

# **Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here**

UNTOLD STORIES FROM THE FIGHT AGAINST  
MUSLIM FUNDAMENTALISM

## **KARIMA BENNOUNE**



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Boualem Yekker was one of those who had decided to resist, those who had become aware that when the hordes confronting them had managed to spread their fear and impose silence they would have won.

—TAHAR DJAOUT (1954–1993),

*The Last Summer of Reason*

Sharif reminds me of a drama that the veteran women's rights activist Akila Ouared once staged with children in Algeria. The main character decides not to become a suicide bomber because he gets the lead role in a play. He has something beautiful to live for. Because art means he does not face what the cartoonist Slim called *Walou à l'horizon*: Nothing on the horizon.

## CHAPTER THREE

## The Imam's Liberated Daughter and Other Stories: Women Battling Beyond Stereotypes

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**S**exism is at the heart of this totalitarian project," Iranian sociologist Chahla Chafiq says of what she calls Islamism. Subordinating women—in the family, in the street, in the bedroom—is central to most fundamentalist visions for society around the world. Muslim fundamentalists aim to control the womb, the unmentionable areas of the body—what the Qur'an calls "the unseen parts." Sometimes those are even said to include the faces of women. Fundamentalists also seek to restrict women's movement, space, being. As Nighat Khan, dean of Lahore's Institute of Women's Studies, told me, if women try to create their own spaces like her institution, "They're considered threatening." ("We don't know what they do behind closed doors," say their detractors.) On the other hand, when women try to mix with men in shared public space, "They can be threatened." Women's rights activists then live a spatial conundrum. Ultimately, Khan says, in the face of fundamentalism and conservatism, "You can be nowhere."

This Islamist obsession with all things female means women of Muslim heritage are in many places the first to walk the gauntlet of rising fundamentalism, whether they are simply appearing in public, practicing professions that are off-limits, or, most of all, championing women's rights. Whether they wear burqas or bikinis, they live at Ground Zero. "It feels as if we are seated on a bomb," a young woman from Niger tells

me. "We are at the frontline in this country," explains Mary Akrami, who runs Kabul's first shelter for battered women.

Women's human rights defenders, a category that includes some men, are then everywhere one of the most important forces contesting fundamentalism. "Every step forward for women's rights," Nigerien sociologist Zeinabou Hadari argues, "is a piece of the struggle against fundamentalism." To quote the writer Katha Pollitt, "The opposite of fundamentalism is feminism."<sup>1</sup> This is as true among people of Muslim heritage as anywhere else.

No matter how many challenges feminists have faced on this terrain, they have had important victories when they have stood together. Zaynab Elsawi, who coordinates Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP), told me how she and others protested in front of a Khartoum courthouse in 2009 against the sentence of flogging meted out to female journalist Lubna Hussein for the crime of wearing trousers in public.<sup>2</sup> One of the protesters was an older, heavy-set woman from a generation that had known life before such restrictions. Young soldiers came to drag the protesters away and threw them one after another into a truck. When they got to the older woman, they could not lift her, so they told her to go home. Outraged, she hired a taxi to follow the other arrested women to jail.

In prison, they all faced "a very much stimulating investigation," Zaynab laughs. "They asked us to write that I am not going to do these kinds of things again. And we said 'No, we are going to do it again and again and again.'" From jail, the arrested women sent messages around the world. Many others came out to demand their freedom, as they had demanded Lubna Hussein's rights. "The reaction was much more than what the government expected," Zaynab thinks, "so they decided to release us." Lubna Hussein's sentence was commuted. Across the regions, across the miles, this defiance of fundamentalism echoes in the lives of countless other women activists of Muslim heritage.

#### REJECTING PUNISHMENTS "IMPOSED BY GOD"

Aïssatou Cissé is a human rights activist, a novelist, and, since the 2012 elections, a special adviser to the president of Senegal. Unable to walk

since birth, she is permanently in a wheelchair. Nevertheless, she is unstoppable. When I am invited to give a lecture on women and revolution in North Africa at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar in the summer of 2011, Aïssatou attends, even though there is no elevator and she has to be carried up several flights of stairs. She lives in an inaccessible world but makes it her own.

Among Aïssatou's many causes—including the Global Campaign to Stop Stoning and Killing Women, and her work against early marriages—the one that is closest to her heart is the fight for the rights of disabled women and girls. Some interpretations of religion, she tells me, consider "handicaps" to be "a punishment imposed by God." Though some conservative religious associations give charity to the handicapped, they also teach that the Qur'an says they should not go to school. As a result, Aïssatou comments, many disabled Senegalese children are torn from the classroom and kept away from other children. "Their biggest fear . . .," she has written, "is to be considered supernatural incarnations: the children of *jinns* [genies], that according to some beliefs can either bring great wealth or a great deal of unhappiness."<sup>3</sup>

To combat such notions, Aïssatou produced a comic book, *The Stories of Nafi and Khadija*, about the (mis)adventures of a wheelchair-bound eleven-year-old named Nafi, and of Khadija, a young albino girl in love. Nafi, sent to beg on the streets of Dakar, survives sexual assault by a stranger, and, with the support of NGO activists, overcomes this ordeal and is able to return to school. Meanwhile, Khadija's romance with her *bien-aimé* Demba is threatened by the objections of his conservative family to a *pounée*, the Wolof word for albino. Demba's mother travels to consult a *marabout*, a religious leader, hoping to gain support for breaking up the couple. Just when you think the story will end badly, Aïssatou's marabout espouses a tolerant Senegalese Islam, devoid of prejudice. His counsel about Demba's love for an albino? "These beings are like you and me. . . *Domou Adama leñu!*" They are human beings.

As this happy ending suggests, Senegal has a tradition of relatively liberal Islam that leaves space for tolerant interpretations of culture and women's advancement. Aïssatou's own family's ferocious support of her freedom is one example; the election of a historic 43 percent of women

to the Parliament in July 2012 is another.<sup>4</sup> However, Aïssatou worries that such attitudes are under pressure from rising fundamentalism, a trend she knows can undermine her work. She tells me she is afraid. This is a word I have never heard her use. Her fear is provoked by such developments as funding pouring in from the Gulf to finance Qur'anic schools in Senegal.<sup>5</sup> She is likewise concerned about an influx of foreign Qur'anic teachers who "try to shape you, change your mentality, going as far as to teach the child that her mother and father are bad parents because they allow her to do certain things which are forbidden by religion."

Misinformed children grow up to become misinformed adults. She tells me a story that captures the cost of this trajectory. A woman of Wolof ethnicity in the north of Senegal married a man from another ethnic group. As a Wolof, she had not been excised. (Unlike many of the 140 million women and girls of different faiths worldwide living with the consequences of female genital mutilation, or FGM,<sup>6</sup> this woman still had both her clitoris and her labia minora intact.) Though FGM is illegal in Senegal, and only an estimated 28 percent of women here have suffered this practice,<sup>7</sup> the Wolof woman's in-laws refused to eat food she cooked because she had not been excised. (I cannot help wondering just how they think food is prepared.) No one would speak to this woman. So harassed was she, Aïssatou continues, that finally she submitted to FGM as an adult. "Now, they say she is pure, and only now can she join the family, because religion rejects the impure." Cultural conservatism uses the faux alibi of religion to justify pre-Islamic practices like FGM. Aïssatou is irate.

"It is not religion that says it!"

Incensed by such stories, Aïssatou headed to the north of Senegal in her wheelchair to lead a seminar on FGM. A man in attendance grew increasingly angry with her, accusing her of making things up. He asked if she was Muslim, if her father was Muslim. Aïssatou retorted, "You have the right to question me, but I would like it if someone can show me where it is written in the Qur'an, in which Surah, that you must be excised." The women in the workshop had never heard that this "rule" was not written in the Qur'an. Enraged, the man left.

Muslim women must be proactive, Aïssatou urges. They cannot

simply listen to what male leaders say about religion. Internationally, groups like Malaysia's renowned Sisters in Islam (SIS) do offer alternate feminist interpretations of the religion's teachings. "There are conflicting interpretations available," SIS cofounder Zainah Anwar reminds me. "There is nothing divine about the choice you make." However, not enough women in Senegal have embraced the understanding that diverse interpretations of Islam are available to them, Aïssatou thinks.

If they do not learn the Qur'an, Aïssatou warns, they are left with men interpreting it for them. "Personally, I refuse that." While her body is differently abled, her spirit is utterly ungovernable. "It is not for anyone to tell me how to act in terms of religion or my everyday life. One must refuse indoctrination. When someone wants to impose something, they say that religion says so." I ask if she is afraid to say such things openly. "No, on the contrary, I am relieved to say them," she responds.

Aïssatou Cissé is uncompromising, a quality whose value in the fight against fundamentalism is inestimable. She is known for her dress sense and plunging necklines. Aïssatou rejects shame. To say that someone knows no shame is usually meant as an insult, but it is actually a sign of liberation for many women. The wheelchair-bound activist proudly tells the disabled women she works with that they have a right to a sex life.

#### I AM YOUR PROFESSOR

Dr. Fatou Sow is the international coordinator of the network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). A sociologist, she was my supervisor when I taught at CODESRIA, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, in a summer Gender Institute on "Gender, Culture, Politics and Fundamentalisms in Africa." The title of our course is long because, as Fatou regularly reminds me, "One must avoid the trap of thinking everything goes back to Islam. All customs and all conservatisms are not in fact 'Muslim,' even though Islam is used to rubber stamp them." Gambian activist Amie Joof underscores Fatou's concern when she tells me, while I am in Dakar, "You see a lot of confusion between religion and culture." For Fatou

Sow, this means feminists must take on both what she calls religious fundamentalism and cultural fundamentalism.

Dr. Fatou, as our students call her, has taught at universities in Senegal, France, and the United States, but she is spending her “retirement” back home by the seaside in Dakar. She is one of the least-retired people I know—still writing, editing, lecturing, traveling, and wrangling the coalition of activists around the world who make up the brilliant, vital, and sometimes unwieldy WLUML. WLUML’s particular contribution, Fatou suggests, has been to popularize a women’s discourse based in the camp of secularists of Muslim heritage.

At seventy, she is coediting a book about sexualities in Senegal with a group of activists. At the university, she taught courses, including one about reproductive health, to predominantly male students. After menopause, she was amused when her students in their twenties and thirties would tell her, “Madame, post-menopausal women, it is well known, do not have sexual needs.” Fatou nearly swears at this (“*espèce de . . .*”). “These young people who have never had sexual relations with a post-menopausal woman, who have never dared think about the sexuality of their mothers, decide that once a woman is not producing children, she has no more sexual needs.” These assumptions are ironic, because for many of them, if a man takes up with a woman the age of his daughter, “it’s normal because men have sexual needs until they die.” Fatou does not let the question rest. “So, I said to them, have you asked your mothers this question?” “Of course not,” they reply.

