

# The Feminist Silence About Islam

Kay S. Hymowitz

Western feminists should be protesting about the oppression of Middle Eastern women, but this would reveal how little they have to complain about at home.

Feminist policies may grate on some people but few quarrel with feminism's core moral insight, which changed the lives (and minds) of women forever: that women are due the same rights and dignity as men. So, as news of the appalling miseries of women in the Islamic world has piled up, where are the feminists? Where is the outrage?

For a brief moment after September 11, when pictures of those blue alien-creaturely shapes in Afghanistan filled the papers, it seemed as if feminists were going to have their moment. And in fact the Feminist Majority, to its credit, had been publicising since the mid-1990s how Afghan girls were barred from school, how women were stoned for adultery or beaten for showing an ankle or wearing high-heeled shoes, how they were prohibited from leaving the house unless accompanied by a male relative, how they were denied medical help because the only doctors around were male.

But there has been barely a peep from feminists as it has become clear that the Taliban were exceptional not in their extreme views about women but in their success at embodying those views in law and practice.

In the United Arab Emirates, husbands have the right to beat their wives in order to discipline them—'provided that the beating is not so severe as to damage her bones or deform her body', in the words of the *Gulf News*. In Saudi Arabia, women cannot vote, drive, or show their faces or talk with male non-relatives in public. Saudi girls can go to school, and many even attend the university; but at the university, women must sit in segregated rooms and watch their professors on closed-circuit televisions. If they have a question, they push a button on their desk.

This turns on a light at the professor's lectern, from which he can answer the female without being in her dangerous presence. And in Saudi Arabia, education can be harmful to female health. Last spring in Mecca, members of the *mutaween*, the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue, pushed fleeing students back into their burning school because they were not properly covered in *abaya*. Fifteen girls died.

We did not hear much from feminists when in the northern Nigerian province of Katsina a Muslim court sentenced a woman to death by stoning for having a child outside of marriage. The case might not have earned much attention—stonings are common in parts of the Muslim world—except that the young woman, who had been married off at 14 to a husband who ultimately divorced her when she lost her virginal allure, was still nursing a baby at the time of sentencing. During her trial she had no lawyer, although the court did see fit to delay her execution until she weans her infant.

We did not hear much from feminists as it emerged that honour killings by relatives, often either ignored or only lightly punished by authorities, are also commonplace in the Muslim world. In September, Reuters reported the story of an Iranian man, 'defending my honour, family, and dignity', who cut off his seven-year-old daughter's

---

**Kay S. Hymowitz** is the author of the forthcoming *Liberation's Children: Parents and Kids in a Postmodern Age*, and is a contributing editor at the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal* ([www.city-journal.org](http://www.city-journal.org)), from whose Winter 2003 issue this article is adapted.

head after suspecting she had been raped by her uncle. The postmortem showed the girl to be a virgin. In another family mix-up, a Yemeni man shot his daughter on her wedding night when her husband claimed she was not a virgin. After a medical exam revealed that the husband was mistaken, officials concluded he was simply trying to protect himself from embarrassment about his own impotence. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, every day two women are slain by male relatives seeking to avenge the family honour.

Such brutality is not limited to backward villages. In relatively modern Jordan, honour killings were all but exempt from punishment until the penal code was modified last year; unfortunately, a young Palestinian living in Jordan, who had recently stabbed his 19-year-old sister 40 times ‘to cleanse the family honour’, and another man from near Amman, who ran over his 23-year-old sister with his truck because of her ‘immoral behaviour’, had not yet changed their ways. British psychiatrist Anthony Daniels reports that British Muslim men frequently spirit their young daughters back to their native Pakistan and force the girls to marry. Such fathers have been known to kill daughters who resist. In Sweden, in one highly publicised case, Fadima Sahindal, an assimilated 26-year-old of Kurdish origin, was murdered by her father after she began living with her Swedish boyfriend. ‘The whore is dead’, the family announced.

When looking at this inventory of brutality, the question bears repeating: Where are the demonstrations, the articles, the petitions, the resolutions, the vindications of the rights of Islamic women by Western feminists? Even after the excesses of the Taliban did more to forge a consensus about women’s rights than 30 years of speeches by Gloria Steinem, feminists refused to touch this subject. They have averted their eyes from the harsh, blatant oppression of millions of women, even while they have continued to stare into the Western patriarchal abyss, indignant over female executives who cannot join an exclusive golf club and college women who do not have their own lacrosse teams.

