

Women's Voices Across the World for Justice

FİRDEVS MELİS CİN*

Islamophobia, Victimization and the Veil

By Irene Zempi and Neil Chakraborti
Palgrave Pivot, 2014, 118 pages, £45.00, ISBN 9781137356154

Women and Civil Society in Turkey: Women's Movements in a Muslim Society

By Ömer Çaha
Wey Court East: Ashgate Publishing, 2013, 222 pages, £65.00, ISBN 9781472410078

The Unfinished Revolution: Voices from the Global Fight for Women's Rights

By Minky Worden
New York: Seven Stories Press, 361 pages, \$25.95, ISBN 9781609803872

The three books reviewed here focus on one of the most prevalent forms of discrimination: Gender Injustice. Everywhere in the world women tend to suffer from gender discrimination more than men, regardless of ethnicity, class, or religion¹ and gender disparities vary widely making women more vulnerable to poverty, abuse, or political marginalization. Compared to men, women and girls receive less education, remain underrepresented, face difficulties in accessing health and judicial services. Further, they are exposed to all kinds of violence and unequal standings in society. This

inequality makes gender justice a morally and politically urgent topic. Although the majority of countries in the world legally and rhetorically institutionalize and support women's rights, the political will to fight against gender inequality is usually absent. Thus, women become victims of discriminatory social and cultural norms as well as conservative mindsets, policies, laws and institutions².

The books in this article focus on the universal and local struggles for women's rights and outline the above mentioned inequalities around the world. They engage with women's is-

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sues from different perspectives, such as the perspective of constitutional law, feminist campaigns and activism, or civil society initiatives. They tease out the importance of an on-going fight for women's rights to make a real change in the lives of women and girls and to create a more just society.

Islamophobia, Victimisation and the Veil by Irene Zempi and Neil Chakraborti is an academic book based on a research project conducted in the United Kingdom to explore the everyday discrimination, harassment, and assaults veiled women face due to Islamophobia. The book starts with the striking quotes of women regarding the everyday Islamophobia they are exposed to for wearing a veil and then it conceptualizes Islamophobia as a form of hate crime. The first chapter of the book displays the colonial perception of Islam and it critically engages with how the veil is depicted as the symbol of 'Muslim otherness' in western societies. The authors argue that it is orientalism and colonisation through economic and political hegemony that created a representational apparatus in which veiled women are characterized as docile and suppressed, regarded as a counter image of western women, and seen as victims of gender inequality. Especially after the 9/11 attacks, this colonial mode of representation gained a new dimension and the veil has become symbiotic with Islamist extremism. It is advanced as a symbol, which represents a threat to western societies with regard to gender equality, public safety, and national cohesion as well as

impeding identification. After elaborating on the popular perception of the veil, which is based on discourses concerning gender oppression, terrorism and a supposed threat to western values, authors argue that Islamophobia is highly gendered because the veil makes the Muslim identity visible. This visibility coupled with the aforementioned stereotypes regarding Muslim women makes them more vulnerable to attacks in public than are Muslim men.

The study is based on a qualitative methodology and includes 60 individuals and focus group interviews carried out in the East Midlands, UK. In this sense, the results cannot be generalized but they can still offer an interesting insight on the condition of veiled Muslim women. The findings are grouped into two categories.

The first round of analysis focuses on the visible forms - such as verbal abuse, sexist remarks, physical abuse - and invisible forms - such as being overlooked or even ignored in cafés and restaurants or generally, in public life. This represents the overall context of the Islamophobic victimisation of women. The second part focuses on the implications of these attacks and abuses on women, their families, and wider community. The narrations of women in the book highlight that being a victim reduced their self-confidence and made them feel worthless, insecure, and unwanted. Consequently, leading to depression, insomnia, psychological trauma, and reclusiveness. This self-deprecation went so far as to cause these

veiled women chose to curtail their own freedom and stopped going out and chose not to pursue a higher education degree for fear that they will always be victimised in the public sphere for wearing a veil. The most striking result emerging from this research was that women normalised this victimisation and started to see it as embedded in their everyday life experiences and therefore did not take any legal steps. This is an important reason why the assaults against veiled women are still prevalent.

