

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

Mona Eltahawy, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Joanne J. Myers

Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I would like to welcome you all to this Public Affairs program.

Our guest is Mona Eltahawy, author of *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. This book expands upon her wildly popular and controversial 2012 *Foreign Policy* essay on Middle Eastern gender relations, in which she asked: "Why do they hate us?" Now, please note, if you think "they" and "us" refer to Muslims and Americans, you'd be wrong. "They" are the Arab men and the "us" she refers to are Arab women. From the response this article received, there is no denying that misogyny in the Arab world is an explosive issue, and continues to be so.

In *Headscarves and Hymens*, Mona expands on this theme as she addresses some very difficult issues in highlighting the egregious record of women's rights in the Middle East. For Mona, the issue is a highly personal one—but you will hear more about that shortly.

But suffice it to say that in recent years we have increasingly been made aware of how women in the Arab world face unspeakable sexism, from the limitations on their movements, to child marriage, and genital mutilation. They are also used as political pawns. What rarely happens is an airing of their opinions, especially on any mainstream, widespread scale. Mona is succeeding in bringing their views to our attention.

Interviewing Mona will be Naureen Chowdhury Fink, head of research and analysis at the [Global Center on Cooperative Security](#). She is an expert on violent extremism, including how it relates to women.

After about 30 minutes or so of their conversation, we will then open the discussion and invite you to ask your questions.

But before we listen to what Mona has experienced, what she has learned, please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our guests, Naureen and Mona. Thank you both for joining us.

Discussion

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: Thank you all of you for joining us here today, and of course thank you, Mona, for being here and for this fantastic book. It has been a difficult book, but a really, really fascinating read.

I'm going to jump right into one of the key questions that came to my mind as you were describing how women fought alongside men for the revolutions and how the [Arab Spring](#) was as much a citizen uprising that included both men and women.

But you ask the really potent question then: Whose revolution and what did it do for women? After all of that fighting together, women ended up scarred, beaten, sexually assaulted, and facing a number of issues on the street that you've talked about.

So I come back to that question: Whose revolution was it and what did women get out of the Arab Spring? Are they better off now?

MONA ELTAHAWY: Undoubtedly, the revolutions that began with [Tunisia](#) in 2010 were not revolutions about gender or women's equality or women's liberation. They were revolutions that were driven by the insistence that people wanted to be free and wanted to lead dignified lives. You could see that from the chants that you heard on the streets. People were chanting, "Bread, freedom, social justice, and human dignity." You could hear these chants across the various countries where the uprisings and revolutions took place.

But what drew people on the street was a recognition that the state oppressed everybody, men and women, and you saw men and women side by side.

But the points that I'm trying to raise in my book are: What happened when women went home, and what did they realize about the kind of oppression that they as women had to face? That's where I draw what I call the "trifecta." The trifecta is basically the recognition that the state, the street, and the home together oppress women specifically.

That's where what I call the "double revolution," the social and sexual revolution, comes in, because we began a political revolution that was directed towards the state. But, unless we have the social/sexual revolution that takes the fight to the street and to the home as well, in an attempt to destroy the patriarchy of that trifecta, then clearly it is only the men's revolution.

You see that playing out in so many of the countries, but specifically my own country, where I moved back in 2013, Egypt. All we have done is play basically political musical chairs, where we [got rid of Mubarak](#), then we got a [military junta](#) of 19 Mubaraks, then we [got Mohamed Morsi](#), then we [got Sisi](#)—and it's just one man replacing another. Unless we take that revolution to the streets and to the home, with gender at its heart, and have a social/sexual revolution, the political revolution as far as I'm concerned will fail because it will always be a men's revolution.

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: You are painting this picture of a quest for freedom, a quest for equality, a quest for rights, and you are sort of complicating this image we have of the Middle East, with the men and women fighting side by side, but then this continued revolution of women. Certainly in our line of work, working on countering violent extremism and counterterrorism, we are faced with another very puzzling image, which is of young women leaving homes, presumably in the West, where they do have some of these rights, where they are least legally protected, and then going to join perhaps the most extreme of some of these misogynist movements in [ISIL](#) [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], in Iraq and Syria. [*Editor's note: For more on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, check out [Richard Barrett's September, 2014 Carnegie talk.](#)*]

How do you square that image between the desire for freedom and the sexual revolution you were talking about and young women choosing to leave places where they should have some of those rights and then going to join ISIL? Those pictures are very puzzling put together.

MONA ELTAHAWY: Another of the points that I want to raise in the book as well is too often when we look at the Middle East and North Africa, the only options that we see available for people are either military rule or Islamic rule, as if that is the only thing available, as if, in a country like Egypt of 85-to-90 million people, that's the only thing we could come up with.

I call them *Daesh*. I don't call them ISIS or ISIL because *Daesh* is the Arab acronym [for *Ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-'Iraq wash-Sham*] and they don't like that acronym and I don't like them, so I will continue to call them by the name that they don't like.

I think that we have to place *Daesh* along the spectrum of that political Islam that I am also fighting. I am fighting military rule and political Islam because I think they are two sides of the same coin, authoritarianism, paternalistic rule, and this very misogynistic approach to life and religion. I think that *Daesh* belongs to the far right extreme.

In my book, I mention *Daesh* as one of the many groups that are killing and maiming people in [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#), and they specifically target women. But most of my focus is on the [Salafi](#) groups and the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) in the region.

But if I were to take my arguments from the book and extend them to the UK and parts of Europe, and in some instances here in the United States, I think what those women represent are the more extreme version of the women of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi groups, who in my opinion have internalized this misogyny, have basically understood that to survive in the kind of culture that we live in, there are certain things that you have to learn and regurgitate back, and in that case be protected and comforted by that group.

When it comes to the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, we have women who were advisors to Mohamed Morsi and who were the heads of the women's committee of the Muslim Brotherhood who made outrageous statements, such as "female genital mutilation [FGM] is a form of beautification," "women should not protest because it's undignified." In the middle of the revolution, we had the head of the women's committee of the Muslim Brotherhood's [Freedom and Justice Party](#) actually saying, "It's undignified for women to protest; they should let their brothers and fathers protest."

