

# Gendering the millennium: globalising women

*Haleh Afshar*

---

## Introduction

As the twentieth century came to a close in the West, the Muslims were three-quarters of the way into their fourteenth solar and in the first decade of their fifteenth lunar century. The ancient Persians would have been three-quarters of the way through their second millennium, and the ancient Chinese and Egyptians well into their third. Thus, as the differing conceptions of time move on in different places, it is worth looking at the vast distances that divide women across the globe, even as they are coming ever closer together in the global workforce.

The West is of course mesmerised by the proximity of the global village and the expanding links through the airways and networks that make communication a matter of an instant and help to create an almost unified world vision. But that vision is one that is firmly rooted in the West, and dominated by the Anglophones and their values. It has less and less time and space for those who fall outside its embrace. Hence, paradoxically, the ability to communicate may well have opened more avenues for misunderstandings, over-simplifications, and stereotypical conceptions of 'others'. Yet global communication could have created the global vision which would have shown the way forward for feminised employment. There were reasons to hope for the emergence of solidarity among industrial workers; the experiences of women working in the factories of transnational corporations mirrored the fragmented labour processes that had dominated the work patterns of the industrialised countries. But the relocation of some production processes to the home (Mitter 1986), and of other industrial processes to the Free Trade Zones

(FTZs), created divides and competition rather than unity. Yet it would have been easy to see that, even for those who have been integrated into the global market, the twenty-first century does not seem to be laden with hope and peace. There is a continuous erosion of rights and entitlements at the margins of the global economy; and an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor that has not been helped by the relentless penetration of capitalism all over the world. The failure of modernisation and subsequently of globalisation has in turn helped to create a backlash and a return towards imaginary pasts that are extremely problematic – not least for women, who are both an important sector of workers in the global economy and also number significantly among the supporters of those who are returning to alternative views of the world, faith, and eternity (Afshar and Barrientos 1999).

To understand the ideological as well as the economic gap, and the reaction to its impact, we must move away from the blanket assumption that by the end of the twentieth century the world was no more than a global village with a considerable degree of homogeneity and integration. What requires analysis is not so much the premise, but the method of assessment, which uses the same tools and the same calculations in the hope of obtaining similar results. Many Third World feminists have long argued that it would be preferable to consider the specificities of situations (Afshar 1985). What I wish to address, however, is the interactions between the global and the local, and the divisions and counter-actions that have arisen directly as a reaction against the globalisation of cultures, values, moralities, and economies. Islamism in general and Iranian Islamification in particular are located very much at this juncture. Despite rising prosperity, undeniable economic growth, and rapid modernisation in the 1960s and 1970s, there has since been what may be called a 'backlash' in much of the Muslim world. This was seen by its participants as a 'return' to their roots and a 'rejection' of global capitalism and consumerism. This rejection has had the unequivocal support of a number of intellectual women who, in the knowledge of what feminism had to offer, chose the Islamic alternative (Afshar 1998; Karam 1998).

## Globalisation

Globalisation is occurring in a complex world that has undergone rapid changes over the past decades. The entire concept of production has moved away from the 'just in case' model to the 'just in time' one

(Mitter 1986), with women regarded as a flexible, mobile, and cheap resource, increasingly pulled into production lines that stretch from the smallest agricultural producers to the largest of world factories – all producing for a global market. The various analyses of this process reflect the difficulties of coming to terms with its multidimensional nature and of containing it within the formal boundaries of theory and grand narratives. From a development perspective, much of the analysis of globalisation has been built on the overarching influence of the expansion of transnational corporations (TNCs) and the new international division of labour.

From an economic perspective, globalisation needs to be seen in the context of structural adjustment and stabilisation, which, through the policy of conditionality adopted by the IMF and the World Bank, have affected most developing countries over the past decade. These policies forced many countries into an economic and political straightjacket that would integrate them into the global process. The effect of these policies on women has been profound. As the consequences of structural adjustment have become institutionalised in the global development process, the coping strategies developed by women in times of crisis have now become embedded in their daily lives. These measures are far from simple, and the analysis must separate out the layers that make up the contradictory ways in which globalisation has affected women at different levels and in different countries.

Discussions of the advance of globalisation have on the whole concentrated on the industrial dimension, and the inability of capitalism to 'develop' equally. The main focus has tended to be on the specific localities where TNCs have operated, and on the specific effects of industrialisation and the increase of industrial employment for certain groups of women in developing countries. But the all-embracing tendencies within the process of globalisation must not be accepted without analysing its effects on non-industrial employment and economic activity, as well as on different political ideologies in different countries. Some analyses of global commodity chains have moved beyond industry as the main focus, and feminist writers have begun disaggregating the specificities of women's experiences (Afshar and Barrientos 1999). Globalisation has also been analysed from the political, spatial, and physical standpoint of uneven development. One view is to see it as a necklace connecting centres of consumer affluence to localities of production that are strung around the world, acting as links in the global chain (Amin 1997). This approach also takes a global view of the

process of uneven development; a process in which the winners and losers are now distributed across the world, where the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, and the gendered wage gap is yet to close. Thus globalisation links 'world managers' to those whom they manage and permits instant contact and immediate response to market needs (Frobel et al. 1980). It also creates both telecommunicative and electronic interactions that keep a permanently open window through which the élites may observe one another. The proliferation of satellite and cable communications also provides the masses with the voyeuristic opportunity to watch the rich at play on the large and small screen. The only benefits that result for the poor are more colourful dreams and aspirations, and moments of oblivion to ease their long days of work.