But look more deeply into the matter, and it becomes apparent that the sound of feminist silence about the

savage fundamentalist Muslim oppression of women has its own perverse logic. The silence is a direct outgrowth of the way feminist theory has developed in recent years. Now mired in self-righteous sentimentalism, multicultural non-judgmentalism, and internationalist utopianism, feminism has lost the language to make the universalist moral claims of equal dignity and individual freedom that once rendered it so compelling.

To understand the current sisterly silence about the sort of tyranny that the women’s movement came into existence to attack, it is helpful to think of feminisms plural rather than singular. Though not entirely discrete philosophies, each of three different feminisms has its own distinct reasons for causing activists to ‘lose their voice’ in the face of women’s oppression.

**Feminism has  
lost the language  
to make the  
universalist  
moral claims of  
equal dignity and  
individual freedom  
that once rendered  
it so compelling.**

**Biological determinists**

The first variety—radical feminism (or gender feminism, in Christina Hoff Sommers’s term)—starts with the insight that men are brutes. Radical feminists do not simply subscribe to the reasonable-enough notion that men are naturally more prone to aggression than women. They believe that maleness is a kind of original sin. Masculinity explains child abuse, marital strife, high defence spending,

every war from Troy to Afghanistan, as well as Hitler, Franco, and Pinochet.

Gender feminists are little interested in fine distinctions between radical Muslim men who slam commercial airliners into office buildings and soldiers who want to stop radical Muslim men from slamming commercial airliners into office buildings. They are both examples of generic male violence—and, specifically, male violence against women. The war in Afghanistan could not possibly offer a chance to liberate women from their oppressors, since it would simply expose women to yet another set of oppressors, in the gender feminists’ view.

If guys are brutes, girls are their opposite: peace-loving, tolerant, conciliatory, and reasonable. Feminists long ago banished tough-as-nails women like Margaret Thatcher and Jeanne Kirkpatrick (and these days, one would guess, even Condoleezza Rice) to the ranks of the imperfectly female. Real women, they believe, would never justify war.

Sara Ruddick, author of *Maternal Thinking*, is perhaps one of the most influential spokeswomen for the position that women are instinctually peaceful. According to Ruddick that is because a good deal of mothering is naturally governed by the Gandhian principles of non-violence such as ‘renunciation’, ‘resistance to injustice’, and ‘reconciliation’.

Too busy celebrating their own virtue and contemplating their own victimhood, gender feminists cannot address the suffering of their Muslim sisters realistically, as light years worse than their own petulant grievances. They are too intent on hating war to ask if unleashing its horrors might be worth it to overturn a brutal tyranny that, among its manifold inhumanities, treats women like animals. After all, hating war and machismo is evidence of the moral superiority that comes with being born female.

Yet the gender feminist idea of superior feminine virtue is becoming an increasingly tough sell for anyone actually keeping up with world events. Kipling once wrote of the fierceness of Afghan women: ‘When you’re wounded and left on the Afghan plains/And the women come out to cut up your remains/Just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains.’ Now it is clearer than ever that the dream of worldwide sisterhood is no more realistic than worldwide brotherhood; culture trumps gender any day. Mothers all over the Muslim world are naming their babies Usama or praising Allah for their sons’ efforts to kill crusading infidels. In February 2002, 28-year-old Wafa Idris became the first female Palestinian suicide bomber to strike in Israel, killing an elderly man and wounding scores of women and children. Maternal thinking indeed.

### Cultural relativists

The second variety of feminism, seemingly more sophisticated and especially prevalent on university campuses, is multiculturalism and its twin, postcolonialism. The postcolonial feminist has even more reason to shy away from the predicament of women under radical Islam than her maternally thinking sister. She believes that the Western world is so sullied by its legacy of imperialism that no Westerner, man or woman, can utter a word of judgment against

former colonial peoples. Worse, she is not so sure that radical Islam is not an authentic, indigenous—and therefore appropriate—expression of Arab and Middle Eastern identity.