If I were to draw that line to those women who go and join *Daesh*, I would also complicate it by this idea of choice feminism that we often talk about now.

I'm often asked, when it comes to the veil and various veils, "Why are you so opposed to the veil? A woman has chosen to do this." This idea of choice has to be complicated beyond "a woman has chosen to do this."

Just because a woman has chosen to do something does not oblige me as a woman to support that choice. Unless that choice is a feminist choice, this is where we part ways.

So these young women who go and join *Daesh* in my opinion are not making feminist choices; they are committing what I believe is as egregious as the women who joined the [Charles Manson](#) gang.

I would make a difference also between men and women who joined things like the [Baader Meinhof gang](#) in West Germany, because at least the women who joined the Baader Meinhof gang actually fought. They were quotes from West German police in which they would say "shoot the women first." Why would they want to shoot the women of Baader Meinhof first? Because they were actually fighting with the men. These women had agency beyond going to be the bride of some jihadi, being covered from head to toe and basically dropping out of existence.

So it's very puzzling to me. I do not support that choice and I think it is an internalization of a very dangerous kind of misogyny.

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: Moving into this idea—and you mentioned this repeatedly in your book—that women have to some extent internalized this message so much that they have become the main protagonist. You talk about the mothers who take their daughters to be mutilated, or mothers who agree on this.

So let's complicate the notion of what it means to be a woman in Islam. We talk a lot about—and you've mentioned this certainly in the book, and you mentioned about the "A'isha/Khadijah complex." There is this enormous focus on the youngest wife of the Prophet and what she did in that relationship.

There is very little discussion about Khadijah, who was to all intents and purposes his boss. She was older, she was his only wife as long as she was alive, and she proposed to him. Why are we not talking more about Khadijah and why aren't women abroad in the diaspora communities and these girls that you are saying have this very simplified notion—why is Khadijah not more the role model? A'isha may have been a good role model—I don't want to say no—but why aren't we talking more about Khadijah?

MONA ELTAHAWY: This thing about Khadijah is really interesting to me. Khadijah, many of you might know, was the first person who accepted Muhammad's message. She was the first person who believed in him. This is a woman who, as you said, was 15 years older than him, a divorcee, by some accounts also a widow. Apparently, she had more than three husbands. She proposed to Mohammed. She was his only wife. He was 25 and she was 40 when he married her. She was his only wife until she died when she was 60, I think it was.

I think the reason that our clerics do not bring Khadijah up is because, clearly, this was a woman who fully was empowered and was the best symbol of consent and agency. One of the ideas that I also want to talk about when we talk about revolution is consent and agency. So when our clerics look at a woman like Khadijah, who was the boss of the man who became the Prophet of Islam, and who was older than him, for them she represents the worst kind of thing that a woman is. This is a woman who is in control of her life. This is a woman who was the boss of the founder of Islam. She was clearly not a woman who was going to be molded in any way by Muhammad.

But they focus—they obsess—over A'isha. There is a huge fight over how old she was. Some people say she was six, some say she was nine, some say she was 19. I say in 2015 it doesn't matter how old she was, because in 2015 marrying a child anywhere in the world is pedophilia and should be against the law.

But this is a real issue of life and death in countries like Yemen, Saudi Arabia, my country Egypt, Sudan, where women's rights activists who very courageously try to put an age to marriage, a limit to how young a girl can be when she gets married, they are fought with charges of blasphemy by clerics who hold onto this idea of A'isha.

What they do is they say, "You are breaking the *sunnah*, the tradition of the Prophet, by questioning this." But they never say, "It's *sunnah* to marry an older woman." I joke about this, but it's really not a joke.

We have huge levels of male unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa, and in many parts of the so-called Muslim world I've never seen a cleric say, "Practice the *sunnah* of the Prophet. Marry

a woman who's older because if you're unemployed she can take care of you." [Laughter] I never hear this.

What I do hear is these men being silent when these young girls are dying in childbirth at the age of eight or nine because they have essentially been raped on their wedding night by men five times their age. This is a crime under anybody's imagination.

Now, we can have arguments about how many cultures in the year 620 allowed child marriage. But again, it's beside the point. What happened in the 7th century should not be something that we have to abide by in the 21st century.

This image of Khadijah is not only the clerics' worst nightmare but she is the worst nightmare of *Daesh*. If the young women who are joining *Daesh* knew about Khadijah, knew about this woman who practiced consent and agency in the best way, I wonder would they be rushing to join *Daesh* at the age of 15 and being told to be happy with their lot, as the so-called jihadi bride of god knows who, who is ruining the lives of people in Iraq and Syria and is involved in [systematic rape](#) of the Yazidi women, as we all know.

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: Which brings me to the question, then, this complicated notion in this sort of more complex history that you are painting here: How much of that is accessible? I know that a lot of times when we talk about women's rights and we talk about gender issues, especially in countries dealing with extremism and conflict, we hear about this as a Western import—"these are Western values. These are not local values; these are not our values. You've brought them from abroad."

And yet, in your book you very powerfully highlight women in the Middle East who have been fighting for equal rights historically and in a contemporary setting. As a Medieval historian myself, I could say that a lot of these stories are really revolutionary when you do think of what was happening in Europe in the year 620 and then you have Muhammad fighting for a divorce and alimony and things like that. It is quite revolutionary.

But there does not seem to be that access to that history among women in the diaspora community. So you can have young girls who will go over to *Daesh* and say, "This is the historical image I follow."

How do we increase that access to information? How do we muddy the waters a little and bring this complexity into the history?

MONA ELTAHAWY: What I try to do in the book, as you say, is mention, name drop, as often as I can, a lot of feminists who belong to my heritage, whom I can turn to. As much as I admire and love [Gloria Steinem](#) and [Germaine Greer](#), until she went culturally relativist on me and I had to part ways with her—but there are a lot of Western feminists that I do admire—they are not the only ones that have informed my own feminism.

