



# *Cultural Relativism, Universal Human Rights, and Women in Islamic Societies*

By Carolyn Brown Heinz

**H**ow are we to teach about women in Islam? There is no single “woman in Islam,” no single Islamic interpretation of what a woman is and should be, and no single view of Islamic women’s aspirations among those women themselves. Still less is there agreement in the non-Islamic world on this topic, except for two contradictory notions: the first, that Islamic societies should define their own realities regarding gender, not do what the West thinks best for them; and second, that Islamic women should have more rights than they presently do. The first position is associated with “cultural relativism,” the second with “universal human rights.” These would seem to be irresolvable contradictions that will inevitably be raised by students in the classroom as they struggle to work through these complexities. I hope to demonstrate in what follows that this seeming dichotomy largely disappears in the rich diversity of actual Islamic communities and in the disparate hopes and agendas of Islamic women themselves.

*In Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan's sweeping reforms during his ten-year rule (1919–1929), modeled after those of Turkey, established schools for girls, reformed marriage laws to prevent child marriage, limited brideprice, and outlawed concubinage. He encouraged women, including his own queen, to appear in public without chador.*

#### MALE HONOR AND FEMALE VIRTUE

In all societies “authored by men” (Blake 1994), woman is other and men project onto female bodies their social fears and preoccupations. The female other is her body, not her mind or soul, “an organically-based system of symbols inscribed with male concerns and given back to the ‘body politic’” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Women serve as the external representation of male honor at the family level, and at the state level they become emblems of national identity. Colonial justifications for dominance came to focus on the oppressed women of the colonized world, hidden behind veils and in harems beyond the reach of the colonial male gaze (Abu-Lughod 1998). Modernizing rulers of the early twentieth century attempted to unveil women to remove the shame of national backwardness. The “painted doll” emancipated women who resulted came to represent all that was inauthentic in modernized, “westoxicated” Iran (Sullivan 1998). In the anti-modernist rage that was the response to the dislocations of modernism and oppressive regimes, woman became—because they had never stopped being—the precious gem of the “cultural imaginary,” whose re-veiling now became a dominant symbol for postcolonial re-Islamization.

What is the problem with women, that makes it so essential they be under male control and hidden from view? According to the *Qur'ān*, all humans, male and female, struggle to keep their desires [*nafs*] under the control of reason [*'aql*], best done through study of the *Qur'ān*. All sorts of human weaknesses, obsessions, vanities, and indulgences are *nafs*. Lust, greed, fornication, adultery, immodesty, anger, sloth, selfishness, foolishness, arrogance, murder—all *nafs*. Women are more vulnerable to *nafs* than men, and moreover, women entice men into degenerating into their worst selves, succumbing to their own *nafs*. A society in which everyone has freedom to indulge their worst impulses is a society in chaos, *fitna*. From this it follows that freedom, liberation, exploration, self-determination—the language of Western personal autonomy—these are suspect concepts. As Shaykh Fazl Allah Nuri, who was executed in 1906 for resisting the first Constitutional Movement in Iran, said: “The foundation of Islam is obedience and not freedom” (Sullivan 1998, 220).

Because male honor is projected onto the women of the family, women are under constant surveillance from their fathers and brothers. And because women's bodies are emblems of ethnic and national identity, legislation in Islamic societies concerns itself with controls over female virtue. In nations such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, reforms in women's legal status initiated in early and mid-twentieth century have been reversed in favor of stricter codes governing the lives of women. In light of dialogues going on in the US regarding abortion, abstinence, and communication about fertility options, it is important for our students to understand what factors have led to reversal of earlier, more liberal policies. Ironically, in many cases it was top-down reform that generated resistance and demands to return to a more moral, Islamic code.

#### STATE POLICIES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

States in the twentieth century set courses of radical social engineering that first produced powerful, unwelcome dislocations at local levels of family and village, and then political responses ranging from reactionary to revolutionary. These were not the same in every country; modernizing strategies differed; they operated on local cultures that varied; they had differential success, producing differential opportunities and dislocations, affecting local institutions differentially; and the popular responses varied significantly. Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan provide important examples.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in Malaysia in 1972 focused on industrialization that would provide benefits for the Malay male working class. The government established urban free trade zones where transnational corporations employed thousands of mostly rural youth in labor-intensive industries. However, it was chiefly young female migrants from rural areas who came to constitute this work force, satisfying the demand for cheap and obedient workers. By the late 1970s, roughly 80,000 young women had been transformed into industrial laborers (Ong 1990). In the rural areas from which they came, the NEP had succeeded in improving living conditions through technological improvements in agriculture, producing greater class differentiation as a small group of commercial farmers benefited, while large numbers of landless farmers were cut adrift from the rural economy. In the meantime, family planning policies, aimed at all three Malaysian ethnic groups, were accepted by Chinese and Indians, but provoked such male hostility among Malays that Malay fertility rates actually increased. Islamic discourse was used to resist the “killing of the fetus.” The birth of children is beyond human control: “Allah giveth.”