Postcolonialists have their own binary system, somewhat at odds with gender feminism—not to mention with women’s rights. It is not men who are the sinners; it is the West. It is not women who are victimised innocents; it is the people who suffered under Western colonialism, or the descendants of those people, to be more exact. Caught between the rock of patriarchy and the hard place of imperialism, the postcolonial feminist scholar gingerly tiptoes her way around the subject of Islamic fundamentalism and does the only thing she can do: she focuses her ire on Western men.

To this end, the postcolonialist eagerly dips into the inkwell of gender feminism. She ties colonialist exploitation and domination to maleness; she might refer to Israel’s ‘masculinist military culture’—Israel being white and Western—though she would never dream of pointing out the ‘masculinist military culture’ of the jihadi. And she expends a good deal of energy condemning Western men for wanting to improve the lives of Eastern women. Thus American concern about Afghan women is merely a ‘device for ranking the “other” men as inferior or as “uncivilised”’, according to Nira

Yuval-Davis, professor of gender and ethnic studies at the University of Greenwich, England. These are all examples of what renowned Columbia professor Gayatri Spivak called ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’.

Spivak’s phrase points to the postcolonial notion that brown men, having been victimised by the West, can never be oppressors in their own right. If they give the appearance of treating women badly, the oppression they have suffered at the hands of Western colonial masters is to blame. In fact, the worse they treat women, the more they are expressing their own justifiable outrage. ‘When men are traumatised [by colonial rule], they tend to traumatise their own women’, says Miriam Cooke, a Duke professor and head of the Association for Middle East Women’s Studies. And today, Cooke asserts, brown men are subjected to a new form of imperialism. ‘Now there is a return of colonialism that we saw in the 19th century in the context of

**Too busy celebrating their own virtue and contemplating their own victimhood, gender feminists cannot address the suffering of their Muslim sisters.**

globalisation', she says. 'What is driving Islamist men is globalisation.'

It would be difficult to exaggerate the through-the-looking-glass quality of postcolonialist theory when it comes to the subject of women. Female suicide bombers are a good thing, because they are strong women demonstrating 'agency' against colonial powers. Polygamy too must be shown due consideration. Thus, the very people protesting the imperialist exploitation of the 'Other' endorse that Other's repressive customs as a means of promoting their own uniquely Western agenda—subverting the heterosexual patriarchy.

### Utopian engineers

The final category in the feminist taxonomy, which might be called the world-government utopian strain, is in many respects closest to classical liberal feminism. Dedicated to full female dignity and equality, it generally eschews both the biological determinism of the gender feminist and the cultural relativism of the multicultural postcolonialist. Stanford political science professor Susan Moller Okin, an influential, subtle, and intelligent spokeswoman for this approach, created a stir among feminists in 1997 when she forthrightly attacked multiculturalists for valuing 'group rights for minority cultures' over the well-being of individual women. Okin minced no words attacking arranged marriage, female circumcision, and polygamy, which she believed women experienced as a 'barely tolerable institution'.

But though Okin is less shy than other feminists about discussing the plight of women under Islamic fundamentalism, the typical United Nations utopian has her own reasons for keeping quiet as that plight fills Western headlines. For the utopian is also a bean-counting absolutist, seeking a pure, numerical equality between men and women in all departments of life. She greets Western, and particularly American, claims to have achieved freedom for women with scepticism.

The utopian is less interested in freeing women to make their own choices than in engineering and imposing her own elite vision of a perfect society. Indeed, she is under no illusions that, left to their own democratic devices, women would freely choose the

utopia she has in mind. She would not be surprised by recent Pakistani elections, where a number of the women who won parliamentary seats were Islamist.

But it does not really matter what women want. The universalist has a comprehensive vision of 'women's human rights', meaning not simply women's civil and political rights but 'economic rights' and 'socioeconomic justice'. Cynical about free markets and globalisation, the United Nations utopian is also unimpressed by the liberal democratic nation-state 'as an emancipatory institution'. Like the (usually) unacknowledged socialist that she is, the UN utopian eagerly awaits the withering of the nation-state, a political arrangement that she sees as tied to imperialism, war, and masculinity.

Having rejected the patriarchal liberal nation-state, with all the democratic machinery of self-government that goes along with it, the utopian concludes that there is only one way to achieve her goals: to impose them through international government. Utopian feminists fill the halls of the United Nations, where they examine everything through the lens of the 'gender perspective' in study after unreadable study.