“But if you haven’t asked the question, how do you know the answer?”

All this reticence about sexuality is new, according to Fatou, and increasingly the result of fundamentalist pressure on education and society, which she dates back to the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. There are popular traditions of erotic song and dance in Senegal that she says make Beyoncé look tame. Fatou Sow, like most Senegalese of her age, grew up with them. As Dr. Fatou’s collaborator, Codou Bop, aged sixty, recalls it, they and other Senegalese of their generation grew up dancing. “At the end of Ramadan in everyone’s house, we danced. We danced all year.” Men and women together.

At age twenty, Fatou says, she would shake hands with any man. But,

for the last fifteen years, she often avoids holding out her hand to young men. “If he doesn’t shake my hand, I will give him a smack. I can’t stand it.” She has had male students come to meet her in her office but decline to shake her hand. Their excuse? “It is in the Qur’an.” Fatou insists this has nothing to do with the Qur’an but rather with certain Arab cultural practices alien to Wolof culture. She is well aware of the insult implied, just as clear as if a student had refused to shake her hand because of her race. “As a woman, I am to be respected. I am not your mother. I am not your mistress. I am your professor and you must respect me by shaking my hand.”

Today Fatou is pessimistic when she sees the reports that pour in to the WLUML network. On July 11, 2012, twenty-three-year-old Ms. L.I.E. was condemned to death by stoning for adultery in Khartoum.<sup>8</sup> The information was circulated through the WLUML network by a Malian colleague. On September 4, 2012, a sixteen-year-old girl was sentenced to public flogging in the Maldives under what is called Sharia law after confessing to premarital sex.<sup>9</sup> This news is shared with us by a Nigerian networker. “I despair for Muslims,” Fatou tells me. “Every day there is a case of a woman being attacked for what she wears, or what she does. I find this very depressing.”

Fatou stresses that she does not resist Islam but rather an Islamic discourse that is “aggressive and offensive.” More than that, she says, “It crystallizes around the rights of women.” What worries Fatou most is that secular discourse seems to be fading.

Is secular or religious discourse on women’s rights more useful? I ask.

This is the great debate among women’s rights activists of Muslim descent. It is chic nowadays in the West to focus solely on those who reinterpret Islam to make women’s rights arguments, rather than those who, like Fatou Sow, fight for women’s rights from a broader perspective without recourse to religion. For Fatou, the best approach depends on the context. In certain places it may be appropriate to make what are sometimes called “Islamic feminist arguments” within a religious paradigm. “But as a Senegalese,” she insists, “I refuse to reinterpret the Qur’an to change the family law. I am not going to enter into the religious debate. I do not want to close myself off.” Above all, she argues

that the strategy for combating fundamentalisms must be a political one that takes the debate off of “the religious terrain where they wish to trap us. Nowadays, all questions take you back to the Qur'an. You try to discuss AIDS and they reply, ‘Ah, yes, the Qur'an says that you should not have homosexual sex.’”

#### LIVING UNDER MUSLIM LAWS

I first read the work of iconic Algerian feminist sociologist Marieme Hélie-Lucas, now seventy-two, when I was a graduate student in the early 1990s. She wrote some of the earliest articles critiquing the status of women postindependence, and specifically the Algerian Family Code, which reduced them to virtual minors. Fundamentalism did not just fight the Algerian government from without. It had also crept into the law itself through this dreadful code justified in the name of religion and opposed for decades by Algerian feminists because of the discriminatory nature of its provisions on marriage, divorce, and inheritance.<sup>10</sup> I will never forget my own failed attempts to resolve my father's estate in Algeria. When I questioned the gender-discriminatory distribution of assets that was supposed to occur pursuant to the Islamic inheritance provisions incorporated in the Family Code, the legal official I was dealing with pointed his finger upward.

“Madam, you cannot argue with God.”

Marieme addressed all this in a 1987 classic, “Bound and Gagged by the Family Law,”<sup>11</sup> in which she also detailed how fundamentalists threatened to throw acid on the faces of women attending the first postindependence feminist gathering in Algiers in 1981. Steeped in the politics of Algeria's independence movement, Hélie-Lucas chose not to end her quest for freedom when the French army departed. She saw the rise of fundamentalism coming early in the new country. “It developed because the Algerian state did not keep its promises.” Being such a Cassandra was lonely. By the time fundamentalism had become obvious enough for her friends on the Algerian left to join her in speaking out against it, it was too late to avoid disaster.

In the 1980s, Marieme founded the network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), which Fatou Sow now coordinates.

It started as a kind of solidarity action committee that became increasingly formalized. The network originated in 1984, when three women were arrested in Algeria for protesting the Family Code. Marieme encountered a group of feminists from all over the world while in The Hague and asked if they would help support the incarcerated Algerians. They in turn wrote to other women to ask them to do the same. As a result, protest letters from around the world flooded the office of Algeria's president. The women were freed.

Initially, Marieme did not consider taking action about issues beyond her home country. But she saw that the international coalition worked. This first lobbying effort was one of the biggest successes of her political life, she tells me. Subsequently, she received letters from Indian women who had helped in the campaign, asking the Algerian women on whose behalf they had mobilized to join them in efforts for women under threat elsewhere. Those involved realized how groundbreaking it could be to mobilize women from within Muslim majority countries and communities transnationally.

Before long, WLUML was an international powerhouse, a network of women's rights activists from seventy countries, “from South Africa to Uzbekistan, from Senegal to Indonesia with an international headquarters in France and bureaus in Pakistan and Dakar.”<sup>12</sup> One of the group's focal points is “exposing fundamentalisms.” To that end, despite a shoestring budget, WLUML is involved in a wide range of projects—from condemning specific cases of fundamentalist violation of women's rights (like the murder of Pakistani women's rights advocate Farida Afridi in July 2012) to producing and promoting indispensable new resources that can help save others from such a fate (including a book entitled *Mapping Stoning in Muslim Contexts*, authored by a coalition called Justice for Iran). Part safety net, part group therapy, part advocacy organization and part Open University, WLUML blossomed amazingly from one woman's attempt to free three others.

While many people in the world know something about the oppression of women of Muslim heritage, they may know much less about the organized resistance of those same women. In “Heart and Soul,” a WLUML action document that has become a kind of informal history, Marieme pleads: “Know that women also struggle in Muslim countries

because that is where we draw inspiration and strength from.”<sup>13</sup> The efforts of WLUML networkers are analogous to those by feminists everywhere challenging sexism. What is distinct, Hélie-Lucas argues, is the particular role of religion and especially its fundamentalist variants: “In our societies we are told that the circumstances under which we live cannot be changed because God said it should be like this. . . . This is also what brings us together.” In the face of such religiously justified discrimination, WLUML seeks to “build bridges among ourselves,” to break the isolation faced by some women fighting fundamentalism.

This model differs entirely from “aid,” which, as Marieme notes, goes only in one direction: from the haves to the have-nots. WLUML instead offers a reciprocal exchange, and a celebration of the diversities and unities of women of Muslim heritage living in a wide variety of contexts. Women from Nigeria sign petitions on behalf of those in Pakistan, trial observers are sent from Malaysia to Fiji, and so on.

WLUML brings together women who work from a secular perspective (who predominated in the group at first) with those who seek to progressively interpret within religion (whose ranks increased after the 1990s, when the organization’s international office moved to London). Marieme, an avowed atheist, argues that those who use feminist reinterpretation of Islam to promote women’s rights and those who advocate from a secular human rights standpoint should be allies, given the power of the shared enemy they face. Their work can be complementary.

However, there are also dangerous traps to consider when acting inside religion, she avers. “If God and the Prophet said there will be slaves, there are slaves.” Pakistani human rights lawyer and former UN expert Hina Jilani was also skeptical when I spoke to her in Lahore about what is called “Islamic feminism.” “This has not gotten us anywhere. In a country where you have seventy-two different sects of Islam, and seventy-two different interpretations, a seventy-third will not matter.” In her view, such reinterpretation of religion is “of secondary importance as far as human rights activism is concerned. I don’t think that the mullahs are very much bothered about that. What excites them are people who say, ‘We have to go forward, this is the reality and this is the modern world.’” Iranian women’s rights activist Mahnaz Afkhami agrees, telling me, “If you’re in the army, the general is always going to

win. In the religious context, there is a hierarchy. If you’re a woman, the guy who is the general in the religious army is not going to even pay the slightest attention to what your view of the text is.” Still, notwithstanding this ongoing debate, there are many women who advocate each of these approaches (or sometimes both) in the WLUML network (just as there are in this book), battling together against common foes: patriarchs, militarists, racists, and fundamentalists.

After a long career of resisting fundamentalism, Marieme Hélie-Lucas remains deeply frustrated by its continuing strength and our relative weakness. She knows that in many Muslim contexts, secularism has been “rubbed out” by “terrorizing dissenters.”<sup>14</sup> And she knows only too well how little global support is offered to these dissenters. “[I]t seems presumed,” she types out in angry letters after the Pakistani Taliban attempt to kill schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai in the Swat Valley, that “Muslims do not deserve equal access to . . . freedom of thought and freedom of conscience. Presumed Muslims are under cultural arrest; they are bound by customs and religion and should remain so, while the rest of humanity enjoys universal rights.”<sup>15</sup>

In defiance of such mistaken assumptions, Hélie-Lucas will stay up until 4 a.m. to translate someone’s solidarity statement and push the rest of us to keep going. In her spare time, she runs a website called Secularism is a Women’s Issue (SIAWI) to showcase even more of these outsider views. Like Fatou Sow, sometimes she despairs, but she still works harder than many activists half her age. Ultimately, perhaps because of the unlikely success of that very first letter-writing campaign that sparked WLUML, Marieme still believes it is worth trying to be heard against the odds. As she wrote to me during the Anwar al-Awlaki controversy, “Breaking the silence is a great thing for us all.”

#### DECONSTRUCTING SHARIA IN NIGERIA

“The baobab connotes spiritual strength . . . and fortitude . . . in distressing times.”<sup>16</sup>

Ayesha Imam and the women she worked with for years in the Nigerian organization BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights possess those very traits. The group, founded in 1996, fights to protect wom-

en's rights in the maze of the Nigerian legal system, with its overlapping religious, secular, and customary laws and courts. Ayesha tells me they use tools from whichever system can "recuperate rights," believing it is often possible to arrive at similar conclusions by working through Muslim discourses or international human rights. "My issue," she underscores, "is not where you come from, but where you arrive at."