## Revivalism

But the global peep-show has not resulted in universal enchantment with the West and its values. In many ways, the globalisation of work and poverty and the failure of paid employment to liberate women have accelerated disillusionment with industrialisation and modernisation, and helped to create a backlash against the West and its values. This is particularly evident in the Middle East. Women have been among the high-profile supporters of what has been called 'fundamentalism'; a word that was coined to explain a Christian phenomenon and which does not translate into Arabic or Persian. For Muslims, the movement is understood to be a radical revivalist phenomenon, returning to the sources to regain a better understanding of morality and probity, and to secure a return to a more human way of life.

There are large numbers of women who feel that Islam is inherently pro-women. They claim that much of what Islamic teaching is about is similar, though preferable, to what feminists have been asking for and not getting for more than a century, the world over.

It is such women who in countries like Iran, Egypt, and Turkey actively support Islamification (Afshar 1998; Gole 1996; Karam 1998). These are not ignorant or 'backward' so-called 'traditionalists'. Often they are intelligent, Western-educated intellectuals who have thought the problems through and have come to the conclusion that Islam may deliver what feminism has not, despite appearances to the contrary (Franks, forthcoming). They have engaged critically with Western feminist analyses of women and their positions within society and the family and they may reject some of the solutions offered by white,

middle-class, Western women. They argue that a different and preferable form of liberation can be found by returning to the sources of Islam. In the post-modern deconstructing phase of feminisms, at the threshold of the next Christian millennium, it is possible to look more closely at the arguments that these women present and without the blinkers of prejudice, whether male or Western or both. This is not an easy task when all too often women from both the East and the West tend to think of each other in the prejudiced, oversimplified terms popularised by the mass media.

Islamist women began expressing their concern about what they saw as the failure of Western feminism, which, after all the years of continuous struggle, has offered women the opportunity to be more like men. While academia ponders on the problems of masculinity, the workplace in much of the West continues to a large extent to work 'man-hours' and employ 'manpower' to 'man' the desks and the factories. But the labour market is no panacea. To succeed, women must be better than men, work longer hours, and be wedded to their jobs. Even then they cannot go far (Rahnavard, n.d.). Most women get drafted into badly paid, part-time, dead-end jobs. After all, they should think themselves lucky to get any pay at all for doing the same jobs that they do at home for nothing. The assumption is that their first priority is and should be their unpaid domestic work. In any case, sooner or later even those women who do succeed hit the glass ceiling. Taking this simplistic perspective, Islamist women argue that feminists fail as quasi-men and also fail as women. Much of this failure is because most women, world wide, choose to become mothers at some point, and most employers and governments brand them as mothers forever.

Islamist women have taken a position that can now be contextualised within the wider post-modern feminist analysis. They contend that the quest for equality has failed because it has not recognised the differences that exist between men and women, and the differences that exist between women of different classes, creeds, and cultures. They prefer the Islamic alternative that recognises that women are sometimes young, married, and mothers – and often old, freed of domesticity, and potential participants in the public domain (Afkhani 1995; Afshar 1994 and 1998; Ahmed 1992; Karam 1998). They argue that in their struggles to extract equal rights from men, feminists have fallen into the trap of becoming failed men.

Muslims, it is contended, need no such struggle, since the laws of Islam as stated in the Koran are God-given. Women are recognised as

different and valued as such. They have non-negotiable rights to be paid as wives and mothers and to be respected as women. Since the inception of the faith, marriage in Islam has been a contractual agreement between consenting partners. No marriage can be consummated without the payment of an agreed fee, *mehrieh*, to the bride. What is more, marriage does not have to be a life-sentence and an eternal prison. It is a contract that provides a way out for those who find it difficult, by making divorce legitimate. Of course, men do better when it comes to divorce. They have the unilateral right to initiate divorce. After all, even Islam is a patriarchal faith. Nevertheless, once marriage becomes a matter of formal contract, then women can stipulate conditions that make divorce far from easy. And it is not only elite women who can safeguard their marriages through the contract. Many years ago, when I was working in an Iranian village, a sad old peasant came to me for advice. He had married a difficult wife and was desperate to divorce her. But to do so he had to repay her *mehrieh*. Like many Iranian women, she had agreed the consummation sum but had deferred the payment until such time that the husband wished to divorce her. His difficulty was that she had stipulated that he should pay her a pillowcase full of flies' wings. The old man had been killing flies for nearly 40 years and was yet to fill the pillow!

