

Islamic Gender Apartheid

By Phyllis Chesler

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A speech for the 12/14/05 Senate hearing organized by the American Committee for Democracy in the Middle East.

According to one Iranian dissident, “being born female is both a capital crime and a death sentence.” Today, the plight of both women and men in the Islamic world, and in an increasingly Islamized Europe, demands a sober analysis and a heroic response. In a democratic, modern, and feminist era, women in the Islamic world are not treated as human beings. Women in Iran and elsewhere in the Islamic world are viewed as the source of all evil. Their every move is brutally monitored and curtailed. The smallest infraction – a wanton wisp of hair escaping a headscarf – merits maximum punishment: Flogging in public, or worse. This is happening in Iran even as we speak. In 2005, a hospital in Tehran was accused of refusing entry to women who did not wear head-to-toe covering. In 2002, in Saudi Arabia, religious policemen prevented 14 year old schoolgirls from leaving a burning school building because they were not wearing their headscarves and abayahs. Fifteen girls died.

Today, George Orwell's Thought Police are, rather ominously, everywhere in the Arab and Islamic world. Orwell's Thought Police pre-date the Afghan Taliban or Iran's or Saudi Arabia's Virtue-and-Vice squads, who arrest men and women for the smallest sign of "individuality", difference, or female-ness.

Women in Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and increasingly in Egypt, are veiled from head to toe. They live in purdah and lead segregated lives. Women are also forced into arranged and polygamous marriages, often when they are children, and often to much older men or to first cousins.

Girls and women are routinely beaten. Woman-beating is normalized and culturally sanctioned and those who dare protest it are shamed, beaten savagely, and sometimes even honor-murdered by their own families. According to the Women's Forum Against Fundamentalism in Iran, two out of every three Iranian women have experienced serious domestic violence. Eighty one per cent of married women have experienced domestic violence in their first year of marriage. In addition, every year, millions of Muslim women are genitally mutilated—and this is not only happening in Muslim Africa. It is increasingly happening in Iran and in Europe and in North America where the procedures are quietly carried out in hospitals.

In many Muslim countries, women are not allowed to vote, drive, leave the house, or leave the country without male permission and a male escort. Most runaway girls in Iran are raped within the first 24 hours of their departure. The majority of such runaway rape victims are rejected by their families after they are raped. When Iranian girls or women run away from abusive homes, they are also quickly trafficked into prostitution, which has increased alarmingly in the last decade in Iran and which now includes temporary marriages that allow men to “marry for only an hour.” Rape victims and suspected prostitutes are quickly jailed and repeatedly raped, and often impregnated, by their guards. In 2004, nearly 4,000 women were arrested in Tehran alone. Six hundred and forty nine were girls below the age of 14.

Iranian women are worn down every minute and in every way in their private lives. For example, in the summer of '05, a court in Tehran barred a young woman from working after her *estranged* husband

complained that she was only allowed to be a housewife. This woman had been battered and she had fled the marriage two years earlier. But the court confirmed her husband's right to bar her from working outside the home. In November of '05, an 80-year-old husband clubbed his 50-year-old wife to death, "because he could not tolerate her wearing makeup outside the home". In October of '05, female civil servants at Iran's culture ministry were forced to leave the office by dusk "to be with their families". One female journalist, who works nightshifts at an Iranian newspaper said: "This decree means that I will be jobless soon."

And then there are the public and terrifying atrocities.

Increasingly in Iran, women are publicly hung or are slowly and painfully stoned to death for alleged adultery or for having been raped. Public amputations, floggings, and executions are "almost a daily spectacle". If women (and men) publicly protest such heartbreaking barbarities, they are slandered as "anti-Muslim," arrested, and often murdered by the state.

The bravery of Iranian demonstrators is therefore heart stopping. They know precisely what can and will happen to them and still they demonstrate. In Tehran this past summer of '05, women protested Iran's clerical rulers. They chanted "Freedom, freedom, freedom!" and called for a referendum on religious rule. They chanted "Unequal law means inhuman justice" and "Misogyny is the root of tyranny." Earlier in March of '05, demonstrators at Tehran University demanded that women have a right to choose what they wear; that women must be free to choose their husbands and to marry or to divorce; that any kind of sex trade and human trafficking should be forbidden; that polygamy must be illegal.