With her colleagues, she tried to "deconstruct what is Sharia. How does it get to be Sharia? Is it divine or is it merely religious?" In the eighties and early nineties, some of the Sharia courts in Nigeria had come up with "what we may call progressive" interpretations, "as opposed to following somebody's idea of how it should have worked in thirteenth-century Arabia." Ayesha Imam's efforts to support women living under these Muslim laws brought her, inevitably, to work on fundamentalism. "Fundamentalism hit us in Nigeria so it was absolutely necessary, because otherwise fundamentalism was going to close us all down, close all the dreams down, close all the hope down."

The backdrop for this, a resurgence of communalism, was sparked in part by the harsh impact of structural adjustment and ensuing battles for resources. Structural adjustment—economic reforms imposed on Nigeria by international financial institutions—also meant there were many unemployed, uneducated young men looking for something to do. For them, "this was an opportunity to have power and assert themselves," as Ayesha sees it. "They told women in taxis and buses that they had to sit in the back seats." There was "general intimidation."

This in turn led to greater emphasis on Sharia law in Muslim majority segments of the population in the late nineties in the north of Nigeria, and then to enactment of new legislation in the early 2000s.<sup>17</sup> "The reaction among the Muslim community was really mixed. Human rights workers and those who identify strongly as democrats argued that we need secular law. The laws being brought in under the guise of Muslim laws are conservative, and detract from human rights." Even some religious conservatives opposed Sharianization, Imam recalls, on the grounds that you could not have Sharia law before you have economic development so that people can actually live good lives.

"You can't cut off people's hands for theft if they have no other means of gaining a livelihood."

Any such opponents, however, became targets of "vigilante responses." Death threats, beatings, threats of being burned. In one state where the governor delayed enacting a Sharia Act and set up a committee to study the matter, there were even threats to his family. Ayesha recalls attending a meeting in Abuja with the governor who started Sharianization. Young men throughout the hall were telling women where they could and could not sit. "Every time a woman got up to speak, they were yelling and drowning her out. It didn't matter if you were wearing a hijab or not." This was new, Ayesha underlines. When she was a younger feminist, "You didn't get shouted down. You were not in fear of being physically attacked, or being burned or harassed. You'd go to public meetings and people would get up and argue with you and they might laugh."

As fundamentalism began to transform Nigerian lives, Ayesha and BAOBAB became involved in the cases of women who were facing sentences of stoning. One of the first, that of Fatima Usman, ensued when the woman's father took the man who fathered her baby to court to get child support. "He had no idea he was going to set up his own daughter for the possibility of being stoned to death." (Today Usman remains technically out on bail, as the case has never been finally resolved. Nor, thankfully, has the sentence been carried out.)<sup>18</sup> Most such cases began with vigilante groups forcing the police to prosecute and ended in "lots of people convicted of *Zina* [unlawful sexual relations] and whipped because they were not married." If people do not appeal, they are taken out and whipped right away, Ayesha laments. "It was really important to establish the principle that you can appeal. It's your right."

"It's not anti-God to appeal."

However, it was difficult to rally victims of such prosecutions to fight back. "They thought, as Muslims, if they were charged under Muslim laws, they could not defend themselves. It would be tantamount to arguing with God." I had heard those words before. While working on the case of a thirteen-year-old mentally disabled girl, Bariya Magazu, who had been charged with *Zina* and faced public whipping, Ayesha's team had to spend a week in the girl's village "arguing with her father, her family head and the village head that it was not impious to file an appeal under Sharia law." This is what law as sacrament does to people.

Though Ayesha succeeded in convincing Bariya's family members, while the appeal was being filed the nonliterate teenage villager who had just given birth was whipped publicly for the sex she had been coerced to have. "Afterwards," Ayesha wrote in an outraged statement for BAOBAB, "humiliated, bruised, crying and in pain, she was left to make her way home alone."<sup>19</sup> Ayesha points out to me: "The dominant ideology is that good women are secluded, so to be whipped in public view is a really horrible disgrace."

Ayesha was also involved in efforts to defend Amina Lawal, a Nigerian woman famously sentenced to stoning for adultery in 2002 (and later acquitted). Imam was critical of parts of the Western response to the case, which ignored women's rights advocates on the ground. Some Western advocates asked for a pardon, which was neither possible nor politically feasible. Local activists instead chose legal appeals that would immediately stay execution. "If you don't have an appeal, they can take action and you might win the principle, but it's a little late for the person involved." Another reason the local women's rights defenders opposed pardons is that, "technically, you are saying, 'Yes, we did wrong, but please forgive us anyway.' The point we wanted to make was that there hadn't been any wrongdoing."

The women of BAOBAB also raised money to support defendants who were unable to earn a living while being prosecuted: "Having to hop off to court all the time, they can't work in the fields, they can't go sell their stuff." Worse still, "the stress of it is horrendous." So the activists try to offer the psychological support needed to overcome the defendants' feelings that they are challenging their own religion. BAOBAB's contribution was "to make it known that you could fight and you could win. The more we did that, the more people were willing to fight against it and the less people felt like, 'I am a Muslim, I cannot criticize.'"

Every one of the Sharianization stoning sentences has been successfully appealed with the support of women's human rights defenders, resulting in acquittals (or nonperformance of sentence, as in Usman's case), and there have reportedly been no new cases since Amina Lawal's acquittal, though the laws remain on the books. In the battle between stone and tree, it is the BAOBAB that has prevailed.

Above all else, BAOBAB tried to make it known that debate and

discussion were still possible, that multiple understandings have been employed by Muslims. "Therefore, it is not anti-Muslim to say, 'Well we can abolish the death penalty, for example.'" BAOBAB pointed out that in the Qur'an, the Bible, and the Torah, slavery was recognized, but "today, in the Muslim world, nobody—by and large—thinks that slavery is a good thing and should be justified by reference to Islam."

For Ayesha, space for debate and maintaining the flow of knowledge are absolutely critical. This is the only way people can work through on their own, "to something you and I would recognize as rights." Rights must be part of a process, not a mere proclamation. "People can't be told my version of rights any more than I am willing to be told some conservative right-wing version of rights. People have to allow other people the same level of tolerance." But Ayesha knows this is by no means easy. If Nigerians are preoccupied eking out a living, "it's very hard to take the time to discuss." Most of all, she thinks it vital "to recognize that there is a possibility of fighting for change within our communities." This thought brings me back to BAOBAB's slogan, which encircles the eponymous African tree on the organization's logo.

"You can't change the past, but you can try to change the future."

#### THE IMAM'S LIBERATED DAUGHTER

Thirty and unmarried, Aminatou Daouda Hainikoye is originally from the west of Niger. Daughter of a liberal imam, she has a degree in law and specializes in women's rights. I first met her in Dakar at the WLUML-sponsored Feminist Leadership Institute. When she comes to see me alone in the evening at my hotel in the Nigerien capital, Niamey, she wears a fabulous red and blue boubou with a black scarf around her neck and dangling earrings.

Aminatou's home country, one of the poorest in the world despite its uranium reserves, is not the easiest place to be a woman, even less a women's rights activist. Though half the Nigerien population is female, 79 percent of those who live in extreme poverty are women.<sup>20</sup> Only 38 percent of girls go to school, and one in three marries before her fifteenth birthday.<sup>21</sup> Still, Niger is formally a secular state and the mainstream of Islam here has traditionally been tolerant.

Fundamentalism hit the country in the 1990s, Nigerien women's rights advocate Zeinabou Hadari assesses, due to a mix of factors: the rise of extremism in neighboring Algeria and Nigeria, economic pressure created by debt restructuring, the impact of Nigerien students returning from studying abroad (where they were influenced by the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood), and a new democratization that fundamentalists exploited. Programs that defended women's rights were dismantled as fundamentalists blocked efforts to limit the early marriages of girls and spied on women's group meetings.

So today in Niger, Aminatou explains, "Fundamentalism is a real check on the promotion of women's rights." It is based on what she sees as bad interpretations of the Qur'an, as well as the cacophony of diverse misinterpretations with which various marabouts fill the airwaves. Aminatou underscores the financial causes of the rise of fundamentalism in her country. She points particularly to poverty and the devaluation of the West African franc. The fundamentalists use this fragile economic environment all too well. "In the beginning, they offer you money to adhere to their version of religion, to wear the burqa, the hijab, the niqab. They give out money, food, bags of rice, cooking oil. Even if you are not convinced in your heart, you accept so as not to die of hunger."

An activist in Islamic associations, a primarily middle-class milieu, she says she knows many fundamentalists personally—those who are "open to debate" and those "who will not even look at you." The imam's daughter laughs at the about-faces made by some young newly minted fundamentalists who used to go to nightclubs or to "change women like shirts."

As a believer, she strongly supports the secularism of the Nigerien state as a foil to extremists. "People are afraid of these guys. They have political ambitions. It is a way of checking them." In her view, the state has been justifiably vigilant about the rise of political Islam and has played a significant role in blocking it. As long as the political will is there, and the state fulfills its responsibilities, she does not fear the future. This optimistic view stands in sharp contrast to what I hear from Nigerien woman magistrate Moussa Satou, who says, "I worry that in ten years we will become a fundamentalist state." I hope it is

the imam's daughter who is correct in her prognosis, but the regional dynamics prevailing now across the Sahel are not promising.

Based as it is in her faith, Aminatou Daouda's critique of Nigerien fundamentalists is especially blistering. "They want to take Niger back to the era of the Prophet, Peace Be Upon Him. They do not think that religion can adapt to different contexts. You must be a little clueless to think this." She sees her religion rather differently. "Islam can adapt to all epochs. Islam is not a closed religion, it is open." Very secure in her beliefs and identity, she has no fear for Islam, which she deems robust, organic, and something that "must evolve as the world evolves." "That is what really shocks me with them," she says of fundamentalists. "They think Islam must remain frozen."

At university, Aminatou wrote her thesis about the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The fundamentalists had used marches and fatwas to try to block Niger's CEDAW ratification altogether, and then to impose limiting reservations that would hamper its application when those first efforts failed. The Nigerien reservations, or legal limitations on the treaty, seek to allow continued discrimination against women in the family even while ratifying a convention entirely designed to end gender bias, and Aminatou believes they do not hold up "from an Islamic point of view."

Apparently, a "very cool" woman marabout called Zeinab, who preached on national TV, had worked with the Nigerien Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote CEDAW ratification, issuing fatwas in its favor. But Zeinab was killed in a car accident on a trip to promote the convention in rural Niger. The fundamentalists said she died because of her fatwa in favor of CEDAW. "All those who speak against Islam will end up like her," they say.

