

BUILDING ON INDIGENOUS CONCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS



Dr. Mahnaz Afkhami, Executive Director of the Sisterhood is Global Institute.

The Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI) is an independent, international non-profit organization which strives to improve women's human rights on the national, regional and global levels. Founded in 1984, its membership includes women from 70 countries. One of SIGI's most important current projects is the development of a human rights manual designed to teach women in non-Western cultural contexts about general concepts of human rights and how to attain and protect these rights in their societies. Dr. Mahnaz Afkhami, a former professor of English Literature who was born in Iran, is currently Executive Director of SIGI. Al-Raida Editor Laurie King-Irani conducted the following interview with her in SIGI's offices in Maryland in the United States last August.

Laurie King-Irani: Last year, you edited a ground-breaking volume, *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World* (Syracuse University Press, 1995), which is leading scholars, policy-makers and human rights activists throughout the world to look at the status and

rights of women in Islamic societies in new and innovative ways. I understand that this book was the result of a 1994 conference convened by SIGI in preparation for the Beijing Conference. Can you tell us if the primary focus of SIGI's work is women in the Islamic world?

Mahnaz Afkhami: No, not exactly. SIGI is a global network of women. We represent women's groups in seventy countries, and the alert system that we initiated in 1984 has an active membership of more than 1300 people. Alerts are translated into Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese and English and sent out to all corners of the world. Recently, however, we have been emphasizing women in Muslim societies because of the presence of so many active, articulate and energetic women in those societies who are suggesting projects and taking part in the dialogues, conferences and publications we have initiated. So, there has been a tendency in the last couple of years for SIGI to be more active in these societies, but we are still working in other geographic areas, too.

LKI: Is SIGI's work primarily educational?

MA: SIGI is an educational organization, but it also has a "think-tank" function, since most of our members are extraordinary women from various backgrounds in different countries. These women are politicians, writers, theoreticians and scholars who are making important contributions to scholarly discourse on women's issues throughout the world. The think-tank aspect of SIGI's work is especially important in fulfilling our goal of encouraging a global dialogue on women's rights, in order to encourage a deeper understanding of the cultural and political nuances, the diversities and differences, as well as the similarities, that are found in the situation of women throughout the world.

A key part of SIGI's work right now is our Human Rights Education Project, which we began after noting that the declarations, concepts and conventions that have come out of the international human rights movement are usually quite Western-oriented, both in concept and in language.

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So much of the world has had very little to do with the drafting of these declarations or the formulation of these concepts. Indeed, the terminology of some international conventions and declarations can alienate people in non-Western cultures, even to the extent that these declarations are seen as a continuation of the cultural hegemony of the West in the formerly colonized countries of the world. This view, while extreme, is often justified by some of the historical experiences of individuals in developing societies. At the same time, this emphasis on international human rights conventions masks some of the deeply-rooted human rights concepts that are indigenous to non-

Western cultures. Let's take, for example, a woman's right to work. In Muslim societies, we all know that the first person who became a Muslim was Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, who was a successful business woman. She was, in fact, Muhammad's employer. This is evidence of a long-standing, indigenous tradition of working women in the Muslim world. Long before women in the West had the right to work, there was already a well-established acceptance of a Muslim woman's right to work. In disseminating human rights information in the Islamic world, international organizations are all too often educating in ways that are not attractive to or rooted in native, indigenous traditions. Hence, their efforts are often resisted in these non-Western communities. Our Human Rights Education Program, on the other hand, is based on seeking out indigenous, local, and culturally appropriate examples, expressions and images in support of human rights. We are currently overseeing this project in six different Muslim societies: Malaysia, Jordan, Lebanon, Uzbekistan, Iran and Bangladesh. We are working with women in all of these countries to discern what the key rights concepts, symbols and images are in their societies, and then to help them prioritize which rights are the ones they most want to stress. We are striving to prepare the Human Rights Education manuals on the basis of the local experts' in-put, and according to the culturally relevant concepts and priorities as they view them.

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LKI: Who will use the manual when it is completed? Teachers in the formal educational sector, or activists in the informal sector?