I have women like [Huda Sha'arawi](#), who in the 1920s removed her veil and said, "This is a thing of the past." I have women like [Doria Shafik](#), who in the 1950s led a group of 1,500 Egyptian women into storming the Egyptian Parliament to demand political rights. Most people in Egypt do not know that Doria Shafik did this. I have women like [Nawal El Saadawi](#), who is still alive today—she is 83 now—who was one of the first Egyptian feminists to my knowledge to write so openly and poignantly about her own genital cutting and to talk about how it has affected her life. And there is the Moroccan sociologist feminist [Fatema Mernissi](#), whose [books](#) on veiling informed my own decision to remove my *hijab*, because I wore a *hijab* for nine years. So we have all these women.

And we have contemporary women as well. In Saudi Arabia, where a lot of people would say, "Feminists in Saudi Arabia?" I say, "Yes, there are women like [Manal al-Sharif](#), who, every year up until she had to leave and go to Dubai because she was hounded out of her job, took part in [driving campaigns](#) as part of civil disobedience to break the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia. And several other women, all the way back to the 1990s, when you had at least 40 Saudi women who, after [Saddam invaded](#) Kuwait, had their own driving protest to break the ban on women's driving.

All these women exist in countries as conservative as Saudi Arabia and as liberal as Tunisia and Morocco. But you never hear their names. Now, internally you never hear their names because of that trifecta—the state, the street, and the home—that are not interested in promoting this kind of feminist message.

But one of the positive things that came about in the revolution in Egypt was many grassroots groups that came about after the revolution, like one group called [Baheya Ya Misr](#). It was launched by a woman who is also a diplomat in the Arab League [[Inas S. Mekkawy](#)], who brought together lots of young men and women. What they would do when they went out on protest was they would put the pictures of these women that I mentioned, all these names, on these big banners, and they would march through downtown Cairo with the women's names as they waved these banners around, so that people could see these women from our own history that had basically just been entirely forgotten.

When the Muslim Brotherhood was in power and Mohamed Morsi was president for that brief year, one of the things that they wanted to do in the curriculum was to remove all pictures of Doria Shafik because she wasn't wearing a headscarf.

We were actively continuing to erase these women who should be our heroes. So these feminist groups who are coming about on the ground in Egypt were trying to bring her back. But I know that outside of the Middle East and North Africa very few young women know about these women.

And I'm talking about women just in my region. But I'm sure if you talk about Pakistan, I can talk about women like [Hina Jilani](#) and [Asma Jahangir](#). These are two sisters who formed the first legal firm formed by women in Pakistan, and who to this day defend women who have been attacked by acid attacks; they defend women who have been hounded by their families because of so-called honor crimes.

There is a whole list of women who have been intentionally or indirectly erased who our young women today, both in various Muslim-majority countries and outside, must know about. The question is, why don't we know about them?

My book is just one of many that we need. But I think that those who work in counterterrorism and those who work in international organizations that want to counter the narrative of groups like *Daesh* would do well to start repeating these names, would do well to bring light.

In Oslo in January, I took part in a conference for Muslim women that was put together by a Norwegian-Pakistani woman called [Deeyah Khan](#). Deeyah is a singer-songwriter who made a [film](#) about a young woman who was killed in a so-called honor killing in England because she had the nerve to escape her family and marry the man that she wanted. We have so many women like Deeyah. In that conference in Oslo she brought together women from dozens of countries.

Why don't more people know about them? Why aren't they in our mainstream media?

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: You touched on that earlier, and I think Joanne did in her question—who's "them," who's "us?" We have this notion that it always happens "over there." It's always "them," it's not "us." I think there are some very important campaigns. There's a documentary film called *Honor Diaries* that looks at the amount of honor killings, even here in the United States. It's really quite frightening.

You mentioned this phrase in the book that really stuck with me, "the misogyny of the state and the misogyny of the street." I don't know that any country has really gotten rid of both. When we debate "equal pay for equal work" here, I don't see that we've defeated misogyny.

But I think that is a very important point you make. There are two types. We think about violence against women in these big conflict settings and revolutions during conflicts and *Daesh* and these big settings. But there is this low-level misogyny—I don't want to say low-level because people are dying of it—but there is this constant misogyny too in the home that you have talked about. And in many cases, of course, the power is with the father in the household. It's negative when we think of this poor little girl in Saudi Arabia or these girls you talked about in the Yemeni wedding night.

But there are also some very powerful forces for good, which certainly we see in homes, if you think about *Malala's father*—or, presumably, in our homes, fathers—that can play a very positive role.

So how can we engage men? You have some great examples in the book—the Eritrean couple with the man wearing the sign on his wedding day saying, "I will only marry a liberated woman."

MONA ELTAHAWY: "An uncut woman."

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: That's right—and defying his family to marry her.

So how do we engage men more, because the reality is that right now in the home, in the state, and in the street a lot of men in these regions still have that defining role? How can men play more of a role in this revolution?

MONA ELTAHAWY: In order to answer that, I have to start with what you said about the misogyny not just being "over there." One of the points that I tried to make in my book and in all my appearances on book tours so far is that it is really important to see my book not as something that just indicts men from my part of the world and to somehow make it out to be that all Arab or all Muslim men have this structure and deity that makes them especially misogynist. I think it's this trifecta that I am trying to unpack here that encourages it because it institutionalizes it on many levels.

But I make comparisons to what happens here in the United States, especially in the Southern states. I often say that in the Middle East and North Africa I fight the Muslim Brotherhood; here in the United States I fight what I call the "Christian Brotherhood." These are the right-wing Christian groups who have been instrumental in fighting against women's reproductive rights. These are the kind of right-wing political groups that have led to something like the case of *Purvi Patel*, the Hindu woman in Indiana, who was recently sent to jail for 20 years on the charge on infanticide. This is unheard of. The entire world sat back and thought, "What is going on in the United States that this woman, who said that she had a miscarriage, was sent to jail on charges of infanticide?"

Basically a woman is considered an incubator in some of these states. There are some states also in the South where women have very little access to either contraception or reproductive rights generally, especially abortions.