In contrast to such claims, Aminatou Daouda's father the imam supports her work for women's rights (though her going out in the evening took some getting used to, as did the frequent work-related visits to the house by male civil-society colleagues). "Thank God, he understood. He lets me travel to meetings and workshops. I cannot thank him enough because he really helped me."

Inspired by the atmosphere in her family, she thinks the best way to

fight fundamentalism in Niger is to promote a tolerant Islam. "Fundamentalism means going above and beyond the limits of religion itself." In that, she sees an arrogance. "We did not create religion. We must not think that we will protect it. No!" She quotes a Qur'anic verse in which God says that He created the religion and that He is the Guardian of His religion. Extrapolating from this verse, Aminatou Daouda gives me her take on the American would-be Qur'an burner, Christian fundamentalist Terry Jones. "On Facebook, I wrote that he does not bother me, because I know that God is in charge of His religion. It is up to God to react."

In her universe, a Muslim should not trouble others or make demands on them. She has no problem with atheists. "It is their choice and I respect it." Coexistence is Islamic for Aminatou Daouda: "Islam told me this: a Muslim must be tolerant, must support the other, in whatever context." I walk with her out into the dark October night in her many-colored boubou. In front of the Hotel Gaweye, she grabs a cab home alone.

#### OUR DAUGHTERS WILL BE ABLE TO WALK IN THIS COUNTRY

"Street harassment is against Islam." "Disrespect to any woman is disrespect to humanity." "I have the right to walk freely in my city."

Fifty women and a few male supporters filed through the dusty streets of Kabul carrying these banners on July 14, 2011, the week before I arrived in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> A new organization called Young Women for Change had called the march from Kabul University to the offices of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. They did so after their organization's pilot research project indicated that eighteen out of twenty women in the capital city who go out in public are harassed—"assaulted, pinched, grabbed, groped, even slapped"—on a daily basis.

The college student who founded Young Women for Change, Noor Jahan Akbar, comes to see me wearing the most minimal of scarves around her young face, and she dispenses with it entirely as soon as she enters the guesthouse lounge. The daughter of educators, Noor Jahan says she learned the value of gender equality while growing up.

On July 14, 2011, she and the other young women distributed fliers and talked to bystanders on the street. Their public presence followed a "night letter" (unsigned missive) they distributed among university students, stating that street harassment is un-Islamic because the Prophet Muhammad said nobody but those who are inferior in character will disrespect women. Young Women for Change also argued in human rights terms that women are equal with men and deserve the same dignity. After the night letter, they published a "call to action" on street harassment, even delivering it to the Ulema Council, comprising the country's leading clerics. Only then did they take to the streets.

The day of the march, some watchers along the route supported them, Noor Jahan recalls. Others took a dimmer view. "One of the religious TVs in Afghanistan dedicated its Friday preaching to insulting us, saying we were not dressed appropriately, and therefore deserved to be harassed." Noor Jahan says that even one participant in full hijab was told she was dressed inappropriately.<sup>23</sup> "It's threatening to men to see women being empowered. They feel like the lifestyle that has preserved for them the right to dominate women is going to change. This fear causes a lot of anger." Religious "extremism" is also to blame, as what she terms "wrong interpretations" of the Qur'an and the Hadith dictate that women are to stay at home.

The young Afghan activist, who bears the name of a legendary seventeenth-century Mughal empress, is proud to tell me that, after asking for official permission for their event, her group received good police protection. Not only did fifteen Afghan policemen come along, but "they walked with us, and handed out our fliers." It seems to have been an educational experience for the police, who were so upset by those harassing the women protesters that some of the cops shouted at the shocked hecklers: "In Afghanistan, we are all Muslims and in our culture mothers are to be respected. Every one of you has mothers and sisters and wives. Would you feel okay if your mother was harassed like this?"

Like the resilient wild tulips that grow in parts of their country, these Young Women for Change are no shrinking violets and did not simply rely on the police. They photographed the catcallers, which sometimes caused them to stop. Most important, they did not give up, no matter

what anyone said. "The women who came with us, stayed with us the whole time."

As part of their campaign to turn out supporters, the route they would take had been publicly announced two weeks in advance. They then received threats via e-mail and Facebook and over the phone. After giving interviews on Afghan TV, Noor Jahan was told she would be found and punished. "But none of this means we are afraid because even an angry approach shows they are thinking and questioning their beliefs." For safety's sake, the Young Women for Change revised their route two days before the event, but, despite denunciations and real risk, they hit the streets nonetheless.

Noor Jahan expected much worse than the reactions they got. "Before going, my stomach was like turning around the whole morning because I was so nervous that something would happen security-wise. I would feel awful for arranging this event and putting so many men and women in danger, but we were all safe." Additionally, the media broadcast their message. Her face shines when describing this first political success.

At nineteen, this young Afghan is already thinking about her own intergenerational responsibility. The night before the march, she sent a motivational message to the participants: "Because of your fights our children will be treated better." Though she fears a civil war when international troops leave Afghanistan, she is positive about her country's future in the very long term. "I will probably not be alive to see that day, but I think dreaming is important, and nourishing the dream in other women around me is the first step toward achieving it.

"Our daughters will be able to walk in this country."

The criticism she receives, she takes on the chin. "More than once I've been called someone who promotes Western ideas, a non-Muslim." For Noor Jahan, this charge says more about those who utter it than about her. "According to Islam, it is a sin to call a Muslim a non-Muslim." Nor is she shy about replying: "Usually, I say, since when is safety and respect of women an idea that is Western? If you say we don't have this, you're really disrespecting our culture." Young Women for Change actively promote this safety and respect of women, not only through demonstrations and educational events but also in the most contempo-

rary ways. When I meet her, Noor Jahan Akbar is busy planning a safe Internet café for women in Kabul's Karte Char neighborhood.

Her views on women's rights have been nourished by her academic research on traditional women's music in Afghanistan. Women have been singing at house parties, weddings, and birthday gatherings for years. While they are unpublicized, these "couplets and quatrains that women sing are actually feminist ideas, that have been silenced." The lyrics Noor Jahan has gathered discuss early marriage, "the thirst to go to school," complaints about fathers and against violence. Quintessentially Afghan, she wants to use this folkloric music to "advocate for women's rights as an Afghan idea." Whatever people might think about her country, whatever the Taliban might have tried to ban, she knows her history.

"My ancestors have been singing for many centuries."

#### BELOW THE RADAR IN PAKISTAN

In a grad-studenty Lahore apartment full of books, I meet Sarah Suheil and Kyla Pasha, the editors of a very bold online publication on sex and sexuality in Pakistan called *Chay Magazine*. Though they look the age of my own students, they are junior professors. Sarah and Kyla think sex and sexuality are critical areas for discussion in their country. Whether gay or straight, "nobody talks about it, and it's shrouded with religion and shame," according to Sarah, who teaches business law. "We don't talk about sexual relations between a husband and a wife that are perfectly 'legitimate,'" adds Kyla Pasha. Paradoxically, alternative sexualities are "almost easier to discuss openly because you can say them out loud in order to condemn them," she tells me. Transgender women are very visible in some Pakistani weddings and funerals, Kyla explains, "and their prayer is supposed to be especially efficacious."

Sarah, who says she prefers the term *conservative* or *orthodox* over *fundamentalist*, explains that with all the urgent issues in today's Pakistan, they struggle to find enough time to run *Chay*. She also works on land rights and has been involved in protests against both Talibanization and militarized responses to it. In spite of their numerous commitments, Kyla, a poet who teaches cultural studies, had originally wanted

to start a café, perhaps like T2F in Karachi, a literal space for discussion of sexuality. “But, my contention was that we may get blown up or shut down, or both.” Instead, they shifted to the idea of a magazine for readers across the sexual spectrum. Their call for submissions to *Chay* describes a hope that “sex and sexuality should enter the public discourse,” as a way of combatting “unhappiness in our daily lives” as well as “violence, shame, depression, ill health and general social malaise.”<sup>24</sup> Among other topics, they seek contributions on “sex-positivity, virginity and enjoyment.”

While simultaneously working on her computer, Kyla tells me that though it is open to straight and gay views, she feels that *Chay Magazine* has “opened up a lot of space in which a lot of queer people voice their feelings and frustrations. It’s broken one boundary that way.” Recent posts have discussed topics as diverse as reconciling sexual identity and faith, and police brutality against eunuchs. Despite the stigma associated with homosexuality in Pakistan, Suheil and Pasha have found it easier to get writers to express themselves openly about gay themes. In an issue dedicated to religion and sexuality, Junaid Jahangir reminds us that some liberal Muslim leaders such as Imam Daayiee (the first openly gay imam in the United States) have even approved Muslim same-sex unions. “Based on the evolution of Muslim thought,” he wonders, “. . . would it be too much to ask . . . thoughtful and rational members of the Muslim clergy to review the case of gays and lesbians based on the principles of compassion and fairness?”<sup>25</sup>

Some of *Chay*’s gay writers argue that they must look beyond faith when it is interpreted to exclude them. Writes MH Tarrar, in a tract equally appropriate to some versions of Christianity, “For my part, I refuse to believe that if I, as a good person, make a concerted effort to treat people fairly . . . and generally live my life with a sense of caring. . . . Well, any religion that would . . . condemn me for trying to find love with someone of my own biological gender, is a faith I’m better off without.”<sup>26</sup>

The name of the magazine that allows such voices to be heard—*Chay*—is itself taken from the Urdu letter that stands for a curse related to the female anatomy, a word Sarah and Kyla are trying to reclaim. While the publication is for now online and in English, they are seek-

ing ways to produce a print edition, and an Urdu-language version, but have to carefully consider security and resource implications. “We’ve had a lot of negative feedback in a spam kind of way,” says Kyla.

Reading the comments under their mission statement on *Chay*’s website, one finds a mix of responses. Some are resoundingly supportive and grateful. “Best of luck. . . . We need more liberal thinking in this country.” “Thank you for doing this.” Others sermonize and vilify: “You should all follow teachings of Islam and not the path of Shaitan. He will take you to Jahanum.” Satan and Hell are common responses of many different kinds of fundamentalists to open expression of sexuality. “Why don’t you people open a brothel. Read Quran . . . then you will know what wrong thing you are doing. Jerks.” Another irate commenter replied to that last cyber-pundit: “Why don’t you do us all a favour and screw your secret hijabi girlfriend?”

