

A MUSLIM WOMAN EDUCATOR'S REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF "CLAIMING OUR RIGHTS"

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The purpose of *Claiming Our Rights: A Manual for Women's Human Rights Education in Muslim Societies* by Mahnaz Afkhami and Haleh Vaziri (Bethesda, MD: Sisterhood Is Global Institute, 154 pp., 1996) is "to facilitate transmission of the universal human rights concepts inscribed in the major international human rights documents to grassroots populations in Muslim societies." It is an invaluable contribution of the Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI) and a much needed beginning to educate Muslim women's of their rights in Islam. It will fill a gap in the "culturally relevant language to convey the message of international human rights documents to Muslim women" to take the "human rights concepts to women at the grassroots level." (ii)

The manual, "a work in progress," consists of four parts, six appendices and annotated bibliography (141-154). The first part is an introduction of goals, premises and method. The second part is a guide to the facilitators: "Learning through dialogue, diversity and democracy" as the manual is a "component of an educational model which [SIGI] is designing to promote human rights awareness among women...in the Global South, and particularly, in Muslim societies." (xii) The third part is the main thrust of the manual (1-58) and consists of learning exercises. The fourth part consists of the workshop and facilitator evaluation form (59-60). The appendices are: (1) Suras of the Qur'an dealing with/referring to women (62-81), (2) samples of relevant Hadiths (82-85), (3) the first heroines of Islam (86-88), (4) samples of Arab relevant proverbs (89-90), (5) major universal documents relevant to women, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (91-130), and (6) various human rights and women's organizations in selected Muslim societies (131-140).

Though I would have liked to comment on every aspect of this document with the intent of making it faithfully accessible and meaningfully learnable to every Muslim woman, I will only discuss its theme and methodological implications, and the "major premise," focusing only on the first proposition of the 7-propositions premise.

Its themes, derived from the mission statement of Platform for Action of the Beijing Conference (iv), are necessary for individuals who are already aware and started to question the discrepancy in the practice concerning their human rights. What is needed in the methodology, therefore, is a section that will facilitate awareness-raising as the initial step that will instigate women to start questioning and dialoguing about the different themes. This methodological adjustment would have been addressed intuitively had the authors, as well as the scholars and practitioners who were consulted, considered an important element in their explanation of the meaning of "Shari`ah" under the section "Major Premise." The authors, despite their utmost care not to "impart the truth" but to

"facilitate dialogue" (Mahnaz Afkhami's letter of introduction) have over-looked the fact that human knowledge and action are affected by the human belief system. Whether we call it "religion," "faith," or "worldview" , such a belief system composes an important component of one's prior knowledge. This prior knowledge either makes an individual aware or dormant concerning abuses of her human rights. It also makes an individual either accept or reject the "central premise of this human rights educational model that there is no contradictions between human rights and Islam." (v)

The "Major Premise" states: "Most Muslims believe that Islam contains the essentials of human rights and that its content, as God's revelation, is superior to ordinary law. Consequently, human rights documents must be presented as consonant with Islamic tenets, if they are to succeed in Muslim societies. A promising human rights education model, therefore, must be able to contravene the argument that universal human rights contradict Islamic tenets. A Central premise of the human rights education model presented here is that there are no contradictions between universal human rights and Islam. This foundational statement is based on the following propositions:"

Proposition #1 of the "Major Premise" states: "The Qur'an as the '*written*' word of God is eternal, infinite, and *mystical, understood in its eternal and infinite function by the prophet only.* All other mortals have *received it in oral form and understand it according to their human gifts.* The religious experience, i.e., the experience of the 'word of god,' therefore, is by definition *a personal experience, whereas obeying the 'religious law,' the shari'a, is obedience to man mad-law.*" [Italics are mine] (v-vi)

If, for example, a facilitator believes in proposition #1 as stated above, she/he will not be able to dialogue with the majority of Muslims, men and women. That is, because in Islam, there is no distinction between receiving an oral or a written form of the word of God. The Qur'an--the continuous reading--was revealed to the Prophet orally, even though it is stated in the Qur'an (85: 21-22) that the Quran was inscribed in "Tablet preserved." The Prophet also ordered the trustworthy among his companions to inscribe the Qur'anic revelation in writing after he received it orally through Gabriel.

The question to the authors, therefore, is how the form of the Qur'an "as the 'written' word of God" that was sent to the Prophet is different or similar to the form of the "written" Quran that has been available to Muslims for centuries, as preserved by the Qur'an inscribers during the revelation, and as collected in the one and only known document to Muslims since fifteen years after the Prophet?

To state that the Qur'an is "eternal, infinite, and mystical, understood in its eternal and infinite function by the Prophet only" is problematic on two counts:

First, the consensus of the Muslims is that there is nothing mystical about the Qur'an.

Second, to state that only the Prophet can understand its eternal "written" form is confusing both the issue of "Written" vis-à-vis "oral", and the issue of what other human beings, beside the Prophet, have received and are able to perceive of the Qur'an. It might be true that Muhammad, as the Prophet, had understood its eternal, infinite

function on a different level as that of other humans, but to state that only the Prophet understand the eternal message of the Qur'an is a perpetuation to an intruding concept to Islam that myself and other Muslim women are trying to demystify. That is, the perception that only the selected few can interpret the Qur'an is contradictory to the meaning of "Qur'an" in the Arabic language , "a reading" , "and read of what is possible from the Qur'an [the guidance]" (70:20), and as the Qur'an speaks of itself, "It is a guide and a mercy for those who believe" (27 : 77).

In addition, to state that "All mortals have received it in oral form and understood it according to their human gifts" is contradictory to the Qur'anic dictum "Read in the name of the Creator...who taught [human] by the pen" (96:1-4) which means that to read is to learn and to act as guided by the Book, and that human individuals receive the Qur'an through both reading or hearing a recitation of the written document (17:106). Also, individuals do not only understand Qur'an according to their gift, but also according to the Qur'anic intrinsic clarity (41: 2-3). Also, every human is encouraged to understand the Qur'an through its signs (Ayats) (41: 53) in order to act on it. But 'Shari'ah' is the collective understanding of the Muslim community (ummah) which must evolve constantly because of advancement in human understanding, and changes in circumstances. According to the Qur'an (2:30), God has entrusted (gave Al Khilafah/ Vicegerency/trusteeship to) all humans with the divine will (shari`ah/ moral guidelines). Thus, they all need to understand it, though at different levels of comprehension, in order to practice it in their daily life. Yet, the collective decision that will affect the entire community should be a consultative, collective one according to certain procedures, and following specific sources.

Furthermore, to simply state that "obeying the Shari`a is obedience to man-made law" is a direct violation of Muslim's belief that the Shari`ah (in its Qur'anic sense as explained above) consists of both the infinite word of God and his Prophet's model in explicating God's word, as well as the man-made interpretations.

It is true that there has been problems in applying 'Shariah' in the legal sense as is loosely used in contemporary Muslim societies and by some few elitist males, but this problem stems mainly from interpretations that are mainly based on secondary sources as intermediaries of the "divine will". Such kind of interpretations have been backed up by state power and, in fact, have very real effects--sometimes negative effects--on women's lives. These latter types of interpretations are behind the advocacy why I, and other Muslim women insist on the participation of Women in the collective interpretation process for the Muslim community. We are keen on demystifying the perception that only the select few males may interpret the Qur'an. Such advocacy is acknowledging that humans may have a different 'personal' understanding and experience of the 'word' of God, but it is not the same as saying that "All mortals have received it [the Quran] in oral form and understood it according to their human gift."

I hope that the authors will pay special attention to remedy some of the above concerns in future revised editions of this manual.