

The Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence in the Islamic World

By Jan Goodwin
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363 pages

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Jan Goodwin's account of the lives of women in the Islamic world is quite illuminating, even captivating. The author spent several years traveling throughout the heartland of the Muslim world, interviewing women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, "...from princesses, to rebels, from professionals to peasants" (page 7), in ten different Muslim countries. The result is a lucidly written book, rich in detail, about the ways in which contemporary Muslim women are daily adapting to changes in their societies, among them, a growing trend towards Islamization.

The introductory chapter, entitled "Fundamentally Different," gives a broad overview of the political and social environment in the Muslim world, currently characterized by Islamic revival. Goodwin is quick to point out that women's rights are among the first casualties of the drive to Islamize society throughout the Middle East (page 7-9). Virtually all Islamist movements vehemently reject Western notions of women's rights and insist that the Qur'an and *shari'a* (Islamic Law) ought to be the sole source of legislation concerning women. As Goodwin points out, throughout the centuries, Muslim jurists' interpretations of the Qur'an and the *shari'a* have placed far greater restrictions on women than on men. The book's introduction is intended for the general Western reader, who probably has little understanding of Islam. The introduction is especially good at exposing Western stereotypes about Eastern societies; a specialist on Islam or

the Middle East may want to skip the introduction altogether. This introductory chapter suffers from one major setback: it is loaded with questionable information about the activities of supposed "terrorist" radical Islamist groups in America and the West, as well as alleged Saudi manipulations of the U.S. Government, information that has nothing to do with Goodwin's subject matter.

Chapter Two, "Muslims: The First Feminists", is again intended for the general Western reader and has little to offer of an original viewpoint. Most of the material in the chapter seems to be based on a lengthy interview Ms. Goodwin conducted with Professor Leila Ahmed, an academic authority on Islam and women, whom Goodwin extensively quotes. In this chapter, Goodwin simply repeats the argument that the advent of Islam tremendously improved the conditions of women in Arabia. Goodwin stresses the gentle nature of the Prophet Muhammad, his faithfulness towards his first wife, Khadija, his kind and fair treatment of his subsequent wives, as well as his commitment to the eradication of the worst forms of abuses against women, such as female infanticide (pp. 36-38). Goodwin is correct to point out that Islam was the first religion to advance a detailed list of women's rights, from alimony to inheritance, child support, and protection against slander. Goodwin argues that a deterioration in the status of Muslim women occurred shortly after the death of 'Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, whose authority in matters of religion was undisputed by her male contemporaries during her lifetime (pp. 42-43). In the following centuries, all Muslim jurists have been men, and they have interpreted the religion in such a way as to discriminate against

women while favoring men. This is a very interesting hypothesis, but it is impossible to prove or disprove.

The eleven chapters that follow are all based upon extensive field work in ten Islamic countries and represent some of the best scholarship on the subject of women and Islam published in the second half of this century. The chapters recount the author's journeys throughout the Islamic world, a journey Goodwin felt compelled to undertake after an emotional and sad encounter with an eleven-year-old Afghani refugee girl whom she met in Peshawar, Pakistan while working as a reporter among the Afghani *mujahideen* in the late 1980s (pp. 3-6). Goodwin's quest to learn first-hand about the conditions of women in Muslim societies led her to travel to many hot spots, such as Karachi, Kabul, Gaza, *etc.*, as well as to two of the most conservative Islamic countries: Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Goodwin seems to take delight in recounting the many difficulties she had before she was finally granted a visa to travel to Iran (pp. 103-104). Ten of the eleven chapters deal with the lives of Muslim women in particular countries (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank, Iraq and Egypt). One chapter is devoted to American women, formerly Christian, who have converted to Islam, usually as a result of having married Arab Muslim men.