I think about the difficulty of navigating these sorts of tensions when I meet two women in Pakistan whom I will call Shirin and Aafia. Queer Pakistani sexual rights activists, their work is as challenging as their identities might suggest. “That’s why we’re very below the radar,” Aafia explains. They have a “social support group” for what we in the United States would call LGBT people, but it is all “very hush, hush, hush.” Most members of their support group are closeted; homosexual sex is technically illegal here as “against the order of nature” and punishable by up to life imprisonment under the Penal Code.<sup>27</sup> Fundamentalists make everything infinitely more dangerous, but they are not alone in their virulent homophobia. In fact, “the hardest thing for people to negotiate is their families,” Aafia reminds me. Sitting across from me with her chin-length hair and jeans, Aafia considers herself “completely out.” Her family knows. People at her workplace know. However, she thinks about sexual identity in a complex way, and the label *lesbian* sits uneasily with her.

From these two women I learn to be careful of superimposing my understanding of sexuality categories on the context here. The entire question of whether or not LGBT orientation is an *identity* is a significant one for some queer people in Pakistan, “because they’re comfortable in the little space they’ve created, where a few people may know and then they can go about the rest of their life pretending to be straight,”

Aafia briefs me. In the current environment, queer Pakistanis with such views fear the consequences of going any further. “They’re like, ‘Let it stay under wraps. You bring it to people’s attention, that will cause backlash.’” Aafia herself does not agree with this view and wants to make sexual identity something she can discuss openly, regardless of the times.

Hence, creating their support group had deep meaning for Aafia, and it allowed her to make critical connections. Looking at Shirin, she says, “Before we started this group, I actually didn’t know any queer people at all. The first or second lesbian I met, was it you?”

“I’m not a lesbian,” Shirin corrects.

“Whatever, bisexual person,” Aafia continues. As is true for people with minority sexual identities in many places, whether small-town USA or Lahore, this solitude had a high cost. “There was a time of absolute depression and isolation. I didn’t know anybody so I thought there must not be anybody. Then I met people and I thought we have to get together so nobody feels that isolation.”

Does the current security environment in Pakistan make their work harder? “Well it was already hard anyway,” avers Aafia. Still, like anyone here, they now live with heightened security risks due to an upswing in jihadist terrorism. “We go about doing whatever, protesting, but anything could happen. You sort of have to close your mind to that risk at some point.” Shirin is convinced their work is tougher now. A friend of theirs who started a Pakistan Queer Liberation group on Facebook (“a closed-ish ecosystem”) received comments that Islam prohibits such activities. When some of the participants said they were secular, “the responses became violent and vehement,” Shirin recounts. “If it got on anybody’s radar and they decided they needed to do a jihad of some sort, it wouldn’t take much.”

In the current environment, Shirin worries not only about the Taliban but also about fundamentalist lone wolves, “some righteously indignant observant-in-his-own-head, very faithful Muslim person who says, ‘Who are these bad women?’ That’s all it would take.” Extremism has magnified the risk of such responses, she suggests, by putting forward “the legitimacy of violence as an honorable thing.” In light of that putatively “honorable” violence, almost no one faces more risk from

fundamentalists than LGBT/queer people of Muslim heritage, which is why several I meet request anonymity. For her part, Shirin regrets having to ask me not to use her real name. Still, she remains optimistic.

“Someday, I will not need to ask people to do this—*Inshallah*.”

#### THE LAST STRONGHOLD OF MEN OVER WOMEN

Thoraya Obaid was the first Saudi to head a UN agency. In 2001, she became executive director of the UN Population Fund, also known as the UNFPA, remaining in this job until 2010. UNFPA is not just any agency, but one that has become a lightning rod because it works on family planning and reproductive health. In 2001, the United States, under the Christian fundamentalist-influenced leadership of George W. Bush, began withholding money from the organization, falsely accusing it of promoting forced abortion in China.<sup>28</sup> Thoraya has dealt with all kinds of extremism.

Her home country of Saudi Arabia is one of the most closed societies in the world—my words, not hers. Women still cannot drive, though in recent protests they have gone out and done so anyway. Apparently confused as to what century we are in, the *Mutaween* (religious police) harass women in public for wearing nail polish or being insufficiently covered, though in May 2012 one brave woman challenged such a medieval posse at the Hayat Mall in Riyadh, tweeting footage of their harassment to the world.<sup>29</sup> Ten years earlier, when girls in Mecca tried to escape their burning school, the *Mutaween* blocked their exit because they were not properly covered.<sup>30</sup> Fifteen died. The situation of foreign workers—often from the Philippines or Sri Lanka—is similarly terrible. One case that has really stayed with me from my time at Amnesty International was the flogging of a group of Filipino migrant workers who had been arrested at a party and accused of “homosexual behavior.”<sup>31</sup> They were given fifty lashes a week for four weeks, then deported.

This is among the worst conceivable interpretations of Islam, yet the United States government has long unfathomably referred to its close ally Saudi Arabia as “moderate.” All along my journey, progressive women of Muslim heritage have complained bitterly about the role of the kingdom and also about the way the United States has shielded

and supported it. In Pakistan, Nighat Khan underscored the irony of the right-wing battle against Sharia in the United States while the U.S. government buttresses its Saudi counterpart. “They’re the supporters of the biggest Sharia State in the world.” Iranian Chahla Chafiq thinks Saudi Arabia represents an “Islam of the rich,” and she reflects that “Western powers do not speak about Saudi Arabia even if they stone people.” In fact, when Saudi Arabia was hauled before the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1998, after Amnesty International filed a complaint against it for practices like amputation and flogging, the United States said nothing. As the legal adviser who had worked on the complaint, I was horrified when it was reportedly disposed of in an hour behind closed doors.<sup>32</sup>

As a Saudi of a certain age, Thoraya Obaid sees herself as holding moderate views. However, taken in her own context, her stance is positively progressive. I speak with her in Jeddah via Skype. At sixty-seven, she feels she was spared the worst of fundamentalism personally, growing up “during that period in the Middle East when it was liberal.” King Faisal reigned then in Saudi Arabia, and though he was a staunchly conservative anti-Communist who promoted pan-Islamism, even he supported the education of women, thanks to the influence of his fourth wife. Thoraya became the test case for this policy. The first Saudi woman given a government scholarship, she went to study at Mills College in Oakland, California, in 1966. “I was the only one because there was this feeling that if Saudi women went to America, they will marry Americans and ‘get corrupted.’” It was not easy. She found herself in the heart of the American sixties when “as a 17-year-old girl I had all that pressure of paving the way for Saudi girls to come to America.” Her first day at Mills, she took the bus to downtown Oakland and rambled until her feet hurt. It was the first time she had ever walked outside alone. This trailblazer would go on to earn a doctorate from Wayne State University.

When she graduated, her father attended the ceremony, standing out in the crowd in his long white gown and traditional headdress. On their trip home, he became preoccupied, finally telling her he was not sure how they should emerge from the plane when landing in Jeddah. When the plane parked, a huge delegation of men, including Thoraya’s

brothers, waited for her on the tarmac. Her father held her hand. As Thoraya herself remembered in a 2002 speech,

we walked down the stairs, my face uncovered for the very first time—an act against the traditions of that time; my father held my hand firmly in his left hand, and the Mills Bachelor’s diploma in his right—and waved it high up in the air. I never covered my face again; because my father sent a clear and loud message to the society—education was my honour as well as his.<sup>33</sup>

That was possible in Saudi Arabia then. Thoraya thinks that things began to change with the Iranian revolution. Afterward, Saudi fundamentalists multiplied. They became “part of the government system, mainstream in a sense.” They had “their own funding, weapons, prisons, interrogation places.” After the 1991 Gulf War, the Wahhabist trend “took over the country.” Her own father, a religious man educated in Medina under Sheikh Sharabi, “one of the progressive Sheikhs at that time,” did not recognize this new Islam. At eighty, he used to return from praying at the mosque and say that they had been told to spread their legs when standing so they touched the worshipper next to them, to prevent the *shaitan* (devil) from coming in between them, something that had never been done before. He would ask Thoraya, “Were we not Muslims before?

“Is this the new Islam that I don’t belong to?”

Everywhere I went, from Algeria to the Somali diaspora, people had pointed the finger at Saudi Arabia and at Saudi funding as a key factor in the rise of fundamentalism and Wahhabism throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond.<sup>34</sup> Thoraya acknowledged that money had been widely disbursed “quote unquote for development.” The building of health centers abroad with Saudi money had been accompanied by “messaging and proselytizing. It is amazing to see the amount of money invested.” The precise amount is difficult to quantify, though it is in the billions of dollars.<sup>35</sup> She also recognizes with concern the large numbers of Saudi youth who have joined “fundamentalist violent groups,” what they call “the Saudi Afghans.”

In her home country, the fundamentalist message is also spread

by public institutions. Thoraya recounts a visit with a group of young women in Al Qassim Province, the country's most conservative, "where the Wahhabis come from." The girls told her that they have "to learn how to live double"—learn one thing at school and live something else at home with friends. At school they are told, "It's *haram* to wear jeans, *haram* to dance, *haram* to hear music, *haram* to go out, *haram* to do all kinds of things." At home, their mothers let them wear jeans, dance with their friends, listen to music, and go out to coffee shops. One girl asks of Thoraya politely, "Now tell me, Auntie, who's lying to me? My mom, or my school?"

Thoraya Obaid looks to a range of factors to explain the rise of fundamentalism fueling the prohibitions that confused the young residents of Al Qassim. "Wars, the position of America, the Palestine/Israeli conflict, the Iranian revolution, the rapid changes that are taking place, the young generation who want quick change Western style, taking only the superficialities of the West. It just makes people feel that they are lost and the only thing that remains for them is religion."

Known for an approach characterized by "cultural sensitivity" in the United Nations, Thoraya advocates supporting "moderate voices of Islam," and reinterpretation of a "feminist Islam." At the helm of UNFPA, she was known for being a centrist in her views. She says she seeks "words that would allow people coming together rather than fighting each other." However, she also struggled behind the scenes for women's rights, finally losing her temper with the Egyptian ambassador, she remembers, when his country and others were pushing back on issues of reproductive rights. "It's called the Cairo Plan," she reminded this diplomat, referencing the program adopted by the UN International Conference on Population and Development held in the Egyptian capital in 1994 and agreed to by his government at the time. The document guarantees women the right to control their own fertility. "What is the story?" she demanded of the diplomat. "Were you immoral in 1994 and now you're becoming more religious?" In the face of such regression, the former UNFPA chief remains convinced that "at the centre of human progress is the quest for human dignity. . ."<sup>36</sup>

Thoraya Obaid—Saudi, PhD holder, mother, Muslim, retired UN director—notes that fundamentalisms across the spectrum are always

"related to women," especially to women's reproductive rights and sexuality. "This is where they feel their power. Women went out to work, they couldn't control it. It is the last stronghold of men over women."

