many women fear that in a government settlement with the fundamentalists, women's rights would be a concession. This has happened before in Algeria.

Violence against women in Algeria represents an extreme and thus far unique case of politicized Islam. Elsewhere religious minorities or other groups may bear the brunt of the violence, or Islamists may have elected to pursue a non-violent course. One hopes that other groups will not imitate the action of the Algerian extremists in killing unveiled women, but it is important to note that the ideology, which is shared, gives the attacks some justification. It is also important to combat the threats that precede such attacks, which is not always the course taken. In Afghanistan, for example, conservative Islamic councils have recently threatened to attack women who work in United Nations offices as well as the offices themselves. Rather than confront the religious conservatives, UN officials had seemingly decided to abandon their female employees.¹⁰ This is the sort of concession — sacrificing women's rights in an effort to appease Islamists — that Muslim feminists fear and abhor.

Ultimately, the issue is not whether men or women as a group have suffered more or will potentially suffer more if Islamists come to power, or will gain more. Experts on fundamentalism need to include women in their analyses and tell us why women of certain classes are sometimes attracted to these movements and occasionally gain advantages through them, even as they lose certain protections. We also need to know how women experience the violence unleashed in some of these struggles: why they are targeted verbally and sometimes attacked physically. When intolerance against women is tolerated, fundamentalists are strengthened. This was the lesson in Iran: early on when the clerics tar-

geted women, the left and liberal secularists deserted them, not knowing that they would be next, and not realizing that women's rights are an integral part of human rights.

NOTES

- 1 Nazih Ayubi, "Rethinking the Public/Private Dichotomy: Radical Islamism and Civil Society in the Middle East," *Contention* 4, no. 3 (1995): 79-105; Uriah Furman, "Social Thought in Contemporary Non-Establishment Islam," (Ph.D. thesis, Hebrew University, 1994).
- 2 Nikki R. Keddie, "Women, Gender, and Fundamentalism Worldwide," unpublished article.
- 3 Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 4 Paidar, *Women*, 232.
- 5 Shahla Haeri, "Of Feminism and Fundamentalism in Iran and Pakistan," *Contention* 4, no. 3 (1995): 129-49; Farzaneh Milani, *Veil and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992); Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State, and Ideology in Contemporary Iran," in *Women, Islam, and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 48-76.
- 6 Mahnaz Afkhami, ed., "Introduction," *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 1.
- 7 Afkhami, "Introduction," 3.
- 8 Katima Bennoune, "S.O.S. Algeria: Women's Human Rights under Siege," in *Faith and Freedom*, 184-208. The following discussion is based on this article. See also, Susan Slyomovics, "Hassiba Ben Bouali, If You Could See Our Algeria: Women and Public Space in Algeria," *Middle East Report* (Jan.-Feb. 1995): 8-13.
- 9 Muhammad permitted *nuta*, temporary marriage or marriage of pleasure, but the second caliph Umar banned it, and it has since become a practice restricted to Shi'a. These Sunni Algerian fundamentalists seem to have returned directly to the teachings of Muhammad and the Qur'an