MA: The manuals will certainly be introduced into the educational curricula,

but first we are going to test the manuals. In September of this year we will have the first test manuals ready, then, in early 1997, we are going to work with women educators using the manuals in the six aforementioned countries. After we receive their feed-back and advice, as well as more original materials from each of these cultural contexts, we will begin to adapt the manual and its concepts to different groups of people. For example, we will certainly target teachers. Perhaps we will also do manuals for government employees and media personnel. We have to think in terms of adapting the manuals not only for different societies, but for different sectors in each society, e.g.,

both women and men government workers, teachers, judges and social workers. Adjustments will probably have to be made for each of the targeted audiences in each society. We are also going to get advice from individuals in each of the six countries concerning which groups ought to be targeted first. In some countries it will be possible to go directly to the school system; in other countries it may be harder. In some countries, it may be that higher-level decision-makers are accessible and interested, and in other countries not. What is important to emphasize about this human rights education project, though, is that the manual will not be produced here and shipped out; instead, it will be created in the context of particular cultures and societies by individuals and groups who know their own society's values, needs and priorities.

LKI: Concerning women's human rights in the Arab world, how would you appraise the Beijing conference and follow-up activities? Where do you see the human rights debate heading?

MA: There were two things about Beijing that I feel very positive about. First, looking back on the Vienna Human Rights Conference in 1993, I and many others felt that very few women from the global south participated actively and effectively in Vienna. Of course, a number of women from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America were present, but considering their representation in the world's current population, and especially considering that Muslim women, whether Arab or not, comprise 500 million people, the number of women from the global south who occupied decision-making positions were very few. It seemed that any kind of decision-making power was concentrated in a small number of Western women's hands, specifically, women from North America and Western Europe, who chose the women who came from the global south in order to give the desired "rainbow" impression. They had the funding and the capability, and one

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cannot find fault with or raise complaints against people who know how to do things and how to successfully access money and power. But one also wants to encourage others to participate. Women from the global south must also have an equal and effective voice in international fora. It is

not a matter of wanting to keep certain groups of women out, but to bring more women into the decision-making process. Thus, SIGI started trying to involve more women from the global south in the preparation process for the Beijing conference. To a great extent, our efforts succeeded, although we have yet to achieve all of our goals and ideals. However, a lot more women from the global south, particularly Muslim women, were significantly involved in the preparatory process. We had a number of sessions at the Commission on the Status of Women meetings prior to the Beijing Conference. In addition, we convened the conference on religion, culture and human rights in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1994, which led to the publication of the edited volume, *Faith and Freedom*. SIGI also organized two other conferences, one in Africa which focused on women and commerce and industry, and the other in Athens, which addressed the growing problem of women refugees.

At the Beijing conference itself, there was quite a large contingent of Muslim women present. We saw the full spectrum of women from the Muslim world at Beijing: the Islamist (or "fundamentalist"), the conservative, and then the more secular and progressive. I think this range of representation was very healthy because it enabled us to initiate a fruitful debate on the current and future status of women in Islamic societies. One of the interesting points revealed by this debate was that, although the very resurgence of an Islamist movement in so many Muslim societies has had negative consequences for women (especially in Algeria and Afghanistan), it has nonetheless also had an important positive consequence: it has brought to the fore issues of women's rights and participation. Women's issues have now become a focal point for public debate and discussion throughout the Muslim world. Women's silence and subservience is no longer simply taken for granted.

Another positive aspect we saw at Beijing was that although so many governments

persisted in using religion and culture as excuses for reinstating a subordinate status for women, their efforts ultimately failed. Some governments spared no effort to argue that women's human rights just did not and could not mesh with their scriptural or cultural values. We even saw some very interesting coalitions forming between people and states who usually have nothing at all in common. But despite all of their efforts to form alliances and sway opinion, the Beijing Platform for Action was approved by consensus, and came out rather strongly in favor of the inviolability of women's human rights and the necessity of governments throughout the world to change laws, policies and practices in order to be more in line with key international conventions protecting women's human rights. So, I can say without hesitation that I am optimistic about what happened at Beijing.