#### MY FATHER WAS A FEMINIST

When I ask Shirin Ebadi if she thinks it important for women human rights defenders from different Muslim majority countries to work together against fundamentalism, she says, "Of course." Then she quickly turns my query back on me.

"Why do you only ask about women? Men can help as well."

Many men in Muslim majority populations are involved in the subjugation of women and girls, in violence against women, and in propagating the fundamentalist notion that these things are divinely sanctioned. However, many other men in the same countries are also significant contributors to the battle for women's equality and are against fundamentalist gender codes. They must not be forgotten. For example, a Nigerien journalist I met in 2010, Albert Chaibou, who runs a civil society advocacy and media group called Alternative, had just organized a congress of women from across his country to discuss promoting women's rights through new laws. Writing about this in his organization's newspaper, he asks, "Can Niger construct a real democracy and sustainable development while marginalizing half of its population? Certainly not."<sup>37</sup>

My own father's final book, published in Algiers at the end of the dark decade, was a historical and anthropological study called *Algerian Women: Victims of a Neopatriarchal Society*.<sup>38</sup> The front cover features the Arabic calligraphy rendering of a quote from Rumi, the renowned thirteenth-century (male) Sufi poet.

"Woman is a ray of divine light."

Some of Mahfoud Bennoune's male friends would infuriate him by telling him, "I bought your book for my wife." My father would reply, "I didn't write the book for your wife—I wrote it for you." He believed that women's human rights should also be a vital cause for men.

In 1999, my father dedicated his last book to his older sister Zohra, who seems to have died at the hands of someone in her husband's fam-

ily under circumstances that were never clear, and for which there was never any accounting. I do not think my father ever got over this, especially because it was shrouded in secrecy. In one of his last revolutionary acts, Mahfoud Bennoune spelled out on the title page that his book was for “my sister Zohra, victim of Berber-Arab-Islamic traditions.” When I am in Sidi Moussa, Algeria, in 2010, a young psychologist working with female survivors of fundamentalist violence tells me she has read the book and has not forgotten those words.

The reality of male misogyny in Muslim majority contexts cannot be denied. Given the depth of women’s subordination, Mona Eltahawy was right to ask of Arab men and Arab societies, “Why do they hate us?”<sup>39</sup> Fundamentalism has enflamed that hatred and formed it into a creed. But generalizations are also not the end of the story. I will never forget an Egyptian taxi driver who picked me up in Tahrir Square in spring 2011. He was celebrating riotously over the news he had just received on his cellphone that his wife had given birth to a daughter. He was so happy about it that he would not let me pay my fare.

Though he struggled with the baggage of patriarchy, my father over the years became a feminist. Nothing was more important to him than my education and my freedom. He told me that during his years in French prison during the War of Independence, he first began to think critically about the situation of women in Algeria, because his deprivation of liberty came to resemble theirs.

Many of the women’s rights advocates I met also talked about the significant role played in their lives by a progressive father. Maternal contributions have been crucial as well, but perhaps the positive influence of a paterfamilias is less expected. These men are the opposite of the fundamentalists. Thoraya Obaid tells me she wants to publish an entire book about the way in which women in countries like hers were influenced by liberal patriarchs. “Had it not been for their fathers in a strict patriarchal society, they would never have had the opportunities they had.” In her own case, her Saudi father dreamed about her having opportunities equal to those of her brothers. As “a devout Muslim, [he] interpreted the command in the first surah of the Koran as instructions to all Muslims—men and women.” That first revealed word is *read*.<sup>40</sup>

Haja Salamatou Traoré, a devout feminist midwife who fights in

Niger for decent treatment of women with obstetric fistula, told me, “My father was a real Muslim and built many mosques, but he let his daughters go to school and choose their own husbands. This is real belief.”

When I ask Dr. Fatou Sow how she became a feminist, her answer is startling yet familiar. “I had a father who was in a certain way a feminist.” This accounted in part for who she has become. “My father always said, ‘I want you to go far in your studies because I want you to have a good job, and to be able to take care of yourself.’”

“The first time I heard that a woman should be independent was from my father.”

Codou Bop, cofounder with Fatou of GREFELS—the Research Group on Women and the Law in Senegal—tells me she too became a feminist “because of my father.” He defied gendered roles. “He took care of us. He said, ‘I am raising children who are autonomous.’” Codou Bop’s Muslim father died as he lived, making no distinctions among his children. “When he died, he left equal shares to his daughters and his sons. And my father learned the entire Qur’an before going to European school.” Part of why fundamentalism is so shocking to these women’s rights defenders is that it represents a rejection of the open Islams of their fathers. While some other Muslim patriarchs restrict and abuse their daughters, these progressive fathers, who nurture and defend, who stand against fundamentalism at home, must not be forgotten.

#### THE LIBERAL MULLAH OF HERAT

In his tight turban and long white beard, Syed Ahmad Hosaini does not look anything like what some might think a women’s rights advocate should look like. I meet him in Herat at a market full of women artisans that has been built by the Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team. He has just concluded a women’s rights workshop for a hundred participants that was part of an Afghan government campaign. As I arrive, the stately mullah descends the stairs surrounded by women asking him questions. After I introduce myself, we go back up to the meeting room to talk about his work. Despite the weight of our subject matter, the scene is comical, for there is a violent hot wind blowing through the

window, and as I sit with the mullah, it nearly carries away the head-scarf I have to wear here time and again, leaving chunks of my curls blowing in the breeze. Syed Hosaini looks as though he could care less.

He tells me how happy he was to take part in the workshop, and to tell women that “Islam did not say that your rights should be violated.” If their husbands and brothers “break their rights,” they are not respecting Islam. During the workshop, he stresses the importance of women’s consent to marriage. “If she doesn’t want to marry a man, she should say, ‘I don’t want to marry him.’ If she wants him, she should say, ‘I like him.’” The women asked him to come back for a second day, but he could not, for his work continues elsewhere.

He is an unlikely women’s rights advocate, a former mujahid whose idea of women’s equality, admittedly, might not be exactly the same as mine. However, Syed Hosaini’s experience working with Afghan refugee families in Iran brought him to rights advocacy “because he found out how many problems people are facing.” Bearing the honorific title *Syed*, which refers to descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, he is ready to dive in to the most charged debates in Afghan society. “We cannot leave the fundamentalists alone to do their work.” This soft-spoken, bearded man thinks it is important to invite them, talk to them, even try to raise their awareness through meetings, teaching them about “moderate Islam.”

Syed Hosaini undertakes such endeavors daily. He has given trainings about women’s rights and human rights to mullahs across the fifteen districts of Herat Province. Very specific about the topics he covers—which include “gender-based violence,” “gender inequality,” “child rights”—he says without ambiguity: “Women’s rights and men’s rights are equal in Islam.” The liberal mullah has also taught this in meetings and roundtables, on TV and radio. He is well known in the region for this work—too well known. “If I go outside the city, my security is not assured.” He has received numerous “warnings.” Undeterred, he says, “If I am not here to raise the awareness of people, who will do that?”

He faces a very difficult security environment as a “women’s rights activist,” a title Syed Hosaini proudly applies to himself. When I offer him a ride, since he has stayed on to talk to me and evening is com-

ing, he thinks of my safety first and has the driver take me back to the hotel—which is out of the way—before taking him home.

In the Nazary Hotel car, he tells me about an old spoonmaker he once visited. Syed Ahmad Hosaini told the spoonmaker he appreciated his work, which served society. Mr. Hosaini says he himself has been working for forty years and nobody has appreciated his work or told him that it was good. He is glad that I have come to talk to him, as he did with the spoonmaker. In the Herati dusk, I think about how many people like the liberal mullah—men and women—are out there doing the quiet, unappreciated work against extremism and for women’s equality. I wish I could talk to them all.

#### TALKING ABOUT GAZA OPENS MANY WOUNDS

Naila Ayesh was tortured in Israel’s notorious Moscobiya Detention Center in East Jerusalem during the first Palestinian Uprising, and she miscarried as a result. When I meet her in 2010, she has not settled for an easier life but is still an activist. With short, dark hair and wearing a pink sweater, she smokes and drinks tea and tells me about her current work running the Gaza Women’s Affairs Center. Though she originally came from the West Bank, and now lives there, she travels back and forth to Gaza, where she previously resided, for her work with the center. “Every time I go to Gaza, I still feel how warm and giving people are despite the problems they face.” Still, living conditions are beyond terrible, such that even “talking about Gaza, it opens many wounds.” Those wounds are reopened by Israel’s November 2012 assault on Gaza that misses the offices of the Women’s Affairs Center but reportedly kills 103 civilians and wounds a thousand.<sup>41</sup>

Even when I am in the Middle East in 2010, Gazans, who live in a tiny strip of land between the Mediterranean and Israel, are already caught between the devil of Israel’s siege and the deep blue sea of Muslim fundamentalism. I had been to the Gaza Strip in 1987 and had seen the misery even then in hot, overcrowded refugee camps. I want to return to Gaza but do not have the media credentials necessary to circumvent the Israeli military siege. However, my memories from 1987—no substitute for a return visit—are still vivid. In Jabalia Refugee Camp, now

with a population of 110,000 and regularly bombed over the years by Israeli forces, I remember a lake of sewage that stood open for children to walk or fall in. I can only imagine what it must be like now, after being hit repeatedly by Israeli military attacks—including one that killed ten members of a single family.

Young people, who make up 60 percent of the Gaza population, continue to live in misery. “There are no resources for youth to live their youthfulness,” says Naila in 2010. No jobs, no fun activities. “The only thing available for them as kids is the mosque. That’s where the brainwashing starts.” In that hothouse environment, “religion becomes linked in their minds with resistance.” Espousing fundamentalist Islam becomes synonymous with opposing the policies of the Israeli government toward Gaza, when instead it simply contributes to the misery of other Gazans. This can only become worse after each Israeli bombardment.

In such a climate, the work of the Gaza Women’s Affairs Center is arduous. It carries out research and advocacy on local women’s issues and documents them through videography. Sitting in the Ramallah sunshine in December 2010, Naila tells me of their most recent inquiry into women and inheritance, on the basis of which they are producing a manual that explains to women how to claim their due. The center also has a small job-training program that serves fifty women a year. “But, we cannot of course create jobs in the thousands like Hamas is doing.”