Many Muslim women are also honor murdered by their families—yes, by their mothers as well as by their fathers and older brothers for the crime of wanting to go to college, marry for love, end abusive marriages, or go to the movies. Honor murders are usually horrific, very primitive. The girls or women are be-headed or they are stabbed many times, or slowly choked to death. I write about all this in my most recent book, *The Death of Feminism. What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom.*

I call this systemic mistreatment: "Islamic gender Apartheid."

If we do not oppose and defeat Islamic gender Apartheid, democracy and freedom cannot flourish in the Arab and Islamic world. If we do not join forces with Muslim dissident and feminist groups; and, above all, if we do not have one universal standard of human rights for all—then we will fail our own Judeo-Christian and secular western ideals. We will also inherit the whirlwind. If we do not stop Islamic gender and religious Apartheid abroad, be assured: It is coming our way soon. Indeed, it is already here. I document Islamic gender Apartheid in both Europe and North America in my new book *The Death of Feminism. What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom.*

It is dangerous to say what I have just said on most campuses in Europe and North America. If one describes the barbaric human rights violations being carried out in the name of Islam, one is instantly accused of being a "racist," a "Zionist," an American "imperialist," and, the worse epithet of all, a "pro-war neo-conservative." Islamic associations in the West, radical mullahs and Muslim leaders abroad, and culturally relativist western thinkers will sue you, shout you down, refuse to publish you, and refuse to listen to you.

Some personal disclosures are now in order.

First, I am a feminist *and* an American patriot. Yes, one can be both. I am also an internationalist. I believe in one universal standard of human rights for everyone. Finally, I am a religious Jew and am sympathetic to both religious and secular world-views. Being religious does not compromise my feminism. On the contrary, it gives me the strength and a necessarily humbled perspective to continue the struggle for justice.

Second, Afghanistan matters to me, it has touched my life. Once, long ago, in 1961, I was held captive there and kept in fairly posh purdah; some women were exceptionally kind to me. I will never forget them. I believe that my so-called “western” feminism was forged in that most beautiful and tragic of countries. Let me share some details.

I had married my college sweetheart and we traveled to Kabul to meet his family. I had no intention of staying there. In Afghanistan, a few hundred wealthy families lived by European standards. Everyone else lived in the Middle Ages. When we landed, airport officials confiscated my American passport. I never saw it again. Then, I discovered that my father-in-law had three wives and 21 children. Finally, like all upper class Afghan woman, I was placed under house arrest.

Individual Afghans were charming, funny, humane, tender, enchantingly courteous, and sometimes breathtakingly honest. Yet, their country was a bastion of illiteracy, poverty, and preventable disease.

I never put on the headscarves, long coats, and gloves. Instead, I would take a deep breath, go out, and stride at a brisk, American pace. Sometimes, I'd take a bus. The buses were quite colorful except inside, fully sheeted women sat apart from the men at the back of the bus. The first time I saw this, I laughed out loud in disbelief and nervousness.

There soon came a time when I knew I would have to leave. I presented myself at the American Embassy. They could not help me. They told me that as the "wife of an Afghan national," I was no longer an American citizen entitled to American protection. Each time, the Marines would escort me back home. I came to understand that once an American woman marries a Muslim, and lives in a Muslim country, she is a citizen of no country. She is no longer entitled to the rights she once enjoyed. Only military mercenaries can rescue her.

A woman dares not forget such lessons—not if she manages to survive and escape. Which I did—though weighing 90 pounds and with hepatitis.

Firsthand experience of life under Islam as a woman held captive in Kabul has shaped the kind of feminist I became and have remained—one who is not a multicultural relativist. I learned, early on, how incredibly servile oppressed peoples could be and how deadly the oppressed could be toward each other. My husband's mother was very cruel to her female servants. I understood that women internalize sexism just as men do. It was an observation that has stayed with me.

What I experienced in Afghanistan taught me the necessity of applying a single standard of human rights, not one tailored to each culture.