Especially informative is Chapter 11, which focuses on Palestinian women who participated in the *intifada* and who were then jailed and tortured by the Israeli authorities. Goodwin shows great sympathy and affection for the Palestinians, especially Palestinian women who have had to cope with the harsh realities of occupation, serious economic hardships, inadequate housing and social services; frustrated husbands, brothers and fathers who sometimes vent their emotions on women; and the growing power of Islamist movements seeking to confine Palestinian women to their homes (pp. 292-298).

The value of *The Price of Honor* lies in the hundreds

of lengthy interviews that Goodwin reproduces almost in their entirety. The interviews themselves are very loosely structured, and the questions to which the women are supposedly responding are conveniently dropped out of the text. For the most part, Goodwin lets her respondents structure their own stories, they thus speak freely about the defining moments in their lives, their relationships with members of the opposite sex, their careers (many have quite interesting and challenging ones), their fears, anxieties and hopes. The women themselves, not Goodwin, decide what the relevant facts are. What adds to the chapters' beauty is the total absence of any sense of confrontation between Goodwin and the women she interviewed, even when the latter adhere to convictions that are totally opposed to Goodwin's. To her credit, Goodwin never adopts a defensive position when some of the ultra-conservative women she interviewed (mainly the recent converts to Islam) furiously attack, and one may even say, misrepresent, the beliefs and lifestyles of feminists and liberated Western women (see especially pp. 182-183). She clearly sees her mission as one of understanding Muslim women, not of confronting, head on, their beliefs and lifestyles.

Goodwin goes a long way towards shattering Western stereotypes about Muslim women as ignorant, submissive, and superstitious people content to stay at home. Rather, the women who emerge from this book are courageous, religious, caring and fair. In every Islamic country to which Goodwin traveled (including conservative Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states) she discovered strong-willed, educated, intelligent and career-oriented women who, in numerous ways, challenged or circumvented restrictions on women's basic rights to work, get promoted, drive, receive education abroad, and travel alone. A case in point is Huda Awad, an unmarried Saudi businesswoman, who heads her own successful construction company, spends hours at construction sites, interacts regularly with men, and travels abroad unaccompanied by a *mahram* (protector) (p. 224-229). Even those women who appear to blindly obey the men in their lives (whether father, brother, husband or son) seem to do so either because they truly

believe that this is the right thing to do, or (more commonly) out of a sense of expediency, since the consequences of rebellion can be quite disastrous given the combined weight of the male-dominated state and economy, religious interpretations and custom.

In the Epilogue, Goodwin returns to the theme of the rising tide of "fundamentalism," and its implications for women's rights in the Islamic world. Goodwin is correct in identifying radical Islamist groups as the sworn enemies of women's rights, for such groups interpret the Qur'an in such a restrictive way so as to subordinate women entirely to men (p. 352). Unfortunately for advocates of women's rights, the religious establishment in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt has shown no interest in defending women against the onslaughts of the radical Islamist groups. Goodwin fully acknowledges that feminists' ideas and rhetoric cannot be used in the struggle to defend Muslim women's rights, since the vast majority of Muslim men (and even quite a few women) reject out of hand anything having to do with Western feminist ideas. Goodwin, however, is firm in her conviction (shared by most of the educated Muslim women she interviewed) that Muslim women must rise to the challenges posed by growing radicalization and must also question the teachings of establishment figures such as Sheik Bin Baz of Saudi Arabia and Sheikh Gad al-Haq of Al-Azhar in Cairo. In their struggle to protect and promote their basic rights, Muslim women must turn to the Qur'an and the practice and teachings of the Prophet, since they increasingly define the context within which the debate on crucial social issues is carried out in the Muslim world. The virtual monopoly that men have over the interpretation of the Qur'an and the *Shari'a* must be quickly ended if Muslim women are to have a chance to protect and promote their rights within an environment that is becoming increasingly radicalized and polarized.

Despite its weak introduction and epilogue, *The Price of Honor* represents an important contribution to the growing literature on women in Muslim societies.

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