Publishing the only Gazan women’s magazine, called *Al Ghaida*, has gotten the center into some trouble, especially when it pictured a bareheaded woman journalist who had authored one of the articles. Hamas confiscated many copies of that issue. The center is regularly “accused of bringing Western ideas and culture into the community,” and its staff have even come under attack from Hamas’s Ministry for Women’s Affairs. Nevertheless, they manage to maintain a good reputation among local people, Naila feels, because they aim to meet women’s needs and avoid imposing their views.

What can it possibly be like to do this work between the hammer and the anvil? “You see the depression, you see the sadness. But we cannot leave it that way.” Naila and her colleagues are determined to continue their work as long as Hamas does not attempt to take over the center’s

board. Still, when she looks ahead, Naila is filled with trepidation: “We see the darkness of the future. It will take long years before we see light at the end of the tunnel.” While previous generations had been shaped by Israeli occupation, now there are other problems as well. “It’s very dangerous, this coming generation,” because it is “growing up under another layer of repression from Hamas.”

The situation of women is “really going backward.” In recent years, it is as if Gazan women’s rights advocates have had to start their work over again from the beginning. “That’s the tiring part.” Polygamy is on the rise and fundamentalists have brought group weddings to Gaza—a hundred grooms marrying a hundred wives all at once with the Hamas government’s support.<sup>42</sup> Hamas’s announcement that it would give money—anywhere from \$200 to \$3,000—to any man who married a war widow from Israel’s 2008 attack on Gaza has become an impetus for both polygamy and potentially abusive relationships. “They don’t consider the problems that erupt the day after the marriage if she has children, or he has a previous wife,” Naila points out. “Basically, the widows are left with a room in a family house.”

This is all part of the Hamas social agenda. The group’s violent acts against Israelis have gained it the most press; its coercion of Palestinians is much less discussed. Islamic clothing is required of girls in public schools, even for the dwindling numbers of Christian pupils. This is accomplished, Naila recounts, not through written Hamas orders but rather through rumors and fearmongering. While the organization might “deny that it had given such an order, it is enough that Hamas would give a small indication here or there. Families would be afraid. The school administration would be afraid. The order is implemented accordingly.” These fundamentalist tactics are repeated in many places.

Women cannot have their hair cut by a male hairdresser, or smoke an *argeela* (a water pipe) in public in Gaza. In fact, restaurants have been closed because women smoked them there. A UN-sponsored summer camp, where boys and girls participated in gender-segregated activities like swimming and singing, was torched.<sup>43</sup> Women and couples are harassed, beaten, and interrogated on the beach—the only place to go in much of Gaza. “They didn’t allow them to defend themselves while they were sitting there,” Naila reports. “Or to love. Even to love.” Not

many victims of this social persecution will speak out. "There are tons of cases that people are afraid to talk about."

Then there is Asma Al-Ghoul, who is entirely unafraid to talk, Naila tells me. Al-Ghoul is a secular feminist and journalist from the Gaza border town of Rafah who became famous after she stopped wearing a headscarf in 2006.<sup>44</sup> While Al-Ghoul's immediate family supported her choice, she had two very public run-ins with the Hamas police. Back in 2009, she had taken a stroll on a beach with a group of men and women to visit another friend at his home. Asma Al-Ghoul and the others were stopped and questioned by Hamas's "moral police," who tried, according to press reports, to force them to sign a form saying they would not repeat such "inappropriate interactions." In 2010, while fasting during Ramadan, Al-Ghoul cycled up the Gaza coastline to challenge the Hamas ban on women riding bikes. She has even confessed in print to smuggling a copy of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* into Gaza.

In Naila Ayesh's opinion, if more people like Asma spoke out, change could come. She also thinks an overall improvement in Gaza's miserable living conditions could make a significant difference in attitudes, "because basically nowadays people cannot even get their basic needs met." Her plea to readers in the United States is "that America will one time take a decision in favor of the Palestinians who have a just cause." A real political settlement is essential, she knows, to moving forward on her issues.

Naila was hopeful that Hamas's popularity in Gaza was waning in 2010.<sup>45</sup> "Many supporters of Hamas nowadays after they have practiced Hamas on the ground, they don't trust them anymore." Unfortunately, some of them simply move further to the right and now support Salafist groups. Naila thinks that many who voted for Hamas thought it was a way to oppose Israel's policy toward Gaza, but they have found instead that Hamas is simply consolidating its own power. She witnessed a December 11, 2010, demonstration in Gaza City organized by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which brought together an array of anti-Hamas, leftist, and secular forces.<sup>46</sup> As many as 100,000 attended. "It was an opportunity to express that people are not with Hamas." However, reports suggest Hamas's popularity to be on the rise again after Israel's "Operation Pillar of Defense" in November 2012.

In fact, "Hamas has been the perfect police for the Israelis in Gaza," Gaza-born researcher Hadeel Qazzaz tells me. Terry Boullata gave me a concrete example of this policing function as she recalled that when women like her demonstrated during the first Palestinian Uprising against Israeli occupation back in 1988, Hamas supporters would sometimes attack them, even before Israeli soldiers got there. "They thought that we are infidel ladies," Terry explains, "who are in a vulgar way exposing ourselves, so that was a shame on us. We better put on veils before we go to demonstrate."

Such a bleak political landscape leaves women like Naila Ayesh with very little space in which to work. She and her family had to leave the Gaza Strip in 2008. Since then, when she is in Gaza, she always takes a taxi and no longer walks from place to place. But there is one thing she swears she will never do: cover her head. If forced to do so, Naila Ayesh will stop going to Gaza altogether.

#### BURN YOUR BURQAI

In Sudan, women can receive forty lashes for not wearing what officials call Islamic dress, Fahima Hashim, who works with the Salmmah Women's Resource Center in Khartoum, tells me via Skype. "Islamic dress has to be defined by the individual security person who catches you." Women cannot make legal arguments against it, or advance their own opinion about appropriate covering. "That has been left to people who had never seen a woman in a trouser, or a woman in a skirt that is just beneath the knee." In younger days, at university, Fahima and her colleague Zaynab Elsawi could wear what they wanted to. She wonders why, in a country like Sudan, where "we have a lot of problems with education, health, poverty," the government now wastes time on this issue. "There are many more important things that the government should be doing than who is wearing what." Still, many thousands of women have been lashed for this offense, Zaynab says.

These Sudanese women have developed systems for dealing with a situation in which allegedly religious garb is reduced to a sign of acquiescence to state coercion. "I remember in the mid-1990s when we used to have our scarves in our bag. We called it 'just in case.'" She narrates

an experience that explains why. “I was caught because I wasn’t covering my head. This guy took me to the court. By the time we reached there, I took out my scarf and I put it on my head. He wanted to scream at me in front of the security guard, saying, ‘She’s not covering her head.’ Then, he turned and found me covering my head. I said, ‘Well, I always wear it. You didn’t see?’

“It’s not me,” she concedes, “but you have to do it.”

In one of the few pictures I have of my Algerian grandmother, a peasant woman, she wears a tiny scarf that barely covers a handful of her hair, a knee-length skirt, and short sleeves. This was back in the 1970s. The trajectory of the twentieth century had been away from veiling. A Lebanese friend who attended Cairo University tells me that in the fifties and sixties there wasn’t a single veiled woman there. When I arrive at Cairo University in March 2011, a significant majority have their heads covered, and much else as well.

The single most important fact in the debate about veiling is that *no specific garment for women is required by Islam*.<sup>47</sup> To argue otherwise is to make one’s own human, nondivine interpretation. A bra and panties can cover what the Qur’an calls your “unseen parts.” As the journalist Leila Boucli wrote in a special issue on the veil in the review published by the Algiers-based Center for Information on the Rights of Children and Women, “The Islamists try to say this is a settled question by posing the veil as a commandment of Islam, like praying or fasting [during Ramadan].”<sup>48</sup> It is not. As Soheib Bencheikh, the former mufti of Marseille, reminded me, “The veil is *not* one of the five pillars of Islam.” However, the fundamentalists try to block such arguments, Boucli notes, in the very way they frame the topic. “All the debate . . . becomes apostasy.”

There is a spectrum of so-called modest garments—simple headscarves, hijabs that provide more coverage of the neck and shoulders (and sometimes of the chest and outer rim of the face), jilbabs that cover the whole body in a loose robe sometimes accompanied by gloves and even boots, niqabs that cover everything but the eyes, and finally the burqa—a sort of ghost costume that hides even these. Various reasons are cited for wearing this gear, including everything from coercion to religious pride in diasporas. But covering nowadays ultimately means

putting women in a uniform advanced by Muslim fundamentalists. That uniform is often imposed by threats, violence, indoctrination, stigma, or even blaming insufficiently covered women for natural disasters, which is an increasingly popular tactic from Aceh to Algeria. Sometimes demands for modesty escalate from the headscarf to the jilbab and so on. What will women do when even the burqa is not deemed modest enough? That is where stoning and other literal methods of erasure come in, when garments are not enough to make you disappear.

Sometimes women say they choose such attire. Everyone assumes that is the end of the story. Nevertheless, that does not change the meaning of covering, and such “choices” increasingly happen in contexts infused with fundamentalist teachings about purity and the shamefulness of women’s bodies. Muslim women did not wake up one morning and say, “I live in a hot climate, let me shroud myself as much as possible.” While Leila Boucli recognizes that there may be a variety of individual motivations for a woman to wear a veil, at the end of the day, the practice “is doubly discriminatory: it separates women from men, and it separates ‘honest’ women from the rest.” Boucli’s concern is entirely borne out by a fatwa from the all-male European Council on Fatwa and Research. (This Muslim Brotherhood-linked foundation, based in Dublin and headed by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, seeks to unify Muslim jurisprudence in Europe.) The council’s fatwa calls on all Muslim women in Europe to veil: “Thus by her dress, she presents herself as a serious and honest woman who is neither a seductress nor a temptress.”<sup>49</sup> In a single fatwa, the rest of us have become unveiled whores.

In parts of the world there is an onward march to cover women’s bodies and elsewhere to uncover them—with all this often justified in the name of women making a choice. To me, this justification of “choice” misses the point about the overwhelming politics of the presentation of the female form. If one is given a menu with two options—say, covering up and being a good Muslim or not covering and being a loose woman or a bad Muslim—and one chooses to be good rather than bad, certainly that is a “choice.” But is it actually a reflection of personal preference? The real question is, How did we end up with the limited menu?

In every single place I visited or heard about, from Fiji to France, from Toronto to Tunis, I was told of steadily increasing pressure on

women in recent decades to cover more of themselves. This has been a process of radical change, not of the preservation of tradition. The assumption made too often in the debate in the West about this is that protecting the veil is protecting some sort of cultural status quo, when in most contexts the veil itself, and the new more restrictive veils in particular, are themselves an assault on the preexisting cultural status quo.