The book concludes by stressing how Islamophobic victimisation affects wider society and damages the multi-cultural spirit of the UK because it undermines the fundamental values of a liberal democratic state such as choice, freedom of expression, religious freedom and equal opportunities. The authors call out the authorities and policy makers to hear the voices of victimised veiled women and to address their invisibility in the criminal justice system and in society as a whole.

The book touches on a very contemporary issue that veiled women face in Western societies by displaying powerful quotes from their lived experiences. Yet, it fails to base the research on a robust feminist and political theoretical ground that could better explain these women's experiences. Additionally, Islamophobic victimisation is not peculiar to the UK context and, as a reader, I would have liked to read how similar situations were handled and addressed in other non-Muslim societies and what

implications could have been drawn from their legal and political systems. Apart from these reservations, the book can open up new research avenues that focus on the hate crimes against women and analyse them through a more political perspective. The book could be used as basic reading, if not a textbook, for feminist researchers, policy-makers and researchers interested in post 9/11 effects on society.

Similarly to the book of Zempi and Chakraborti, Ömer Çaha's *Women and Civil Society in Turkey*, is also a product of a research study. It includes the analysis of more than 50 different magazines belonging to feminist, Islamic, and Kurdish women's groups as well as interviews with the leaders of these movements. The book is written with the aim of outlining the feminist movements from the late Ottoman Era to contemporary times in the context of civil society and democracy. In doing so, the book presents a strong argument that the existence of various feminist groups highlighted a diversity based on class, religion, gender, and ethnic differences and 'stretched the "unitary" public domain towards a "multi-public" sphere in Turkey'³.

Çaha starts the book with the historical development of the concept of civil society in general. He conceptualises civil society through a political and feminist philosophy and analyses to what extent women are included in civil society. Thus, the author contextualises women's movement at the intersection of feminist

politics and challenges the masculinist nature of civil society defined by social contract philosophers such as John Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes and the philosophers who separated civil society from the state such as Hegel, Marx, and Gramsci. The book, then, presents the emergence of civil society and women's movement starting from the last decade of Ottoman Empire until the 1980s. The chapter argues that both the Ottoman constitutional governments and the early Kemalist Turkey directly linked the reforms and the progress on women's rights with a broader effort towards modernisation and the adoption of western norms. Women's rights were, therefore, never regarded as an autonomous movement but rather seen as the realm of the state and the ruling elite. Thus, women could not become an active part of civil society until 1980s.

With the revival of civil society and feminist movements after the military regime (1980-1983), different feminist fractions of liberal, radical, and socialist feminism emerged in Turkey. Çaha analyses each of these fractions based on a detailed study of feminist magazines and provides a list of feminist actions that have been influential in voicing women's problems and paved the way for the institutionalisation of these feminist movements. The feminist organisational and publication activities, including women's studies and research centres that emerged in the universities, worked effectively in interconnecting the feminist movements with society and made feminism

more understandable in Turkey. The impact of feminist movements could also be seen on legal reforms. These movements worked as a progressive force facilitating the improvement of the new Civil Code in 2002 and Penal Code in 2004, which had a more egalitarian approach in favour of women and the promotion of civil society.

In the post 1980s, new collective identities were formed in Turkey, which also affected the feminist movements. Çaha examines these collective feminist movements of Islamic and Kurdish women by analysing the magazines of these groups. The author approaches the Islamic women's movement by focusing on the headscarf ban debates between Islamist women and Kemalist modernizers, who suppressed various ways of self-realization for women. The political and social organizations, foundations and platforms have played a significant role in the politicization of Islamic women. They enhanced their struggle for the right to wear a headscarf and their right to self-expression, helped them to participate in civil society, and provided these women with legal, financial, and educational support.