Let us now return to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1990, Iranian journalist, Freidoune Sahebjam, published a haunting and carefully rendered account of how, on August 15, 1986, a 35-year-old woman was stoned to death in Kupyeh, Iran. It is titled: *The Stoning of Soraya M.* Soraya, (peace be upon her), was lynched by the villagers with whom she had lived all her life. Her own father, her two sons, and her lying,

greedy, heartless, criminal-husband, Ghorban-Ali, all threw the first stones.

When Soraya was only 13, an arranged marriage with the 20-year-old Ghorban-Ali took place. Soraya was docile, obedient, and fertile. She did everything uncomplainingly. Her husband routinely insulted, beat, and then abandoned her and their children; he also consorted with prostitutes and brought them into the marital bed. Soraya dared not say a word. A "complaining" wife is easy to divorce.

On his say-so, she was sentenced to die—on the very day her husband accused her of adultery. The villagers chanted: "The whore has to die. Death to the woman." The villagers--who had known Soraya since her birth--cursed her, spit on her, hit her, and whipped her as she walked to her stoning. According to Sahebjam's account, a "shudder of pleasure and joy ran through the crowd", as their stones drew blood. Soraya died a slow and agonizing death. Afterwards, the villagers all literally danced on the spot where Soraya had been murdered.

I must emphasize that this ghastly, local stoning cannot be blamed on the alleged crimes of the American or Israeli Empire. Like evil, barbaric customs also exist in the world. The West has not caused them. This is a very important point—as is the question: What can or must we do about it?

Dare to argue for military as well as humanitarian and educational intervention—and you will be slandered as a “racist”—even when you are arguing for the lives and dignity of brown- and black- and olive-skinned people. In the name of anti-racism and political correctness, the Western academy and media appear to have all but abandoned vulnerable people—Muslims as well as Christians, Jews, and Hindus—to the forces of Islamism. Such cultural relativism is, today, perhaps the greatest failing of the western academic and media establishments.

If we, as Americans, want to continue the struggle for women's and humanity's global freedom, we can no longer allow ourselves to remain inactive, anti-activist, cowed by outdated left and European views of colonial-era racism that are meant to trump and silence concerns about gender. The Western academy has been thoroughly “Palestinianized”. Even feminists have come to believe that the “occupation of Palestine” is far more important than the occupation and destruction of women’s bodies, worldwide.

As I see it, everything is at stake. This is not the time for ideological party lines. It is a time for action, clarity, and unity. As Americans, we must acknowledge that Islamic religious and gender Apartheid are evil and have no justification. I would like us to support Muslim and Arab dissidents in their fight against Islamic gender apartheid and against tyranny. To fail this opportunity betrays all that we believe in.

I share the vision that Natan Sharansky and Ron Dermer have spelled out in their book *The Case for Democracy. The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*. I, too, believe that "democratic nations, led by the United States have a critical role to play in expanding freedom around the globe." Both women and religious minorities in non-western and Muslim countries, and in an increasingly Islamized Europe, are endangered as never before. In my new book, I argue that America must begin to factor both gender and religious Apartheid into our evolving foreign policies.

What must be done? We must combat the hate propaganda against America, Israel, and women that characterizes so much of the Arab and Muslim world today. This is a long educational and cultural process. We must defeat jihad. We must fight back. And, we must peg every peace and trade treaty with a Muslim country to the status of women in that country. I have a list of ten things that must be done in this regard vis

a vis Iran. My esteemed colleague, Professor Donna Hughes, has begun to spell out what an American feminist foreign policy might be towards Iran.

American and Western leaders cannot turn their backs on Muslim dissidents, on the people in the Arab and Muslim world—or on the endangered Jews in Israel or on the Christians in Muslim countries. Our American vision of freedom and equality for women must also become part of American foreign policy. This is *the* feminist priority of the twenty-first century.

Dr. Phyllis Chesler is the author of fifteen books, including the feminist classic WOMEN AND MADNESS (1972) and THE NEW ANTI-SEMITISM (2003). She has just published THE DEATH OF FEMINISM. WHAT'S NEXT IN THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S FREEDOM. She is a Board member of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East. Her website is www.phyllis-chesler.com

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