Iran had a petroleum industry controlled by US corporations as the center of gravity for the economy from which wealth, modernization, progress, literacy, and prosperity would flow to all classes of society. The protection of American oil interests and of the shah's regime through violent surveillance and suppression angered the people, and efforts to modernize peasants through village-level programs aimed at young women enraged rural males (Sullivan 1998).

The situation of Pakistan is different. A nation carved out of the British Empire in 1947 and built on a volatile mix of ethnic groups, compounded by the millions of *muhajirs* (immigrants) from India, Pakistan had neither the oil industry of Iran nor the industrialism of Malaysia to generate economic growth, and only weak political institutions derived from the colonial period and India. Though it had reaped liberalizing benefits of British colonial law in matters like the education of women, from 1947 on there were intense debates about the proper role of *sharia*, Islamic law, in Pakistan. Middle-class Pakistanis were frustrated with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's failure to implement economic reforms, his increasing autocracy, and his avowed socialism, leading to the 1977 coup in which General Zia ul-Haq came to power. Short on other forms of legitimation,

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Zia instituted radical policies of Islamization to appeal to a conservative base, especially the Jama'at-i-Islami, reversing many of the legal gains of women over the previous thirty years and codified in the Constitution of 1973, which Zia suspended. In 1979—the same year as the Iranian revolution—Zia announced a series of legal alterations to bring all laws into conformity with Islamic tenets, supposedly as they had existed in the Prophet's time in Saudi Arabia (Weiss 1985).

In Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan's sweeping reforms during his ten-year rule (1919–1929), modeled after those of Turkey, established schools for girls, reformed marriage laws to prevent child marriage, limited brideprice, and outlawed concubinage. He encouraged women, including his own queen, to appear in public without *chador*. These reforms were expanded under Zahir Shah (1933–1973), who jailed prominent mullahs who resisted the unveiling of women (Brodsky 2003). These reforms continued through the 1950s, with women—mostly in urban areas—having increased access to employment, public positions in the media, university education, and professional careers. These advances for women were institutionalized in the 1964 Constitution. All these changes were met with backlashes as against both Islam and *pashtunwali*, the Pashtun (dominant ethnicity of Afghanistan) code for conduct.

#### THE ISLAMIC BACKLASH

The reasons for the often-violent backlash against Westernization, modernization, liberalism, and feminism in these nations are again best seen in their local manifestations.

Resurgent Islam has been most gentle in Malaysia, envisioned as a “return” to an Islamization that never before existed in that form. In the past, Malay *adat* (custom) never demanded the rigid gender segregation of Western Asia; the sexes were relatively egalitarian; women wore loose tunics over their sarongs but did not cover their hair; women could move freely to tend their cash crops and engage in petty trade; equal land shares were awarded to sons and daughters. Malays practiced neolocal residence, disliking the extended family households of the Islamic world and the Chinese (Ong 1990). Malay masculinity depended on a man's economic power to head a household and required him to exercise guardianship over his women.

But the New Economic Policy radically changed life for thousands of rural people, and there was a strong sense that benefits for women came at the expense of men, who were humiliated by their loss of authority, their dependence on daughters' wages, and their inability to keep daughters at home and under their control. Young men could not compete in the workplace with young women. Working girls enjoyed their new social freedoms to define themselves as independent, capable of self-support, and able to choose their own husbands. At the same time there was growing moral confusion on the part of these young women and men, and in the 1970s the revivalist *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia) urged a return to Islam and identification with the pan-Islamic *ummah*. Muhammad's first wife, Katijah, was held up as a

model: she was a merchant who hired Muhammad to run her business, then became his first convert. The working women of Malaysia re-thought their relationship to men.

