

Book Reviews

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

Mahnaz Afkhami

London: I B Tauris, 1995, 244 pp., £12.99. ISBN 1-86064-008-7

Faith and Freedom is an interesting series of case studies addressing the question of women's human rights in the Muslim world. It is based on a pre-Beijing conference in Washington, organised by the Sisterhood is Global Institute, which invited eminent scholars in the field to address the problems of difference and generalities. Are human rights applicable to all at all times, or can the Muslims delineate a separate and different path which would demand qualified rights? The authors come to the conclusion that analysing and understanding the specificities of Islam and Islamic societies would demonstrate the reality that women all over the world need similar rights and that by understanding Islam and its teaching they could strategise to gain these rights.

This volume is a valuable contribution to the current debates about women-centred politics and the discourse of difference.¹ In an introductory section, Mahnaz Afkhami and Deniz Kandiyoti present an international perspective on the subject and the processes of political empowerment. Fatemeh Mernissi (p. 33) argues that Islam and democracy should be reformulated ...

... away from political violence and racist overtones and closer to the realm of reason. The first step is to compare what is logically comparable: liberal democracy and the Muslim state as forms of government, rather than liberal democracy and Islam as a culture or religion.

Abdullahi An-Na'im and Bouthaina Shaaban and Farida Shaheed undertake such a logical

process by focusing on Islamic law. An-Na'im underlines the importance of historical specificities and social construct of Islamic laws; a view echoed by Shaheed. Shaaban studies the contribution of the eminent woman scholar Nazira Zin al-Din, in offering appropriate interpretation of the different effects of Islamic law on women and men by returning to sources such as *hadith*, reported by female companions of the Prophet.

Shaheed emphasises the role of advocacy undertaken by organisations such as Women Living Under Islamic Laws, in supporting groups of women who in specific countries are faced with the difficulty of strategising against the draconian imposition of particular morality laws. Eleanor Abdella Doumato's chapter discusses Saudi women's struggles to gain an element of freedom of mobility within the public sphere. Anne Elizabeth Mayer places such struggles in an international context and highlights the importance of right-wing moralism on a world-wide basis, including activists such as anti-abortionists in the USA and elsewhere.

The second part of the volume contains specific case-studies of the legal definitions of violence and the cultural and legal constraints on women in countering them: Shahla Haeri's case-study of rape as a weapon for asserting male political power in Pakistan is both harrowing and enlightening. Women of all classes are vulnerable to such a crime when a man's honour is closely linked with the chastity of his wife. However, in Pakistan some brave women, supported by their families and the women's organisations, have turned this process on its head by publicly denouncing their rapists and exposing these men for the dishonourable criminals that they are. Sima Vali's chapter highlights the problems created by the unquestioning acceptance of some patriarchal values by aid donors. In the case of

Afghan refugee women, they are expected to uphold Islamic values. With the emergence of the extremist Islamists, this means a turning away from the prevailing social norms towards far more restrictive ones, which impose physical restrictions on women and create a new structure of social dependence.

The crisis faced by Afghan women is experienced in a far more critical way by Algerian women. Liberal and educated intellectuals, particularly women, are being killed for refusing to bow to the fundamentalist interpretation of subjugation that the Islamists are demanding of all women at all times. The merest digression from absolute obedience, from young or old, is punished by death — a punishment which is meted out mercilessly to any girl and woman of any age and any class who dares to defend her most elementary of human rights: '... the armed groups have actually violated nearly every principle of *Islamic* humanitarian law as well as international norms' (p. 200). Karima Bennouna calls on women the world over to show solidarity with Algerian women and their struggles for peace and right to life.

The volume concludes on a more optimistic political note by publishing an article by the redoubtable Jordanian woman member of parliament and journalist, Toujan al Faisal, and by describing the chequered history of her opposition to Islamists in Jordan and her eventual success in gaining popular votes and support, despite the extremists' fierce and public opposition to her and her cause.

This is a very useful book, which should be read by all those who are interested in, or working with, women in the Middle East and Islamic world.

Note

See for example Mary Maynard's 'Race, gender and the concept of difference' in Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard (eds): *The Dynamics of Race and Gender*, Taylor and Francis, London, 1994.

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The Alms Bazaar: Altruism under Fire — Non-profit Organisations and International Development

Ian Smillie

London: IT Publications, 1995, 286 pp., £16.95

In this book, Ian Smillie describes how, why, and at what cost NGOs, having their genesis in altruism, compassion, and service, have now come to play an increasingly important role in international development. It reads like a well-researched, anecdotal 'travelogue', in which the author describes both the beautiful and the ugly contours of the contemporary NGO landscape. Written in simple English, the book uses the kind of idiom that is easily understood by those for whom English is not their first language.

Smillie honestly analyses much of the ideology in order to lay bare the naked truth about the NGO enterprise. He shows some NGOs to be innovative, some to be efficient, some to be foolish, and others to be downright knavish. He shows how some of the work they have done is useless, some of what they have done is clearly dishonest, and how some of them are utterly incompetent. He even documents the 'political messing around' that some NGOs have done.

Smillie poses and discusses a series of very perceptive questions: What are NGOs? How are they funded? How are they managed? Is the definition of NGOs adequate? What are women's NGOs actually doing? What are NGOs doing in disasters and emergencies? Can Southern NGOs be partners of their Northern counterparts — or are they clients and dependants? Has the funding system transformed NGOs into project-implementing sub-contractors? What are they telling the public in the North about the reality in the South? Can they in their present form play an authentic role in strengthening civil society?

What the book lacks, however, is a theoretical framework of analysis to hold together the facts and observations that are so eloquently documented. This becomes most evident when the author tries to explain and interpret the ground realities of the NGO