LKI: But how do you foresee the follow-up to Beijing in the Arab world?

MA: I see that there are two simultaneous movements happening now in the Arab-Islamic world: One is the development of an extraordinary awareness of rights on behalf of women, and parallel to it is an Islamist resurgence which focuses on women and their proper role in family, society, and the community as the measure of the Islamic integrity of any given Muslim society. Paradoxically, this focus on woman as symbol has given some Muslim women an opportunity to be active and visible in ways that would not previously have been possible. I am speaking here of conservative, fundamentalist Muslim women, who would never have had such opportunities for self-expression and activism without the backing of a fundamentalist political movement. It is not a form of activism, however, which is conducive to the long-term achievement of human rights for women, but it is an activism which brings women into fields which they otherwise might never have entered. There's no doubt, though,

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that what they are urging is a "separate but equal" platform for women, which is a negative (and in my view, a potentially dangerous), factor as we have seen in recent events in Algeria. But by bringing into an activist role these women who would not otherwise have had one, we can say that the fundamentalists are doing leadership training of women and teaching them the principles of persuasive and articulate public speaking. Still, there is no doubt that these two movements, the feminist and the fundamentalist, are mutually contradictory. In the end, the human rights groups are talking about equal opportunities, equal rights, equal access to employment, wealth and key

public spaces, and the others are saying the equality does not apply, but complementarity does. And to many of us at SIGI, complementarity implies inherently unequal treatment of men and women, as well as an inherent limitation of roles, not only for women, but for men, too.

We have to confront and discuss this issue of inequality, but it cannot be confronted by ideologies and methodologies imported into Muslim societies from elsewhere. It has to be an indigenous commentary and confrontation; it has to come from within, and it must combine the views of the people themselves and be spearheaded by the people themselves.

LKI: Do you see that happening in your travels and studies? Is an indigenous Muslim feminism taking shape?

MA: Yes, I definitely think so. Even some of the adherence of women activists to the fundamentalist groups has resulted from a basic heightening of social and political consciousness. Many women have chosen this route — and sometimes even for reasons other than religious ones — because they are against poverty, corruption, foreign military interventions, and an invasion of a highly materialistic Western consumer culture. So, a lot of women allied with these Islamist groups have not explicitly opted for a subservient or unequal position (as encoded in the fundamentalists' discourse), but have joined the Islamist movement on social and political grounds. All of this indicates to me that Muslim women are entering the political realm in increasing numbers.

Another interesting phenomenon is that modernity brings with it certain complexities and contradictions because we are passing from one set of values and priorities to another. This is a period of great uncertainty and potential confusion, and the upshot is that many people throughout the world are really quite anxious. So, the women's movement in general, and the women's human rights movement in particular, are modern phenomena. But, so is political Islam! The Islamist resurgence is also a quintessentially modern development. If traditions were already in place and unquestioned, there would be no need to have a fundamentalist movement, whose *raison d'être* is to

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restore a traditional order that has been lost. These two movements are both results of momentous changes in a shared and common world. I think we will continue seeing these two movements, which arise out of the same socio-cultural and temporal context, clashing for the foreseeable future. They may help bring attention to the negative and destructive aspects of both Eastern and Western societies, such as materialism, corruption, poverty, and the lack of popular participation in the political process. Seen from this angle, both feminism and Islamism give powerless people more of a voice in political decision-making. Also, we must not forget that there is a rich vein

to be mined in Islam; we can go back to the Qur'an and the Hadith to address contemporary questions of social justice and equality. But women's rights should not be confined within the limited framework of any particular religion, whether Islam, Buddhism, Christianity or Judaism.

LKI: Have you, or anyone else affiliated with SIGI, given thought to publishing a book in Arabic outlining an indigenous feminism drawing on indigenous Arab sources, whether Islamic or Christian?

MA: Dr. Fatima Mernissi of Morocco is working on a project entitled "Humanist Islam" with a large number of colleagues. It is a huge project: a series of books in Arabic which will look at women and women's rights through an Islamic lens. They are now collecting and studying all the verses of the Qur'an and all the Traditions of the Prophet that are positive concerning women's rights.