A new ‘sacred architecture’ of sexuality (Mernissi 1987, xvi) had to be created, through everyday practices inventing “Islamic” traditions (Hobsbawm 1983) that would redraw boundaries between Malay men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims. Almost overnight, large numbers of university students, young workers, and even professionals began to enact—in prayer, diet, clothing, and social life—religious practices borrowed from Islamic history, Middle Eastern societies, and South Asian cults (Ong 1990, 267).

This was more a middle-class than a working-class movement. On the campus of the University of Malaysia, women began wearing the face-framing *minitelekung*, and some went to full, Arab-style *purdah*, a move that officials worried would scare off foreign investors. University women declared their unwillingness to compete with men in the labor market or to seek jobs that would put them in authority over men.

In Pakistan, Islamization may have had only modest influence on the moderate Islam practiced in villages such as the one studied by Richard Kurin (1985), but in urban areas it had a profound effect on middle-class and elite women who did not, as in Malaysia, lead the way. Rather it was enforced on them, provoking strong resistance, including public demonstrations, from women's rights organizations. The *nizam-i-islam*, the 1979 reforms of General Zia, consciously attempted to bring seventh-century Arabian codes of conduct and law to twentieth-century Pakistan. The Offense of Zina (adultery) Act defined rape in such a way that not only can it never be proven, but victims of rape are liable to be classified as adulterers and punished with up to one hundred lashes, while perpetrators of rape are frequently given the benefit of the doubt and released (Weiss 1985; Human Rights Watch 1999). In addition, rape is used as a powerful weapon among male political rivals; as Shahla Haeri shows (1995), “political rape” is a modern improvisation on the theme of feudal honor in which the target of humiliation and shame is not necessarily a specific woman; it is rather a political rival, an old enemy, on whom revenge is to be taken.

The anti-Shah movement in Iran “brought out the greatest political participation by women in the history of Iran” (Sullivan 1998, 232). Ayatollah Khomeini hailed women as the “pillars of Iranian society,” but “women were soon pilloried into submission, the symbol for revolutionary liberation (the *chador*) turned into a shroud of protective exclusion and bondage” (ibid.). Zohreh T. Sullivan interviewed some of these revolutionary Iranian women, some of whom described “moments of unwelcome epiphany.” Not only was the march followed by several days of hysterical responses from young Islamic fanatics who roamed the city in search of women they could assault, but it also revealed to them the indifference of leftist organizations [which had joined the revolutionary movement] to women's

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Meena, not identified by her last name, to protect her family, was murdered by the Taliban. She is a martyred founder of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), who also supplied this photograph.

issues” (ibid.). These Iranian women are now attempting to reclaim some of the gains women had achieved under Pahlavi rule through reinterpretation of the sacred texts of Islam. Looking to the Prophet’s time for acceptable models, Zia Ashraf Nasr, the granddaughter of the renowned Islamic cleric mentioned earlier, Shaykh Fazi Allah Nuri, makes a representative comment:

*I believe, based on the life of the Prophet and the first leaders of Islam, that Muhammad himself did not discriminate against women. He considered his daughter Fatima superior to men. He made her the beginning. . . . Why? The Prophet had sons from other wives . . . But he didn’t give any of them as much power as he gave this girl . . . After Fatima, her daughter was privileged—Hazrat Zainab who supervised the caravans, who took care of the family in the desert of Karbala, who brought the family in its imprisonment from Karbala to Medina. There were other men after Imam Hossein’s martyrdom—Imam Zeimul Abedin, for instance. But it was a woman, Hazrat Zainab, who supervised the family, who took charge. Even in Yezid’s court, it was she who lectured at him, and what a sermon she delivered. She was a woman, yet she was at the head of Islam. Then why should a woman, later on, stay home and the man go out? . . . Now the veil enslaves woman. Now women have been packaged and bundled so that one has to guess from the shape. . . . Is it a human being or a black bundle? (Sullivan 1996, 221)*