Many of the garments in the veil category are not at all indigenous to the locales where they are being imposed or “chosen.” For example, women in Niger traditionally wear boubous in a stunning Crayola array of colors, with accompanying headdresses that have nothing to do with niqabs or hijabs advocated by fundamentalists. Madame Fatimata Mounkaïla, a professor of literature and NGO activist I meet in Niamey, resplendent in her pink boubou, exclaims: “We are not Saudi and we do not want to dress like them.” Some women do now wear hijabs in Niamey, an entirely foreign mode of dress here. And Mme. Mounkaila’s retort?

“You do not have to wear the burqa or question the rights of others to be a Muslim.”

This drive toward covering is not simply a product of individual women reading the Qur'an and interpreting the text to mean they must cover their bodies to be good Muslims. It is happening, at least in significant part, because of right-wing political movements telling them that this is what Muslim women do. This idea increasingly infuses popular culture and media—whether in the form of Al Jazeera Arabic pressuring its much-watched women anchors to cover up,<sup>50</sup> or the new, terrifying all-niqabi TV station set to broadcast from Cairo,<sup>51</sup> or the multibillion-dollar “Islamic” apparel industry and its “modest” fashion shows.<sup>52</sup>

I remember a flyer I saw posted on a Palestinian bus in East Jerusalem in December 2010. It demonstrated how to cover yourself appropriately if you happened to be female. The “public service announcement” showed a picture of a curvaceous young woman in jeans and hijab, another wearing a skirt and simple headscarf. “This is not hijab,” the text in Arabic beneath their photos explained reproachfully. Next to the drawing of a woman wearing a full jilbab and a long scarf hanging over her head and chest all the way down to her elbows, was a green check-

mark. This was supposedly the right way to dress. This was not the Palestine I had known since I started traveling there in 1987. From the bus window I saw numerous young women still refusing these dictates, bareheaded or wearing fitted jeans and knee-high boots along with their small headscarves.

Strangely, while many feminists of Muslim heritage have been fighting against the impulse to obscure their female compatriots,<sup>53</sup> some Western feminists have fallen in love with the veil. One of my most surreal academic experiences was sharing a podium with distinguished American historian Joan Scott at Yale Law School. Scott claims the veil is a celebration of female sexuality and that feminists from Muslim majority countries who decry it are hysterical.<sup>54</sup> Algerian feminist lawyer Wassila Tamzali, in an open letter to the French feminist movement, laments views like Scott’s and says the veil has had yet another “victory,” by dividing feminists and confusing feminist discourse.<sup>55</sup> For example, when a young British blogger named Adele Wilde-Blavatsky dared to write in 2012 that the hijab was discriminatory and rooted in men’s desire to control women’s sexuality, noting that “Muslim feminists” have spoken out against such garments, she was bizarrely vilified and accused of asserting white privilege in an open letter signed by seventy-seven North America-based feminists.<sup>56</sup> (I wonder whether similar tributes await me.) Today, Fatou Sow, who says that before age fifty she had never seen a veiled woman in her native Senegal, finds herself exasperated by feminists in the West who now defend veiling to her, using the language of rights.

“I say, ‘What is this, the freedom to be oppressed?’”

Sadly, “the veiled woman” has now become the trope for all women of Muslim heritage in the West. As Wassila Tamzali raged in her brilliant book *An Angry Woman*, with regard to the disappearance of unveiled feminists from “the countries called Arabo-Islamic” in Western imagery: “We are today . . . invisible to your eyes. We are condemned to solitude.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Sudanese feminist Zaynab Elsawi, who fights against the veiling imposed in her country, asked me urgently via Skype from Khartoum to make sure that Americans “know that people like us do live, and do work and do exist. We use the minimum space we have to continue our struggle.”

I have no problem with individual veiled women whom I know themselves sometimes face discrimination in the West. However, I do find some of the more restrictive garments truly distressing, the obvious negation of the women who wear them, and by extension the negation of other women in the same environment. Not-being-veiled is a condition that is only possible in the presence of veiling.<sup>58</sup> And not-being-veiled has been a life-threatening condition in many circumstances. So I also have no problem with other women (and men) *choosing* to make a harsh critique of the meaning of veiling. This is deemed offensive by some in the liberal/left/human rights camp in the West. Yet, thinking critically about what it means for women to need to conceal themselves seems to me the only way to support women on the ground battling the ever-encroaching fabric erasure of women's bodies.

Here are just some of the critical views I heard along the way.

Tarek Fatah told me in Toronto that the burqa is "the flag of fascism." The Pakistani Canadian founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress argues that his fellow Canadians, steeped in a multiculturalism gone awry, should grasp that "there is no rational argument for anyone with any sense to take up the case that women have the right to mask their faces." For him, this practice is a nonsensical attempt "to get closer to God by hiding."

As a dancer of Shi'a heritage, Karachi native Sheema Kirmani is inherently concerned with physicality. She complains that the hijab is an "unaesthetic thing I don't want to see, a pain to my eyes and emotionally oppressive. The human body is something beautiful, and shouldn't be hidden."

Yanar Mohammed was photographed burning a hijab, in post-Saddam Iraq no less, for a magazine cover seen around the world. Why would she risk doing that when she already faced death threats for her women's rights advocacy? "Hijab to me is something that is forced on my head and it is shameful. It is shameful on the society that forces it on a woman's head." Her mother's generation had fought hard to unveil themselves, now younger generations were, to her dismay, being re-veiled. After writing that Islamists seem to believe that women's skin has radioactive material in it and so must be covered, she was sued for injuring religious feelings.

Nor is Yanar the only person rejecting such forced robing of Iraqi women. An Iraqi trade unionist in a village outside of Baghdad had complained to her that Al Qaeda had come to his town and was distributing the burqa. "The burqa in Iraq is a thing we have not seen before," she clarifies. "It is so weird." The trade unionist was well respected in his village, so people asked him what they should do about this. He replied, "We will not submit. We'll stand against them." They did, and they were able to protect the village for a time. Five months later, however, Al Qaeda killed the trade unionist who opposed the burqa. "Now all the women in that village wear it," Yanar mourns.

She tells me that the Iraqi government had distributed black plastic bags to be used for trash at one point during the Saddam years. The new garments now pushed on Iraqi women resemble Saddam's refuse receptacles. "We didn't know that in 15 years, they are going to be putting us, the women, in those black garbage bags. They don't even leave you space to breathe."

When I go to the Pacific island nation of Fiji, where there has been a Muslim population of South Asian descent since the late nineteenth century, human rights lawyer Imrana Jalal tells me that, concomitant with the rise of fundamentalism, there are increasing numbers of hijabs, niqabs, and burqas even here. In the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This is not at all the tradition of Fijians of South Asian descent, who used to wear shalwar kameezes and saris and cover their heads only to go to mosque. Now, I am told by another Fijian Muslim woman that there are even some efforts to keep women out of some mosques altogether. Fifty-year-old Imrana Jalal concludes that things have changed a lot since she was growing up. Her own father opposed veiling; now, the Muslim schools here require it.

Back in South Asia, in Pakistan, retired Justice Magida Rizvi tells me the niqab shocks her. "I don't recognize it." It came only slowly, a "very subtle shift in dress gradually, until our eyes were open." More and more women put on scarves. Now, the niqab is "everywhere you look." There is a frog-in-hot-water aspect to this. When the heat is turned up slowly, you do not notice until it starts to boil. UN independent expert on culture Farida Shaheed described this with regard to reactions to fundamentalism generally: "Every day there is a little something, every

day over a period of a year. Then you realize that your acceptance, your threshold has gone up. You just accept this as a part of life." That is precisely what has happened with covering.

Pakistani feminist academic Nighat Khan says she is "totally ambivalent" about the hijab. Many of her feminist friends think it is a choice. On the other hand, she thinks "it's dreadful, whether in France or in Pakistan." Nighat does not understand why Muslim men do not cover their heads. "If Muslims need to cover their heads, and God is for both, then both should."

Commenting on the Iranian chador, a garment that has traveled far in the years since the Ayatollah replaced the Shah, Iranian women's rights activist Mahnaz Afkhami asserts that it "was a way of saving the purity of the woman, on whose behavior depended the honor of the male members of the family. This was not an approach to gender relations that is in any way conducive to equality." She concedes that the Qur'an asks "modesty" of women, but her interpretation is that *modesty* does not require any particular garment. In her view, if women really choose to be heavily covered, so be it. However, "you certainly can't work in a factory. You can't drive a bus."

In 1970s Iran, the chador was disfavored (though no longer banned, as under the last Shah's father), and women could be seen in short sleeves and short skirts. As of the 1980s, women were uniformed by the Islamic Republic in mandatory chadors or hijabs. During the Iranian revolution, Mahnaz remembers, the Islamists produced children's books depicting chickens without feathers. "They said the woman who doesn't veil is like a naked chicken with no feathers."

As thought-provoking as my exchanges about covering were throughout my travels, the single most memorable discussion I had on the subject of veiling was with Heba Hafiz, a divorcée and women's rights advocate in Egypt. Her father, who was otherwise not strict, had imposed the veil on her. She found herself "living a life, *yani*, full of misery and I always do what others want and not what I want." When her father died, she decided to remove her veil. "My connection with God is my connection with God. I can do better without a veil." Off it came. "I had, of course, a civil war."

Her mother and even her unveiled sister opposed her decision, fear-

ing how she would be judged. It is bad enough not to wear the veil. It is another thing altogether to make the conscious choice to remove it. Heba argued with her mom, "It's my rights. It's not your hair." She said that wearing the veil made her "always sad. I didn't smile at all." Now she is herself again. "It is me, Heba, nowadays." When I met her at Beano's Café in Cairo, she had shiny locks and an irrepressible grin.

"I enjoy being me," she said.

I was taken to see Heba by her friend Doaa Kassem, a young woman who insists that she covers her head by choice. She does so with boldly colored scarves that always match her ensemble. Heba and Doaa seem quite happy together, neither judging the appearance of the other—an ideal example of the potential coalition between covered and uncovered women who "would like to free our identities from political competition," as Yakin Ertürk, the Turkish former UN special rapporteur on violence against women, described it to me. Fundamentalism is a major obstacle. I wonder what will happen to Heba and Doaa in the new Egypt, where, after the election of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi, squads of veiled women enforcers have reportedly taken to the streets to harass their unveiled sisters.<sup>59</sup> Heba's bare head will be unacceptable, as will Doaa's bright scarves.

Will either of these two women be able to enjoy being herself?

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