So I draw the line between what I call "purity culture" here in the United States, this obsession with virginity, this obsession with women's bodies, this obsession with vaginas, and I connect it to the obsession with modesty; in modesty cultures where I come from, again an obsession with vagina. The saying now that I want to put on all T-shirts across the world is "Stay Out of My Vagina Unless I Want You in There." [Laughter] These very religious conservative men are obsessed with our vaginas.

So the purity culture here and the modesty culture over there have to be connected so that you don't think that I'm just talking about the men of my part of the world. Misogyny exists on a spectrum globally, but each country has made its own progress along that spectrum, thanks to the efforts of feminists and thanks to its ability to break that trifecta of the state, the street, and the home.

Going back to my region now and what's going on in the home, I think it is very important to realize that, because of that trifecta, what ends up happening is the misogynies are reflected back and forth.

For example, in March of 2011, when the military in Egypt subjected women revolutionaries to so-called virginity tests—essentially sexual assaults—the military knew it could get away with this because this concept of a virginity test exists in the Egyptian home.

I have been told many stories about this. But one story I was actually told was someone said, "My friend was engaged. The engagement broke up for whatever reason, and her fiancé actually contacted her parents and said, 'I think you should have your girl checked.'"

You can actually go to a forensics doctor and basically ask him to issue a virginity certificate. This exists in Turkey, this exists in parts of Iraq, this exists in Egypt. This is outrageous. This is a crime against the body of a girl or a woman.

I connect that crime—again, it is under this idea of consent and agency—to one of the earliest crimes that happens in the home again.

Now, this virginity test that was perpetrated by the state—the state knew that the people on the street and in the home would not be outraged. When I heard about these virginity tests, I thought, "For sure we are going to have another revolution now. How could they violate our revolutionaries like this?"

Nothing happened. The women who exposed these tests were called liars and they were told, "You are trying to malign our honorable military that is trying to protect us against Mubarak."

The state knew the home would be quiet, just as the home knows the state will be quiet when the home perpetrates one of the earliest crimes against the body of the girl, and that is in the form of genital mutilation or cutting.

So the misogynies are constantly reflected back. That is all underpinned by the legislation that allows this to happen and that allows street sexual harassment to go unpunished and unaccountable. That trifecta again allows all of this to happen.

Now, you mentioned the [case](#) of Lama. Lama is a young girl who at the age of four was—four or five, I can't remember now, but it is a horrific case.

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: Five. Too young.

MONA ELTAHAWY: She was raped by her [father](#), who was a televangelist in Saudi Arabia. He claimed that he raped her because she wasn't a virgin. She's a girl who was five. Again this

obsession with virginity. He managed to get away with it because her mother—he had divorced her mother—accepted blood money from him because she was a very poor single mother.

According to Saudi law, the crime of rape is punishable by death, but a man cannot be punished by death—and I am against the death sentence under any circumstances—but a man in Saudi Arabia cannot be sentenced to death if the crime that he supposedly committed was against his wife or his children.

So here again you have multiple levels of complicity between the state and the home, and in many instances the street as well.

This crime that happened against Lama—the people who stood up to it very bravely and courageously were Saudi activists. Now, I talked about Saudi feminists who many people do not know exist. There are also Saudi human rights defenders who many people outside of the kingdom do not know exist. They very bravely and courageously took up the case of Lama, and they also took up the case of domestic violence laws, so that they could take the crimes that happen in the home to the highest level.

But they are fighting against incredible odds. One of the worst odds that they are fighting against is something that the state allows to happen. It is called the guardianship system. In Saudi Arabia a woman is essentially a child her entire life because she must depend on a male guardian—be it her father, her husband, her brother, and in some instances her son—to give her permission to do the most basic of things.

According to this domestic violence law—this is a country where a woman cannot drive—you are basically supposed to depend on your male guardian to take you to the law enforcers to complain about domestic violence. How are you supposed to go and complain about the violence of the home if the person in the home who is going to take you to the police is the person abusing you?

So despite the fact that we have these incredibly courageous people fighting against the highest odds, that trifecta (the state, the street, and the home) must be taken apart in order for their courageous work to actually have an impact in helping the girls and women who are at the center of this trifecta.

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: I could go on forever, but I don't want to take up too much time from the floor. I will ask one more question because I think it is particularly key.

The book is in many ways inspiring because it catalogues so many difficult issues. It is a catalogue of things that need to be addressed—and I would add addressed quickly. But what can we do about it? There is a spectrum of actors you highlight—from the feminists, the ideologues, the civil society actors, to governments, to international organizations. What range of actions do you think is the best way to actually address it? Much as I think we need to raise awareness about the problems, I'd also love a chance to think about what the solution is and how we can move forward.

MONA ELTAHAWY: Right. I think the solutions belong on many levels. Kind of the ultimate solution—I'm not a policymaker, but my quickest answer to "What can we do?" is destroy the patriarchy. How can we destroy the patriarchy takes many levels.

I think, whenever I am asked at gatherings like this "What can I do to help you and women from your background?" I say, "Nothing. You as individuals can do nothing because only we can help ourselves." I didn't write this book because I want anyone to come and rescue us. I'm not waiting for

someone to come and save us. Only we can save ourselves and only we can have this fight.

But what you as individuals can do at the local level—and that's why I always connect it to the misogyny that is available—

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: It's on sale at your local store.

MONA ELTAHAWY: Exactly, and at a 50 percent reduction.

In every country I've traveled there are obviously examples of misogyny. So I say fight the misogyny in your country. Believe me, when the Muslim Brotherhood or the state or anybody in my country finds out about a case like Purvi Patel or finds out that women in the United States don't get equal pay or you haven't had a woman president yet, the first thing they say to me is, "Don't you know they beat women up in America as well? Don't you know that a rape happens every four minutes in America as well?" Their excuse is always that "There's misogyny over there."

Of course there is. There is misogyny everywhere. So I say, fight the misogyny in your own community because that lifts up feminism on a global level. That way you won't have anyone over there saying, "Well, it's just as bad." The easiest way to shut down feminist discussions or a discussion about the importance of feminism is to say, "It happens everywhere—shrug—what can I do? It happens everywhere."