Lately, we are seeing a lot of new writing on women's role in religion. In our next collection of papers, to be entitled "Prose, Politics and Power: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World," there is an essay on religious higher learning as a human right. This is extremely important in Muslim societies, because women are generally not allowed into religious schools of higher learning, and unless you have the background and the learning, you will never have the validity or the credibility to discuss Islam seriously. So, for the first time at Beijing, women's right to higher studies in theology was claimed as a basic human right. I think it is essential to strive for this right.

LKI: What, in your opinion, are the major challenges confronting women in the Arab world?

MA: Without hesitation, I would say that the most important challenge is getting women into decision-making positions. We have a lot of work ahead of us in our strug-

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gle to ensure women's participation in social, political and economic decision-making. Once you have that, you can influence decisions which affect women in all fields: education, health care, the economy, the environment, etc. We have to remember that decision-making in any society does not simply happen. It requires a lot of preparation and training. So, the concept of educating women for empower-

ment, educating women how not to be afraid of power, is of utmost importance. Too many women learn that power is something unattractive — it's unfeminine! — so it is crucial to teach women to see power in new ways — not just as force, might and coercion, but as the power to create, to help, to heal, the power to do things for people, the power to make decisions that are positive and constructive. This type of education is essential for getting women into key positions within the power structures of their societies. And, of course, education always involves an awareness of one's relationship to one's culture and religion. How do we reconcile this? This is not an issue specific to the Arab world; we also see similar phenomena in the United States with the rise of the Christian fundamentalist groups. But certainly, the answer is not to go back to some golden era that probably never really existed!

Another important challenge is achieving financial and economic independence for women. This was the concern I heard most frequently voiced by grass-roots women's organizations in Iran 25 years ago. And in the US, when we hear about battered wives, we are reminded that these women could escape abuse and degradation if only they could stand on their own two feet financially. Again, education is so important; to achieve economic self-sufficiency, you first must have the necessary skills and training.

LKI: What has been your experience in dialoguing with Western feminists with little awareness of women's realities and concerns beyond North America and Western Europe? Do you feel that they have opened their eyes to the needs and views of women in the global south, particularly Arab and Muslim women?

MA: I think there is more sensitivity now than before. There was, and still is, a certain arrogance in the Western women's attitude. There's a sense that they have all the answers. But perhaps this stems from their lack of expo-

sure to other realities, their lack of opportunities to learn about other cultures. It seems that Western women who have lived in non-Western contexts can be more sensitive than those who have never had any experience, except what they see and hear in the media. Sometimes I get the sense that, if you don't have the same concern for the same priorities as Western feminists, you are made to feel less developed, or less progressive. I have seen a lot more sensitivity from Western feminists in the last few years, but I must add here that sometimes their attempts at cultural awareness and sensitivity can go too far, as we see among those Western women who say that female circumcision (female genital mutilation, *i.e.*, FGM) is just another cultural practice. But this cultural relativism is just another example of the arrogance I have just described. It is as if Western feminists are saying "okay, a whole set of norms apply to us and our culture, and a whole other set of norms applies to these other cultures."

What we must not forget is that all cultures, whether Eastern or Western, have gone through various stages of cultural expressions and behaviors, some of which have been harmful and negative, and many of which have changed. And they ought to change. All cultures change, and if they didn't, then every human society would be characterized by a harsh hierarchy of a few dominating men on top of the social and political pyramid, and all women and most other men in subordinate positions.

LKI: It is also important to realize that women don't play a very significant role at the top of the social or economic hierarchy in North America, either!

MA: No, they really don't! In the United States, you have only one percent participation by women in economic and corporate decision-making, and just seven percent in political decision-making. It is a dismal record, considering America's advanced economic development and its high, overall level of education. So Western feminists should consider this bleak reality before they criticize the non-Western world. But in general, there is much more understanding and sensitivity on the part of Western feminists now than we saw even two or three years ago.

LKI: What would you cite as the deciding factors in this deepening of sensitivity and awareness?