Çaha links the Kurdish women's movement with third wave feminism in the sense that it was identity oriented. Like the black women's movement, the Kurdish women's movement was not only against the patriarchal culture but it was also against the middle class Turkish woman that dominated the women's movement

in Turkey and overshadowed subjective problems of Kurdish women. The analysis of Kurdish women magazines shows the different perspectives held by Kurdish and Turkish feminists towards women's issues. For instance, while Turkish feminists saw education as a vital component of women's development and freedom, Kurdish feminists regarded the education given in Turkey as a destructive and assimilating act.

The book ends with concluding remarks on how feminist movements in Turkey, including the Islamic and Kurdish movements, opened a space for women in civil society and challenged the patriarchal nature of civil society, which perceives women as the guardians of the private realm. Also, these movements were a challenge to the classical approach of political philosophers, such as Hobbes and Hegel, to civil society that is grounded on the homogeneity of the public sphere.

Overall, Çaha presents an analysis of women's integration into civil society and the analysis of feminist magazines of different fractions offers a convincing account of drawing links between women and civil society. However, I noted three shortcomings in this book. Firstly, it could have been more useful if the author had included direct insights gleaned from interviews of Islamist and Kurdish feminist movements' leaders in order to display more clearly how they broke through the glass ceiling and to outline their respective agendas for the future. Secondly, although

there is a considerable progress made by different groups of women in participating in civil society, there is still a nuanced tension among the feminist movements; these movements include socialist, radical, and liberal feminists along with those who do not want to associate themselves with any of these movements. A separate chapter before the conclusion pulling together these tensions and arguing how different fractions of the feminist movements co-exist in the culturally, socially, and politically polarized and complex Turkish society would enrich this significant study. Finally, the book could have formulated specific policy-making suggestions from the historical development of women's movements to guide policy makers on the issue of the promotion of women's participation in political platforms.

As a feminist researcher, I should also note I found this book very valuable in the sense that it was written by a male author from a feminist perspective. This book is of great value to scholars and students of political science, women's studies, and sociology.

The Unfinished Revolution: Voices from the Global Fight for Women's Rights is collection of articles edited by Minky Worden and reflects the diverse voices of journalists, activists, feminists, policy makers, researchers, and Nobel laureates (including Shirin Ebadi). Unlike the former books, this book is a call-to-action book to inform the people about the poor conditions and human rights abuses of women around the world.

The book has 8 parts and brings together 30 papers. Each part focuses on a specific basic right that many women around the world do not have access to. The first part starts with the criticism that the Declaration of Human Rights was initially gendered, in the sense that it did not address the specific injustices to which women were exposed. With the campaigns of feminist activists such as Eleanor Roosevelt in 20th century, women's rights are recognised as human rights and the use of new technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, and cell phones in 21st century helped in revitalizing women's rights movements and promoting civil society in the Middle East. The second and third parts focus on the political transitions from repressive dictatorships to new political systems that were formed in the Middle East and they highlight the fact that women's rights are not protected under these new constitutions and governments. The authors argue that the revolutions and transitions in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia and the collapse of state authority and dissolution of the rule of law in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, and Libya impede women's fundamental freedoms ranging from the freedom of movement to participating in political life, and lead to a rise in tribal customs such as child/forced/exchange marriage, selling girls, and honour killings. Widespread insecurity and financial hardship, the harsh conditions of non-existent medical infrastructure, sexual violence and rape are presented in a different context as a consequence of war. Even women working to better the condi-

tions of other women in these regions and to provide them with access to education and health are threatened with death by groups such as Hezbollah and the Taliban. The poor conditions of women in these contexts are also associated with how women and girls are pushed to become victims of human trafficking: labour and sexual exploitation.