So fight it. Fight it wherever you are and don't accept it. I think in a lot of the Western contexts I speak in, people have gotten to this place of complacency, which is incredibly dangerous. A lot of my second-wave feminist friends, like [Robin Morgan](#) and Gloria Steinem—I'm going to be in a [conversation](#) with Robin Morgan at the PEN Festival on Saturday—a lot of them will tell you that the fights that they were having on the barricades in the 1960s and the 1970s have come back. How, in a country like the United States, have they come back? How, in a country like the United States, have civil rights and the crimes of the civil rights come back again, that we are still talking about police brutality against black men?

I went to [Beijing in 1995](#). The [Beijing platform](#) was one of the most progressive platforms on reproductive rights. We have not been able to as a global community have another women's conference. You know why? Because all these religious fundamentalists in concert with the Vatican will destroy what we were able to produce in Beijing because of the religious fundamentalists and the regimes who support them.

So fight it in your own community and fight complacency.

On the political level, ask your politicians why they are silent when they buy billions of dollars' worth of oil from Saudi Arabia, sell Saudi Arabia billions of dollars' worth of weapons, and they know what Saudi Arabia does to women. The Swedish [foreign minister](#) tried to say something about this and she was [banned](#) from speaking at the Arab League. But worse, in Sweden, this paragon of feminism, she was attacked by the business community because they didn't want to lose money, she was attacked by politicians for being "too emotional"—too emotional! This is the Swedish foreign minister.

Again, misogyny has not been erased anywhere. So on a political level ask your politicians why they are shamefully silent. They basically throw women away like cheap currency and bargaining chips when they sit with our regimes. Again, I'm not saying, in the way that [Laura Bush](#) did when she took over the [presidential address](#) just before this country [invaded](#) Afghanistan, "We are invading Afghanistan to liberate the women from their *burkas*," which was just ludicrous. This is not why this

country invaded Afghanistan.

I am not asking for anyone to invade, because most Western countries have terrible records when it comes to colonialism and imperialism in my part of the world, and hypocrisy when it comes to using women's issues. So don't come invading us for our sake.

But talk to your politicians about why they are hypocritical when it comes to women's issues and why they are so easily able to strike these deals.

And then, on a UN and international level, I want to know why the United Nations allows so many countries from my part of the world to place these asterisks that allow them to get away with violating exactly the kind of provisions in something like CEDAW, that basically destroy the meaning of the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#). Why, if this convention is aimed at protecting women from cultural and religious discrimination, do you allow countries to basically opt out, if according to their religion and culture, it somehow violates it?

I honestly want someone from the United Nations to sit and explain to me why these countries continuously violate the very conventions that—and basically, when you sign on to these conventions, you can then say, "You know what? The United States hasn't signed CEDAW, but we have." But then you look into the details of the various provisions they violate, and it's meaningless. All it does is it gives them cachet and the ability to say, "We signed this convention."

I think I've given you plenty here, right? The UN, the politicians—

NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK: The fight at the international level and take politicians to task.

Questions

QUESTION: Judy Maysles.

Is it possible to be a feminist and actually practice Islam?

MONA ELTAHAWY: That is a good question that is going to require somewhat of a complex answer.

I used to call myself a "Muslim feminist." I no longer do. I call myself "a Muslim and a feminist." My Islam and my feminism are in separate parts of my being.

But I belong to a movement called [Musawah](#). *Musawah* is the Arabic word for equality. It's a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. It was launched in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2009. That movement brings together scholars of Islam, activists, writers like myself, and others who identify with the goals of Musawah.

Among Musawah's members is a woman who is a personal hero of mine and a mentor, an African-American scholar of Islam called [Amina Wadud](#). Amina Wadud identifies as an Islamic feminist. So I am a Muslim and a feminist; she says, "I am an Islamic feminist."

Amina, in March of 2005 in this city, New York, where I used to live at the time, led us in the first public Friday prayer. She was the imam. It was a mixed-gender Friday prayer, it was men and women praying side by side. I think I was one of two women who didn't wear a headscarf and I had my period. So I broke all kinds of laws. But I took part in this prayer as a Muslim and as a feminist. Amina led us in this prayer as a woman imam, as an Islamic feminist.

Amina believes you can be a Muslim and a feminist because she reinterprets the religion. She studied at Al-Azhar, which is where all the clerics of the Sunni world go and study, from where they can then go and spread the message of Sunni Islam. Amina believes that you can be an Islamic feminist.

The reason I don't call myself a Muslim feminist but I do believe you can be a Muslim and a feminist—but I want to complicate the answer for you a bit—is because I don't want to engage in "my verse versus your verse." Amina produces the verses that are feminist and that say things like "the Prophet was married to Khadijah," "the Prophet's [last sermon](#) said, 'You must treat women well.'" There was a time when certain things, just as in the [Bible](#) or the [Torah](#), were acceptable; now they are no longer acceptable—that kind of stuff. So it is an active feminist reinterpretation of Islam.

I am fighting so many things; I'm so glad that there are women like Amina around. My feminism is much more of a secular kind. I say, "It's 2015, it's against the law." So I need a law that helps me with this.

But I also understand that there were people before that Friday prayer who contacted us, because at the time I was a board member of the [Progressive Muslim Union of North America](#) and we were co-sponsors of this prayer. I went to this prayer, no questions asked. But there were some people who contacted us and said, "I need the religious justification for why this prayer is okay." If I want those people along with me in this revolution, the social-sexual revolution, I need Musawah and I need women like Amina Wadud, who can then give me the verse and the saying of the Prophet and the *sunnah* of the Prophet that will then allow those who need Islam to come before their feminism to come to the prayer.

At the launch of Musawah there were two young women who I found very inspiring at the meeting. My roommate was a British-Pakistani Muslim, and she would say to me often, "If it's a competition between my Islam and my feminism, my Islam will win."

But there was an Egyptian feminist, who I've gotten to know much more since and who recently before the revolution launched an anti-street-sexual-harassment movement called [HarassMap](#). This young Egyptian woman said to me, "In the contest between my Islam and my feminism, my feminism will win."