It takes the education of women to produce this kind of articulate re-thinking of received tradition. As a result of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, where women were locked up at home and refused even the most elementary education, female literacy is now around four percent. Our students can understand the critical views espoused by educated women like Zia Ashraf Nasr, but need to be helped to understand the self-sacrificial devotion of women in *jihadi* communities. Students find Audrey Shalinsky’s 1993 study of Farghanachi Uzbek refugees from Afghanistan disturbingly beyond their frames of reference. Shalinsky describes the practices of piety that produce willing *shahid*, martyrs for Islam. Women and children, moved to tears, listen to cassette tapes made by conservative mullahs telling stories of the Prophet, which remind them of their own sacrifices and lost loved ones. One story describes the glorious reception of the dying martyr: God says, “Welcome, welcome. Come! Everything is waiting for you. The heavens are waiting for you. The *houris* are waiting for you. The angels are waiting for you” (Shalinsky 1993, 667). Another is a romantic story of a young man who asks the Prophet for permission to spend his wedding night with his bride before going to war; next morning, after a stirring farewell from his beloved, he leaves for his martyrdom, saying: “On the Day of Judgment ask God and the Prophet for me . . . You may find me in bloody clothes. Oh my one-night bride, you will smell the musk and fragrance from my blood” (670).

These tapes prepared Islamic mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives to sacrifice their men to martyrdom and themselves to total submission in the name of Islam to bring the ‘umma to power. They succeeded—and that was the Taliban regime. But throughout all that period, another group of women was struggling for a different vision of woman. Members of the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women (RAWA) were attempting, among other things, to document atrocities against women. Their most famous achievement was to film the widely-seen public execution of Zarmeena, a mother of seven who was accused of killing her husband. The heroism of these women is apparent from interviews conducted by Anne Brodsky with RAWA women who risked their lives to get the footage:

*We knew this execution wouldn’t be documented by any news agency. The Taliban wouldn’t do it and they wouldn’t let others. So it was our responsibility. And we discussed if we should just take photographs or make a report or if we should film it. The opinion of the committee, including me, was that RAWA was a political organization of women, defending human rights and women, but we didn’t have power to make the Taliban stop. The least we could do was document the scene by filming it and getting the word out. We did it because no one else could document this, to show the brutalities. We were willing to sacrifice our lives to do this. (Brodsky 2003, 15)*

*The distinct contribution of an anthropological approach is to immerse the student in real facts on foreign ground, where they witness women, on their own terms and not necessarily responding to Western influence, staking out, with great personal drama, every position along that spectrum.*

These women are fighting for human rights for Muslim women in Afghanistan. They are jihadis, too, and like other jihadis, they are willing to accept martyrdom. Like the Farganachi women and like Zia Ashraf Nasr, they, too, look to the Prophet's time for models: he banned female infanticide and *levirate* (forced marriage of a widow to her husband's brother); gave women the right to inherit and keep property of their own, even after marriage; urged that dowry go directly to the woman, not to her in-laws; and allowed women as well as men to initiate divorce (Brodsky 2003, 39). The martyred founder of RAWA, Meena, was not only a superb organizer but also a poet who could express the aspirations of millions of women:

### I'LL NEVER RETURN

*I'm the woman who has awoken  
I've arisen and become a tempest through the ashes of my burnt children  
I've arisen from the rivulets of my brother's blood  
My nation's wrath has empowered me  
My ruined and burnt villages fill me with hatred against the enemy,  
I'm the woman who has awoken,  
I've found my path and will never return.  
I've opened closed doors of ignorance  
I've said farewell to all golden bracelets  
Oh compatriot, I'm not what I was  
I'm the woman who has awoken  
I've found my path and will never return.  
I've seen barefoot, wandering and homeless children  
I've seen henna-handed brides with mourning clothes  
I've seen giant walls of the prisons swallow freedom in their ravenous stomach  
I've been reborn amidst epics of resistance and courage  
I've learned the song of freedom in the last breaths, in the waves of blood and in victory  
Oh compatriot, Oh brother, no longer regard me as weak and incapable  
With all my strength I'm with you on the path of my land's liberation.  
My voice has mingled with thousands of arisen women  
My fists are clenched with the fists of thousands of compatriots  
Along with you I've stepped up to the path of my nation,  
To break all these sufferings all these fetters of slavery,  
Oh compatriot, Oh brother, I'm not what I was  
I'm the woman who has awoken  
I've found my path and will never return.*

—Published in *Payam-e-Zan* No.1, 1981

### HUMAN RIGHTS OR CULTURAL RELATIVISM?

Those of us who teach about Asia take many disciplinary approaches. Certainly an ethics or public policy course could spend a good deal of time debating and agonizing over the universal rights versus cultural relativism issue. The distinct contribution of an anthropological approach is to immerse the student in real facts on foreign ground, where they witness women, on their own terms and not necessarily responding to Western influence, staking out, with great personal drama, every position along that spectrum. ■

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