The book highlights that women's rights are also violated in progressive democracies and addresses the domestic, physical, and sexual violence against women in the United States and Europe. Undocumented immigrant women in the US remain silent when subjugated to the violence and harassment at the hands of their husbands or immigration authorities because of their status and due to the fear of being deported if they speak. Women throughout Europe, particularly in Turkey, are battered by their husbands, abused, raped or killed by men. In these cases, many of them cannot take any action or seek justice due to their destitution and the failings of their countries law enforcement officials and institutions. In an additional section, by bringing together the stories of women across the world, authors point out another particular form of violence against women, namely women's health. This form of discrimination stems from the inherent weaknesses of national health systems or legal norms relating to women's health issues. In Africa, women suffer from poor access to affordable quality health care or the absence of health care systems. In the Middle East harmful traditions con-

tinue to be practiced, such as female genital mutilation. In Latin America, restrictive abortion laws reduce access to women to clean and safe abortions. The lack of effective laws and policies, the lack of women in leadership positions in local and national governments, and the ineffective responses to injustices are argued to cause these inequalities and maintain unequal rights for women.

In the last part, the book outlines the political constraints such as the lack of a functional legal system, coercive population control practices, and repressive measures, for example in China that undermine the civil, political and social rights of women. This part also addresses the forced veiling of women in the Middle East and Africa as well as on the opposite end of the spectrum the veiling ban in Belgium and France. Regardless of where these restrictions take place, they impede women's freedoms from physical integrity to facing obstacles in pursuing their chosen careers. The book concludes with a policy road map on how to achieve real progress in women's rights. It calls upon governments to make genuine international and national commitments in order to improve the legislation and laws, to engage with civil society and NGOs, and to challenge the cultural, religious, traditional norms, and stereotypes impeding women's rights.

This book is designed to spotlight the myriad of problems women and girls face in the world today through real stories of human rights abuses. The book is not written from an ac-

ademic perspective; therefore it is an easy read. Yet, the stories regarding the harsh realities and conditions of women's life are disturbing. The only criticism I could bring to this book is that the book fails to look into inequalities arising from disability, ethnicity, and class in which women make up the bottom tier. To sum up, the book is a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, lawyers, human rights researchers, and jurists who seek to understand and combat the multiple forms of gender inequalities. It offers context and country specific solutions and strategies and, more importantly, it provides us also with the stories and struggles of women activists who have fought abuse and worked to better the conditions of women and children. Thus, the book also underlines the importance of activism for the struggle against the oppression of women and children and for initiating a change in the world. Such a call may motivate many people like the young 2014 NobelPeace laureate Malala Yousafzai, who has fought for girls' right to education.

These three books tackle the debate on women's rights and provide different perspectives regarding women's rights in different geographical locations and cultural contexts. The books present a consistent argument by highlighting the on-going struggle of women and the physical, social, political, and economical oppression they have been exposed to by the society and the state. Zempi and Chakraborti draw the readers' attention to the victimisation women face

on the basis of their religion and ethnicity in a highly cosmopolitan, multicultural, and liberal country like the UK. Çaha outlines the long path of women to create feminine civil society and the struggles of diverse women movements for the recognition of women's rights in a highly homogeneous feminist community and in the public sphere of Turkey. Finally, the edited book by Minky Morden compiles the voices of victims and activists around the world while trying to give a voice to the worldwide problems of women and offering gender responsive policies and practices. A common thread across the books is that if women's issues continue to receive little attention both at national and international levels, gender justice

will ever be an unfinished debate. In this sense, all three books contribute to pushing the gender justice agenda forward and provide a sociologically, academically, and politically engaging reading about women's struggles and rights around the world for researchers, activists, and students who are interested in gender studies and women's rights. ■

Endnotes

1. Alison Jaggar, *Gender and Global Justice* (Polity, 2013) and Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
2. Jaggar, *Gender and Global Justice* (Polity, 2013)
3. Ömer Çaha, *Women and Civil Society in Turkey: Women's Movements in a Muslim Society* (Wey Court East: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), p. 188.