These are two Muslim women, one from Egypt, one from the UK of South Asian descent, both of them at this conference, both of them members of Musawah. One of them wants a secular feminism and one wants an Islamic feminism. We have to be prepared to give both of them what they want if we want this social-sexual revolution to succeed.

So that was my long-winded answer by which I say, yes you can, but it's complicated.

QUESTION: Good evening. My name is Bo.

There's a lot of discussion about what is essential Islam, is Islam fundamentally conducive to terrorism, is it conducive to misogyny. What do you think about commentators like [Nicholas Kristof](#), who point to misogynist countries, especially misogynist countries such as Pakistan or Saudi Arabia and these countries that practice FGM or honor killings or basically deny women essential rights, and the connection to economic inequality, lack of education, higher incidences of recruitment for terrorism? What's the connection between women's rights and all of these problems that are suffered in a lot of these Muslim-majority countries?

MONA ELTAHAWY: Thank you for your question.

I don't think Islam is one thing. I think Islam is many, many things. I think one of the biggest problems that we keep going into again and again is: Who is the true Islam and what is the true Islam and who speaks for Islam? There isn't one Islam that I can point to and tell you, "This is Islam."

The point I make in my book is a lot of the misogyny that we see in my part of the world, the Middle East and North Africa—the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa, because I don't talk about Iran, Turkey, or Israel—is a toxic mix of Islam or religion and culture. I include Christianity in many instances as well. This is also by way of showing you that it is not just about Islam.

In one instance, when I talk about domestic violence laws and the efforts of feminist groups on the ground to fight for legislation against domestic violence, Lebanon was a very troublesome case study, because after about 10 years of fighting for domestic violence legislation, the Lebanese Parliament, which was on and off during that time so it wasn't a continuous kind of ignoring of it, when they finally sat and looked at the bill, the leaders of the Christian and Muslim communities in Lebanon—now, Lebanon is a country of about 18 or 19 sects—the Christian and Muslim leaders in Lebanon objected to language in the domestic violence bill, or the anti-domestic violence bill, that criminalized marital rape. This wasn't just the imams saying "according to Islam;" this was the Christian priests as well. They all believed it was a man's right to have sex on demand. Because of these leaders of the Christian and Muslim communities in Lebanon, the language against marital rape was removed and it was made even worse. A man was basically given the right to have sex on demand in Lebanon, Christian and Muslim men.

So I think that this question about what is the real Islam at this stage in the game is incredibly naïve. There are many different Islams. Which Islam are you talking about?

The Islam in Turkey of [Erdoğan](#) that has changed according to whether Turkey wants to join the EU or not. When the [AKP](#) [Justice and Development Party] wanted to join the EU, Erdoğan's party at the time—he wasn't president, but his party—was working very closely with feminist groups and they basically made their first article in the [constitution](#)—they removed that the man was the head of the family and made men and women equal, because they wanted their constitution to be in line with something the EU could accept. When the EU told Turkey, "You're not coming in because this basically a Christian club," Turkey said, "Well, okay, you know what? This is another kind of Islam now." Now if you talk to feminist groups in Turkey, it's a very different AKP.

So which Islam is it? My point is it's a complicated Islam. It's an Islam that ends up doing this very, very difficult dance with the culture that you're talking about. In Saudi Arabia it's one dance, in Iran it's another dance. [Rouhani](#), what kind of Islam is he practicing, where he is able to sit down and sign this [agreement](#) with the United States, yet at the same time he is complicit in the deaths of how many Syrians?

And also, which Islam—the Islam in Morocco, which has produced a human rights defender called [Khadija Ryadi](#) who wants to decriminalize sex outside of marriage? This is a Muslim woman saying that anyone should be able to have sex outside of marriage.

In Saudi Arabia, a rape victim is sentenced to be flogged unless she gets a royal pardon.

This is by way of saying again there is no one Islam, there is no true Islam. Islam is what we make it. Also, all those things that you said—the economy, the politics, the history of the country—end up

making a different kind of Islam according to where you are talking.

So for me it is something that I have a right to enter into that arena where they are doing that dance and wrestle it away and say, "That belongs to me as well." That's why I joined Musawah.

I haven't read Nick's [book](#), but I know that Nicholas Kristof talks about violations against women's rights across the world. I don't think he focuses just on Muslim-majority countries. I think that's a really important message, because you've got to make that connection.

Essentially, honestly, at the end of the day, all religion as far as I'm concerned has a deeply troublesome misogynist heart—all religions. My Wiccan friends will raise a hand and say "Not Wiccans." [Laughter] Okay. So maybe I will leave Wiccans to the side. But Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Christians—you name it. I think that troublesome misogyny at the heart essentially is about controlling women's sexuality, this vagina thing that I said.

Look at what happens in India, and India is not a Muslim-majority country. But I'm glad that Indian women since the [Delhi gang rape](#) have been very outspoken about sexual violence.

Again, my answers are all going to be very long-winded. There's a reason I'm losing my voice, because I talk a lot. But it's complicated. It's not a simple answer.

QUESTION: Hi. My name is Margaret Williams. I work for the International Peace Institute. I wanted to thank you for an incredible presentation.

I walked in a bit late, so forgive me if I missed a crucial piece of the sentence. But when I walked in you were talking about the *hijab* and that you don't believe in the *hijab*. I was wondering if you could talk about how you approach women and girls who find themselves on various parts of the spectrum, who wear a *hijab* but are still very much empowered in their own right, etc., and how you as a feminist and an activist approach that community.

MONA ELTAHAWY: Thank you for your question. We actually haven't touched this, so I'm not repeating myself.

What I did say was I used to wear a *hijab*. I wore a headscarf for nine years. But one of the issues that I bring up in the book and that has made me kind of reconsider my position—I am basically obsessed with the veil and I hate the veil, that it makes me obsess over it, and I hate that most conversations about Muslim women end up being about the veil. But I can't stop talking about the veil because it's something that I continue wrestling about. Honestly, it's endless.

