

Faith & Freedom

Foreign Affairs Spring 1996

Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World

Edited by Mahnaz Afkhami

THE DEATH IN EGYPT last month of a 14-year old girl following a ritual circumcision has got the country's human rights activists up in arms. Indeed, spurred by the death of Amira Kamil, members of the Egyptian Organisation of Human Rights are going to Court as part of their continuing campaign to ban the practice of female circumcision and, in particular, to overturn a religious *fatwa* supporting it. Issued by Sheikh Gad al Haq Ali Gad al Haq, the *fatwa* justifies circumcision on religious grounds and, indeed, describes it as "a laudable practice that does honour to women." Precisely how circumcision can honour a woman is hard to understand. But what is not hard to understand is the physical and psychological devastation that female circumcision has wrought — and continues to wreak — on the lives of some 3,000 women and girls who are daily subjected to it in Egypt alone.

That Egyptian court case underscores the timeliness of this book. Edited by Mahnaz Afkhami, *Faith & Freedom* is about the quest of Muslim women to secure their basic human rights and draws on the experience of 11 other women in assessing the current status of Muslim women around the world. In the opening chapter of the book, Afkhami forcefully and eloquently elucidates the problem women face in the contemporary Muslim world.

"There are over half a billion women in the Muslim world. They live in vastly

different lands, climates, cultures, societies, economies and politics. Few of them live in a purely traditional environment. For most of them modernity means,

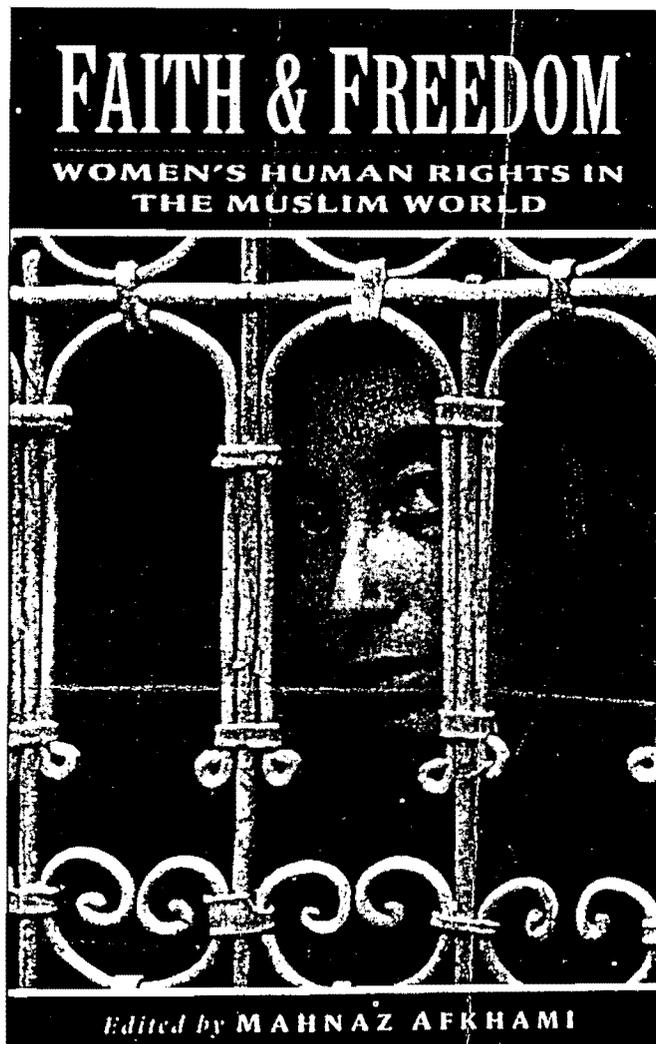
selves and at the world that surrounds them. The most taxing contradiction they face casts the demands of living in the contemporary world against the re-

quirements of tradition as determined and advanced by the modern Islamist world view. At the centre of this conflict is the dilemma of Muslim women's human rights — whether Muslim women have rights because they are human beings, or whether they have rights because they are Muslim women."

Faith & Freedom is partly the outcome of the September 1994 Washington Dialogue, a conference on "Religion, Culture, and Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World" convened in Washington DC by the Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI). The Washington Conference was the first of three held by SIGI in the run-up to the 1995 UN World Conference on Women convened in Beijing and, according to Afkhami, was held "to bring the views of women from the Muslim world to the international debate on women's human rights and to ensure their participation in identifying problems and recommending corrective actions." Well-timed, the Washington Dialogue took place shortly after the 1993 UN Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna and it virtually coincided with the 1994 UN Conference on Population and

Development in Cairo.

But well-timed or not, the Washington Dialogue — as well as the UN Conferences in Austria and Egypt — none the



above all, conflict — a spectrum of values and forces that compete for their allegiance and beckon them to contradictory ways of looking at them-

less met with stiff opposition from many Muslim governments. Indeed, Afkhami claims that many Muslim governments which had originally supported the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 reneged in Vienna and effectively rejected women's human rights, as defined in international documents, even as aspirations. According to Afkhami, such governments did not justify their actions openly on grounds of political expediency. Instead, she says, "they argued that universal human rights are Western parochial concepts used as weapons of cultural imperialism, that to judge Muslim societies by these standards injures Muslim communal rights, and that for Muslim countries Islam provides the basic elements of a just society, including the fundamental rights of women."

But Muslim governments are not alone in undermining international attempts to define and secure basic human rights for women. "At the Cairo Conference," Afkhami observes, "fundamental-

ist positions on women coalesced across cultures and religions as Islamists joined forces with representatives from the Vatican against women's human rights."

The essays in this book are a timely and forceful collection, drawing attention to the plight of women throughout the Muslim world and urging solutions to their problems. At the heart of that plight is the new view of Islam now propounded in so many parts of that world, the Islamist view which, Afkhami says, sees every domestic issue as negotiable "except women's rights and their position in society." According to Afkhami, the Islamist ethic often manifests itself concurrently as discursive text and as naked violence in the effort to control women, a point more than amply illustrated by the recent *fatwa* supporting female circumcision in Egypt.

To a certain extent, though, Afkhami expresses optimism that such grips over the lives of women are loosening, saying that "the ethic and symbols, however,

are becoming increasingly porous as Muslim societies, including a significant number of Muslim women, outgrow and transgress traditional boundaries." In that regard, Afkhami may well be right. But porous though they may be, the ethic and symbols of Islamism still have — and will continue to have — a powerful hold over the men in power and, by implication, over the women such men dominate. That was well-illustrated in the days following the death of the young Egyptian girl, Amira Kamil. Despite that horrendous death, one Egyptian religious leader still showed no misgivings about the practice of female circumcision. "If your son chokes to death while drinking a glass of water, will you prevent his brother from drinking water?" Against such logic, words fail. *Reviewed by Eric Watkins*

Published by I.B. Tauris
PB ISBN: 1-86064-008-7
£12.95