The 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), perhaps the first and most important document of feminist utopianism, gives the best sense of the sweeping nature of the movement's ambitions. CEDAW demands many measures that anyone committed to democratic liberal values would applaud, including women's right to vote and protection against honour killings and forced marriage.

Would that the document stopped there. Instead it sets out to impose a utopian order that would erase all distinctions between men and women, a kind of revolution of the sexes from above, requiring nations to 'take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women' and to eliminate 'stereotyped roles' to accomplish this legislative abolition of biology. The document calls for paid maternity leave, non-sexist school curricula, and government-supported child care. The treaty's 23-member enforcement committee hectors nations that do not adequately grasp that 'the personal is international'. The committee has cited Belarus for celebrating Mother's Day, China for failing to legalise

**The utopian is less interested in freeing women to make their own choices than in engineering and imposing her own elite vision of a perfect society.**

prostitution, and Libya for not interpreting the Koran in accordance with 'committee guidelines'.

Confusing 'women's participation' with self-determination, and numerical equivalence with equality, CEDAW utopians try to orchestrate their perfect society through quotas and affirmative-action plans. Their bean-counting mentality cares about whether women participate equally, without asking what it is that they are participating in or whether their participation is anything more than ceremonial. Thus at the recent Women's Summit in Jordan, Rima Khalaf suggested that governments be required to use quotas in elections 'to leapfrog women to power'. Khalaf, like so many illiberal feminist utopians, has no hesitation in forcing society to be free. As is often the case when elites decide they have discovered the route to human perfection, the utopian urge is not simply antidemocratic but verges on the totalitarian.

That this combination of sentimental victimhood, postcolonial relativism, and utopian overreaching has caused feminism to suffer so profound a loss of moral and political imagination that it cannot speak against the brutalisation of Islamic women is an incalculable loss to women and to men.

The great contribution of Western feminism was to expand the definition of human dignity and freedom. It insisted that all human beings were worthy of liberty. Feminists now have the opportunity to make that claim on behalf of women who in their oppression have not so much as imagined that its promise could include them, too. At its best, feminism has stood for a rich idea of personal choice in shaping a meaningful life,

one that respects not only the woman who wants to crash through glass ceilings but also the one who wants to stay home with her children and bake cookies or to wear a veil and fast on Ramadan.

So why should feminists not shout out their own profound discovery for the world to hear? Because to do so would be to acknowledge the freedom they themselves enjoy, thanks to Western ideals and institutions. Such an admission would force them to give up their own simmering resentments.

**Free institutions—  
an independent  
judiciary, a free  
press, open  
elections—that  
protect the rights  
of women are the  
same ones that  
protect the rights  
of men.**

The truth is that the free institutions—an independent judiciary, a free press, open elections—that protect the rights of women are the same ones that protect the rights of men. The separation of church and state that would allow women to escape the burqa would also free men from having their hands amputated for theft. The education system that would teach girls to read would also empower millions of illiterate boys. The capitalist economies that bring clean water, cheap clothes, and washing machines that change the lives of women are the same ones that

lead to healthier, freer men. In other words, to address the problems of Muslim women honestly, feminists would have to recognise that free men and women need the same things—and that those are things that they themselves already have.

Western feminists have a moral responsibility to give up their resentments and speak up for women who actually need their support. Feminists have the moral authority to say that their call for the rights of women is a universal demand—that the rights of women are the Rights of Man.

#### THE FUNDAMENTALIST CHALLENGE WITHIN

Enlightenment *philosophes* . . . preached tolerance not out of a corrosive relativism, but out of the belief that reason would ultimately prevail over outmoded custom and religious fanaticism. That is not the view, however, that informs the contemporary promotion of difference, which actively facilitates intolerant enthusiasm of an Islamist hue . . .

To Islamists, Western tolerance is weakness, and secularism is a form of spiritual death requiring Islamic salvation. Simply put, while Western liberal sensibilities posit a multi-sum game, Islamist sensibilities are zero-sum. The difference is that traditional Muslims would not have even understood the multi-sum proposition, while today's Islamists understand it very well indeed, and are determined to take full advantage of it . . .

David Martin Jones, 'Out of Bali: Cybercaliphate Rising', *The National Interest* (Spring 2003), p.84.