My position and my relationship with the veil had to be complicated by my own realization that when I began to wear it—and I say I chose to wear it—at 16, this choice is what essentially makes me constantly wrestle with veiling of various types. I chose to wear it at 16. I wore it for nine years. But it took me eight years to take it off, because very soon after I began to wear it I realized it was not for me, for various reasons. If you want to know why I wore it and why I took it off, buy my book. [Laughter]

But this idea that it took me eight years to take it off made me sit down and question what it means to choose to do something. Why was it easier for me to choose to wear it than it was to take it off?

As a feminist, this idea—this is why I brought up this idea of choice feminism. A lot of feminists these days are talking about and arguing about choice feminism. Do I have to support something just

because a woman chose to do it? I have reached the stage where I say, "No, I don't," because of my own personal struggle with the *hijab*.

Now, discussions about the face veil are very different. I'll keep the face veil out of this just for the sake of brevity, which I clearly fail at.

But when it comes to just the headscarf, the way I talk about it now is what kind of choice are we talking about if it is a choice that's easier to make than to reverse?

I believe modesty culture ends up unfairly burdening girls and women in the way that purity culture does with its obsession with virginity. If only girls and women are expected to make a choice but boys and men are not expected to, I don't see any feminism in that.

So you can make a choice, it doesn't have to be a feminist choice, and I don't have to support that choice. This is how I now, especially since I've begun my book tour, talk about the headscarf. I say that: "Okay, you might have chosen to do this. I don't know how easy it will be for you to unchoose it, because it wasn't for me. I put this now under this thing called modesty culture that I believe unfairly burdens girls and women, and boys and men are not expected to make that choice." This is where we part ways with feminism.

I had a young woman come up to me after my meeting in Ottawa. She wore a headscarf. Now, most of my discussion of the various types of veils is in my context, which is the Middle East and North Africa. Here in North America it's a different context obviously.

First of all, women veil for different reasons. Some believe it's a religious obligation, some fight their families, some fight against their families, some are forced to, etc., etc. But at the end of the day I think the stark reality for me in Egypt, where 90 percent of women wear a veil, is social pressure—you know, what kind of choice can you then make?

Here in the North American context it's very different. I imagine it's very difficult to wear a headscarf here because you stick out and everybody sees you.

But this young woman came and she said to me, "I came to your reading even though I disagree with you. But I appreciate what you do is you complicate the picture of Muslim women, and I really like this idea of complicating, because I think that too many of our discussions about the veil are overly simplistic and reductive."

Basically, I am asked, as a woman who used to wear the headscarf, to basically shut up just because she has chosen to wear it. I've already said that at one point I thought I had made this choice, but it was so difficult to unchoose it—do you know what I mean?

So I think that this is a very difficult conversation. It has to be complicated. It is essentially a conversation that must take place between Muslim women. I say this not to bar women or people of other cultures and religions, but you have to hear the voices of Muslim women because it is very complicated. But at the end of the day, as a feminist, I cannot support something that I feel unfairly burdens girls and women.

Some young women I know in North America practice something that in the Middle East is unheard of. That is, two days of the week she will wear a headscarf, three days of the week she won't. All power to them, because I think this is essential in breaking this idea that the veil is a religious thing. The more we move away—because I don't believe it's a religious thing anymore.

There is nothing in the [Qur'an](#) that says a woman has to dress like this. Scholars have interpreted it that way, but others have interpreted it differently. The more these young women in North America play with what it means to be a veiled woman, the better.

She was telling me, "Me and my friends sometimes wear *hijab*, sometimes we don't." I was like, "That does not happen in Egypt, believe me."

I have women in Egypt who write to me and say, "My mother has threatened to lock me up at home if I take off my headscarf. This is what I'm facing in Egypt."

Then we have other young women here who say, "Look, you know how difficult it is for me to wear it at school or at work? I wear it out of basically identity politics." They want everyone to know that they're a Muslim, not necessarily religious.

So I recognize the difference in the contexts, but at the end of the day I cannot support something that expects just girls and women to make that choice.

And then there are ramifications of that choice: Where I come from they can be very dangerous, because a woman who is so-called "modest" is considered a good woman and someone like me is considered a bad woman. At the end of the day, we all get groped on the street, we are all considered fair game, because we have this trifecta that has essentially endangered our lives.

Again, this is my complicated answer to your question. Thank you very much.

QUESTION: My name is Leslie.

I wanted to continue on this thread. I really like what you said about how all misogyny is a global thing and the similarities between purity culture and modesty culture.

Here in the United States we want to be politically correct, and so we don't really ask tough questions. We like to shrug it off—"Oh, that's just how things are over there." But I'm curious about how you and how everyone can convince the world that we're all fighting the same fight.

MONA ELTAHAWY: Yes. Thank you for your question.

One of the ways that I try to do it in my book is to quote intellectual mentors of mine. They are women like the black feminist [Bell Hooks](#), the black lesbian poet [Audre Lorde](#), and a Chicana lesbian thinker and political scientist [Gloria Anzaldúa](#)—all of these women, and the women that I mentioned in India.

But also when I talk more—because my book went to print before this happened—I also mention women in Afghanistan who recently insisted on burying [Farkhunda](#), a woman who was lynched by a mob and whose lynching was recorded, and men were put on trial for this a couple of days ago, I think. The women there, much like women in Turkey about two or three months ago, also buried a woman who was the victim of a rape and a murder.

According to traditional Islamic funeral services, women cannot bury the corpse. This is a male thing. Women can only march so far in a funeral and then the men continue. So these women in Afghanistan and Turkey—especially in Turkey, the women in Turkey told the imam, "We will not listen to you because no man will touch her again," because this woman was raped and murdered.

I connect all these women—Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, these women in Turkey,

these women in India, these women in Afghanistan, and then the three women who set up the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement after [Trayvon Martin](#) was murdered.

I mention women of color especially, because, for the longest time, women of color—not just in the United States, because this is what Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa were fighting—but globally women of color were burdened with this idea that "if we spoke up against misogyny we're making our men look bad."

I know so many Muslim-American women who are discouraged from calling the police when their husbands beat them because they were worried their husbands would be deported after 9/11, because of the position of Muslim men in the United States after 9/11.