MA: A lot of it has

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stemmed from contact and communication. We have expanded the circle of dialogue considerably. The UN and international conferences have made a great difference in that they have allowed people to share perspectives and information. Also, the Internet has helped tremendously. But here, I would like to point out that it is not only Western feminists who have displayed arrogant attitudes. Some of us non-Western feminists have also misjudged, misrepresented and simplified "Western women." Just who is a Western woman? There is as much variety and difference in the West as in the East or South! We demand that Western feminists make the effort to understand our diversity and differences, then we turn around and speak of "the American woman" as if she was an easily identified, categorizable entity. Do we mean an African-American woman? A Catholic woman? A Jewish woman? A single, professional woman living in Manhattan? Or a farm wife raising a family in Iowa? We all are guilty of simplifying and labeling each other, but the more we dialogue and cooperate, the more that tolerance, understanding and sensitivity will grow.

LKI: What would you say is the single most daunting obstacle to Arab women's participation in political and economic decision-making?

MA: Lack of education, not just formal education, but all forms of education and socialization that lead to women's empowerment. There is a great need to develop forms of education which will make it harder for women to be manipulated, exploited and abused, that will make it harder to perpetuate the traditional subservient role of women. Such education need not be alien to the society; rather, it should be based on the concepts, priorities and values which are dear to women, such as their religious heritage and their important roles as nurturers and educators of the young. Lack of education for empowerment leads women to "buy into" the myth that being a woman of equal status to a man somehow threatens her family, or somehow contradicts her role as mother, wife, friend, citizen or religious believer. And when women buy into that constricting mentality, it harms them a great deal.

LKI: But I have noticed that when Arab women express a desire to do new things, to take a critical look at their society and traditions in order to expand their horizons or increase their options, native critics immediately say, 'Ah! This is a Western approach!'. Since anything labeled as Western or American is automatically suspect, even dangerous, this label puts an immediate halt to any discussion or action.

MA: Exactly! That is what I meant when I said that people will emphasize a woman's proper role or deportment as

part of her religious, cultural or national heritage, because this is their reaction to the painful colonial past. They have been using the past as a reason to perpetuate women's inequality and subordination. In traditional and non-Western societies, feminist discourse is always pushed into the category of 'the other', so this identification of feminism with the West and imperialism has harmed us a great deal. But now, people in the global South are actively trying to transcend this way of thinking; I believe this perspective has run its course.

LKI: It seems to me that SIGI's approach of urging non-Western, particularly Muslim, women to develop their own indigenous forms of culturally relevant feminism and concepts of rights is a stroke of genius. It could do much to remove the false dichotomy many scholars have erected between Islam and the West, and thereby counter the pernicious idea that a "clash of civilizations" is inevitable.

MA: For women in the Arab and Islamic world, one of the most negative things is the extent to which we have been reactive, rather than proactive. We are always hearing Muslim women say 'I don't want to be like American women, British women, or French women! I am against the hegemony of Western culture!' Let's leave this discourse behind! We ought to do our own thing; we ought to say what it is that we do want; we ought to state clearly what we see as a good way of life for a Muslim woman. What do we, as Muslim women, stand for? Why don't we comment seriously on some of the feminist ideas and practices that evolved in the West? I don't mean criticism for the sake of name-calling, but serious study and constructive criticism. Why do we constantly comment upon, and react to, Western views about us? Why don't we take the lead? Why not borrow from the West if they have a valuable idea that works? If we find a particular concept or methodology that proves effective in furthering women's rights in the Arab world, why not utilize it?

Recently, the Jordanian human rights lawyer Asma Khodr was participating in a Human Rights Education Workshop organized by SIGI. She told us about an interesting campaign they initiated in Jordan to encourage children's interest in human rights. A Western woman from Amnesty International immediately picked up on this idea and said, 'that is great! Let's see if we can do that, too!'. Western women don't have this reactive-ness; they aren't threatened, and this is something valuable that we non-Western women can learn from them. Our overall goal at SIGI is to encourage dialogue and respect between all the women of the world. If we don't have respect for each other's opinions, ideas and experiences, how can we expect such respect from men?