



THE SUNDAY TIMES BOOK

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Into battle with the

Faith & Freedom
*Women's Rights In The Muslim
World*

by Mahnaz Afkhami
I B Tauris £12.95 pp256

Shusha Guppy

More than half a billion Muslim women are living in the world, from the west coast of Africa to the confines of China. They have widely distinct social organisations, traditions and customs. Two of the largest Islamic countries, Pakistan and Turkey, have women prime ministers, while in parts of the Middle East women are still veiled. In west Africa pious Muslim women live and say their daily prayers naked save for a minisarakong, while in east Africa genital mutilation is still practised on girls.

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution "Islamicist" parties have sprouted all over the Muslim world. They have one thing in common: the centrality of women's relations in society is top of their agenda, "the test of the authenticity of the Islamic Order". At the same time an upsurge in Islamic feminism has produced a rich crop of books, scholarly studies as well as witness reports by field workers and activists.

Faith & Freedom is the first to tackle the question of women's rights in the Islamic world within the framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The editor, Mahnaz Afkhami, was secretary general of the Women's Organisation as well as one of two women cabinet ministers in the late Shah of Iran's government before the revolution. Driven into exile in Washington, Dr Afkhami set up and runs the Foundation for Iranian Studies, and is also the director of the Sisterhood Is Global Institute (Sigi). In

Shusha Guppy's *A Girl In Paris* is published by Heinemann



Muslim feminists agree that oppression comes from power-seeking mullahs and politicians

September 1994 Sigi convened a conference in Washington as a precursor of the recent UN World Conference on Women in Peking. Scholars and academics from all over the world were invited to take part, and Faith & Freedom is an anthology of their contributions.

Such compilations are often uneven and hard-going. Not so here: the editor has selected judiciously, and has eliminated rebarbative jargon. The result is a gripping combination of serious scholarship and popularising. Some of the contributors are already well known while others are lesser known distinguished academics, but all argue that

the oppression of women in Muslim societies has nothing to do with Islam, but with power-seeking mullahs and politicians, as well as underdevelopment. Islam postulates equality between the sexes, enjoins both to acquire knowledge, and gives women the right to own and manage property, to initiate marriage and divorce. Among early exemplars are women of the Prophet's household and many women who governed or ruled Muslim countries, from Egypt to India.

Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan sociologist, points out that Islam emphasises individual responsibility and that the "oriental despot" has

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over-seeking mullahs and politicians © Adrian Brooks/Rex

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no "divine backing", as the West assumes. This, in theory at least, should make Islamic societies receptive to democracy and pluralism; so why do liberal Western powers dedicated to human rights "cuddle up with modern oil-producing 'caliphs'," who tyrannise their peoples, particularly their women, in the name of religion?

The American historian Eleanor Doumato states that in Saudi Arabia all discussions relating to women's rights and human rights are referred to the *sharia* (Islamic law) but that the *sharia* is often vague. It was codified two to three centuries after the advent of Islam by male jurists

anxious to please the caliphs of the day, and is a temporal set of rules subject to interpretation and change. Its ambiguity has allowed Saudi authorities to curtail women's rights to work, drive a car, travel and study, while it has enabled more enlightened rulers (such as King Hussein of Jordan) to introduce reforms.

Syrian scholar Bouthaina Shaaban points out that women have been excluded from the interpretation of Koranic verses concerning women and their rights, and that male commentators have imposed their views throughout history for their own political ends. She gives examples of women interpreters pilloried by the religious establishment because they demonstrated the affinity between the Koranic texts and the rights for which they were struggling.

Faith & Freedom ends on a cheerful note: the election of Toujan Al-Faisal, Jordan's first woman MP. In 1989 Jordan held its first democratic elections since the imposition of martial law following the 1967 war with Israel. Of the 650 candidates, 12 were women — Al-Faisal, a journalist and feminist activist, was among them. "They insult us, and we elect them," she wrote in an article. Immediately two "religious" leaders charged her with apostasy, asked the court to divorce her from her husband and remove her children from her care, and passed a *fatwa* against her life.

Her case had repercussions. Together with other women candidates she was defeated, while 20 fundamentalists were elected. Later she was declared innocent of all charges and won a seat in the general elections of 1993. Her article which caused the controversy and won her the *fatwa* appears in the appendix of this illuminating book. I recommend *Faith & Freedom* to all readers interested in the state of human rights, but especially to western feminists — it puts our own preoccupations into perspective.