So imagine being a woman whose husband is beating you and your life is at stake and your community tells you: "For the sake of the community, shut up." And this isn't just Muslim women. These are women of color, as I said, globally. It's a constant struggle.

We are basically made to ask: What do we fight more, racism or sexism? Women like Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa basically said, "You fight both."

This is how I persuade people and try to convince them that this is a global fight that maybe they weren't aware of before because a lot of women of color were silenced by this idea that "we can't talk about the misogyny in our community because it's going to make our men look bad."

When [Alice Walker](#) wrote [The Color Purple](#) she got so much crap because—I'm restraining myself from cursing here because I'm known for my cursing, but I'm being very polite—she got in a lot of trouble because she talked openly about misogyny in the black community.

I'm saying this because, unless we recognize that feminism does not belong to white feminism, that feminism is ours as well, and that misogyny is a global thing, we are constantly going to be asked to make this impossible decision about whether we fight racism or sexism.

I am of the position right now where—because I love to fight as well, so as many enemies as I can, I will arrange them around me—I position myself between a racist right-wing that wants to use my words and say, "You see, even Mona says Muslim men are misogynist." So I say to them, "I want nothing to do with you."

I also say to those on the left, who say, "Don't talk about this because you're just arming the right-wing racists"—they are basically trying to protect my culture and religion from me. I say to them, "I don't need your help either," because they are tripping over the political correctness.

I also fight the misogynists of my culture.

So I fight all of those three and I do not ally myself with any of those three to fight the racism or the misogyny. It's exhausting, but it's necessary.

QUESTION: My name is Shazia Rafi. I used to be secretary general of Parliamentarians for Global Action. I'm very pleased to meet you here today. I didn't meet you in Beijing or at Amina Wadud's prayer.

I want to bring it back to Egypt and the role of the state in this. I worked with Egypt in the 1990s during the [International Conference on Population and Development](#) and its implementation. The government at the time on reproductive health issues was seen as being very progressive, including

the legislations against FGM, etc., that were passed during that time. But clearly it was a very military, authoritarian regime with a very weak secular opposition party, like the [Wafd](#), etc.

Where is that dynamic now? I mean to some extent some people say that this military coming in is going to reverse some of the period of the Islamic Brotherhood coming in with some changes in the law. But is it really?

MONA ELTAHAWY: I'm sorry I didn't meet you at either of these historic events either, but I'm glad to meet you now. Thank you for your question.

One of the most interesting things that I think a lot of people are unaware of is how Egypt ended up criminalizing FGM. During the 1994 Population Conference in Cairo—this was horrific, because I actually know the Egyptian producer involved. CNN produced a story on FGM in which they started with this horrific—first of all, they started with an interview with our then-dictator Mubarak, and he basically brushed aside FGM and said, "That doesn't happen in Egypt anymore." This is a common fallacy that exists in Egypt, despite the fact that in the age group of between 15 to 49, 91 percent of women have been cut. Mubarak just brushed this aside and said, "FGM doesn't happen in Egypt anymore. This is a thing of the past."

Then CNN cut to a scene of a girl being cut and she is screaming. Now, this young girl was violated twice, once through this unnecessary surgery and twice by being broadcast to the entire world. Clearly, her consent and agency was no one's concern—neither her family's, the cutter's, nor CNN's.

Because CNN basically showed up Mubarak to be either a liar or out of touch—and he was both—Egypt suddenly thought, "Oh my goodness, we look so bad, we better do something about FGM"—not because they care about 12-year-old girls being mutilated for no reason whatsoever, not because this is a crime against the bodies of girls, but because our dictator looked bad because CNN showed that he was either a liar or was out of touch.

This is by way of answering how we end up making any kind of progress when it comes to women's issues—that "Egypt looks bad on the international stage; we must do something." The first time that someone was put on trial for FGM was last year, because again a girl died the year before and because international news covered the event, and [Equality Now](#), the feminist organization, pushed the case. Egyptian NGOs have been fighting against FGM for almost 100 years.

The Egyptian state—this trifecta I talked about—is complicit in FGM because, after it criminalized FGM the first time around, it basically gave the green light for doctors and clinics to continue practicing it because it was going to be safe and sterile, which has led Egypt to be the country in Africa that has the highest rate of medicalized FGM. Seventy-seven percent of genital cutting happens in the medicalized community. This is outrageous because it basically gives legitimacy to this procedure that is absolutely, as you know, unnecessary.

This idea that Sisi has somehow rescued us is one of the most insidious and dangerous ideas. Every time an Egyptian woman, especially, tells me this it drives me insane. How can a man who was head of military intelligence at the time that the Egyptian military sexually violated women revolutionaries save us from anyone? He knew this happened and the military council knew this was happening.

This man was also head of military intelligence when I and several other women were sexually assaulted on Muhammad Mahmoud Street. And I was detained by military intelligence and interrogated blindfolded, and he was head of military intelligence.

It's impossible to ask this one side of the coin that is as authoritarian and misogynistic as the Islamists to protect us against the other side of the coin.

But I think one of the biggest fallacies we have in Egypt, other than the fact that FGM exists, is that it is only the Muslim Brotherhood that is misogynist. That one year that we had Morsi in power, we had a lot of Egyptians saying, "Oh my god, these Muslim Brothers are going to take us back to the Dark Ages." The Muslim Brotherhood were at least honest in their misogyny. The women of the Muslim Brotherhood would say things like "a man is the head of the house," "a man has the right to polygamy," "FGM is beautification." They were honest in their misogyny. So I could see it coming.

The military is misogynist, but they are not honest in their misogyny. Egyptian society is incredibly misogynist. I know that military rule is not going to save us.

Morsi is gone now, so at least we know that the misogyny that exists isn't because of the Muslim Brotherhood, but because of the way culture and religion are tied in together. So I think we have to be honest about this in Egypt.

When it comes to things like the UN and all these meetings that Egypt goes to and presents this very kind of secular progressive face, the lies of the military and the regime have to be called out. There is no way somebody like Sisi is going to be our feminist hero. We know that.

JOANNE MYERS: I want to thank you both, Naureen and Mona, for a very stimulating discussion.

Audio

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Video Clips

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