

Muslim Women's Rights, Continued

Subject to Debate

Sunday 5 July 2009, by [POLLITT Katha](#) (Date first published: 24 June 2009).

I thought President Obama's Cairo speech was basically fine: begin anew, extend the hand, reject "crude stereotypes" all around, turn the page on the Christian triumphalism of the Bush years. But there's no denying that the section on women's rights was rather minimal, just three paragraphs, compared with his long discourse on Israel and Palestine; and to my American ears its priorities were a bit odd. You would think the biggest issue for Muslim women is that someone is preventing them from wearing a headscarf: "The US government has gone to court to protect the right of women and girls to wear the hijab and to punish those who would deny it," he said. "I reject the view of some in the West that a woman who chooses to cover her hair is somehow less equal." Fair enough, but that woman is choosing. What about Saudi or Iranian women, who are forced by law to cover? Obama noted that countries where women are well educated tend to be more prosperous and promised American aid for women's literacy and microloans. These are both good things, especially in desperately poor and underdeveloped countries like Afghanistan; but face it, to become full participants in modern societies women need more than a grade school education and a sewing machine. They need their rights. In fact, some Muslim countries, like Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, already have large numbers of highly educated women—in Iran, as in America, more young women go to college than men. But those women are prevented from working to their capacity, or even at all, by religiously motivated sex discrimination. In Saudi Arabia, women can't even work in lingerie stores. By a quirk of the gender-apartheid regulations, only men can sell ladies' underwear. So much for "modesty": when there's money to be made from women, you can be sure the theocrats will figure out a reason that God wants it to go into men's pockets.

I can see why Obama didn't issue a ringing call for full civil rights for Muslim women: an end to stoning and lashings and female genital mutilation, to forced marriage and child marriage, to family law that enshrines male privilege, the valuing of women's testimony in court as half that of a man's and the scandalous laws that punish as unchaste those rape victims who lack four witnesses—male witnesses, of course—to the crime. Such a statement would have backfired; it would have allowed traditionalists and theocrats to pose as anti-imperialists, defenders of culture and religion against the impious West. Moreover, as he properly noted, women struggle for their rights all over the world, not just under Islam. But I can also see why some feminists were disappointed not to get more of a shout-out. "It seems that Mr. Obama is attempting to build political bridges by taking a more socially conservative stance, a common—but mistaken—tack in the struggle against fundamentalism and terrorism," writes Algerian-American human rights lawyer Karima Bennoune on the blog Europe: Solidaire Sans Frontières [1]. "This may also be the reason that the President felt compelled to stress his respect for 'women who choose to live their lives in traditional roles,' rather than, say, referencing the critical struggles of the Egyptian women's movement. Welcome to the new cultural relativism. We're not going to deal with human rights problems in your part of the world, because we want your extremists to stop blowing us up."

The title of Bennoune's article, "The Religionizing of Politics," points to another problem: the tendency in the West to treat majority-Muslim countries as a single cohesive entity—"the Muslim

world”—rather than as Asian, African and Middle Eastern nations that are as different from one another as the majority-Christian lands of Britain and Mexico. The term itself promotes the view that Islam tout court is what these countries are all about, thus marginalizing other ways of understanding them and rendering invisible the non-Muslims and seculars who live there.

The current election struggle in Iran came as a big surprise to those who take the simplistic view of Muslim nations as our antagonists in a clash of civilizations. Who knew that our arch-enemy, member in good standing of the Axis of Evil, had all these hip young people, these tech-savvy Tweeters, these ordinary citizens eager to go into the streets day after day and risk beatings, arrests and death at the hands of the feared Basij? Who knew it had so many women who, however devout they may or may not be, don't want to be denied ordinary human freedoms in the name of religion, thank you very much? The energetic and massive participation of women in the street demonstrations has received much comment in the Western media, but it's only surprising if you think Muslim women really are as weak and passive as the mullahs imagine.

That impression of Muslim women appears to be shared by Nicolas Sarkozy, who has thrown his support behind a proposal to ban in France the all-enveloping burqa and the niqab, calling it a “question of women's liberty and dignity.” The most vocal French feminists support the ban, as does the French Muslim women's group Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores nor Doormats), for whom it's a necessary counterweight to family and community pressures on women. While it may well be true that some of the small number of French women who wear burqas and niqabs are forced into them, it's hard to see how a ban will help liberate them. Instead, it will permit the French to publicly humiliate them and feel good about it, ratify the Islamists' claim that the West is out to get Islam and give more proof that Muslims are unwelcome in France.

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Just so you know, *The Mind-Body Problem*, my new collection of poems, is now out from Random House.

P.S.

* This article appeared in the July 13, 2009 edition of The Nation.:
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/200907...>

* About Katha Pollitt. Katha Pollitt's writing has appeared in many publications, including The New Yorker, The London Review of Books, the Washington Post and the New York Times. Her new book of poems, *The Mind-Body Problem*, has just been published by Random House. Her most recent books are *Learning to Drive: and Other Life Stories* (Random House), a collection of personal essays, and *Virginity or Death!* (Random House), a collection of her Nation columns. *The Mind-Body Problem*, a collection of poems, will be published by Random House in June. Visit her website at www.kathapollitt.com.

Footnotes

[1] Voir [Obama in Cairo: The Religionizing of Politics](#)