A Muslim husband is also duty-bound to keep his wife in the style to which she is accustomed. Although 'kept', Muslim women do not lose their identity on marriage, nor have they ever lost their independent economic rights and entitlements. They have never become legal chattel and have always retained what is theirs. Although they inherit half as much as their brothers, Islamist women argue that what is theirs is theirs alone and that they are also entitled to have half of what is the man's.

Muslim women have for 14 centuries been legally entitled to inherit as daughters and as sisters. In addition, Muslims do not regard motherhood as an unpaid and de-skilling job. Muslim mothers must be 'maintained' and paid for suckling their babies. These are God-given rights that date back 1400 years. So while feminists in the West were fighting for wages for housework, which they are yet to receive, Iranian women instituted parliamentary legislation to ensure that they retain what is theirs: the *ojratolmessle* (Afshar 1998).

Even the much-derided polygamy is not always as terrible as might have been thought (Dennis 1991). The arrival of a second wife who assumes a domestic role may enable a first wife to concentrate on her own commercial activities.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that by the start of the twenty-first century Islamist women are returning to their roots, re-discovering Islam and demanding their rights. They are disillusioned with the undifferentiated quest for equality. They present a different form of feminism: one that is rooted in a critique of the priorities selected by mainstream Western struggles for women's liberation. They argue that the road to success for women in the West is through their bodies. When something does not sell, when a drink, a car, even a credit card is to be foisted on to the unsuspecting public, the advertisers drape a half-naked woman around it and parade her across the screens, the walls, and the lamp-posts. Women have become part and parcel of the advertising process. But it is only certain women, the ones with the longest legs, the slimmest hips, the sexiest bodies, who can make the grade. Meanwhile, ordinary women the world over compare themselves with these stunning examples and 'fail'. So the liberation process has created an almost universal hunger for the beauty myth. Women are forever dieting, forever painting their faces, forever changing their hair colour, the colour of their clothes, the shapes of their eyebrows. Nor is there any space for them to grow old gracefully. The pursuit of youth and beauty creates generation after generation of anorexic, disillusioned women who punish themselves for not being beautiful enough.

Islamist women believe that there could be an alternative: women could choose to cover themselves. They argue that the veil, which is not an Islamic requirement, can help them become human beings rather than objects. They wear the veil to claim the gaze and to become the ones who observe the world. In a world where men set the fashions and standards, and where men take the photographs and make the films, the only way to subvert the process is to don the veil and become minds rather than bodies.

Of course, Islamification is far more attractive in theory than it is in practice. Women choose Islam because they feel that it liberates them, allows them to have proper life-cycles, and to be rewarded for what they do. Undoubtedly, there is such a thing as Islamist feminism (Afshar 1998; Karam 1998), but it must engage with Islamist patriarchies. All too often, Muslim men in governments fail to oblige. As soon as they come to power, they cover the women up and opt for polygamy (Afshar 1982); neither of which is, strictly speaking, a divinely sanctioned practice. Islamist women argue that the God of Islam was never misogynist, and that the laws of Islam cannot be changed by the wishes of the men. So when Islamist governments come to power, the long journey to gain Islamic rights for Islamist feminists begins.

## Islamist feminism in Iran

The case of Iranian women over the past 20 years is a clear example of what the process can mean. Although women were at the forefront of the revolutionary movement, they were the first to be eliminated from all positions of power after the revolution. The preamble to the post-revolutionary Constitution clearly stated that men and women were not equal. The new government 'freed' women of the objectification imposed on them by Western-style liberalisation – by shutting them up in their homes. They were given the 'critical duty' of motherhood, and placed firmly in the bosom of the family. They became guardians of the family, which was declared to be the fundamental basis of the Islamic Republic (Article 10).

Having domesticated them by law, the theocracy began an enforced exclusion of women from the public domain. In March 1979, one month after his return to Iran, Khomeini sacked all female judges and ordered the compulsory veiling of all women. In May that year, co-education was banned. In June, married women were barred from attending school, and the government began closing down workplace nurseries. In July, seaside resorts were sexually segregated, and women were flogged in public for transgression of the new rules. Morality codes were imposed, and for the first time women were executed on charges of prostitution and moral degradation. By October, the government was dismantling the checks placed on men by revising personal laws; men regained the unreciprocated right to polygamy, to unilateral divorce at will, and the right to prevent their wives from entering into paid employment. The official age of marriage for women was reduced from 18 to 13 years, and men regained the automatic custody of their children after divorce.

Universities were closed for years to cleanse them of corrupt Western ideologies. When they were re-opened, women were excluded from most faculties. They were to be herded into appropriate feminine subjects, such as literature – but not art, which meant standing about in the dangerous outdoors and looking too closely at undesirable objects!

The way forward looked dark indeed. But it is at such times that Islamist women are glad to have inalienable rights given to them by the God of Islam. In Islam there are no intermediaries between people and their God. The religious establishment is respected for its knowledge, but is ascribed no sanctity. Thus women can, and do, legitimately set about discovering the laws of God for themselves, without the help (or rather the hindrance) of male theologians and their teachings. No human being



can legislate against God's wishes, and so for the past 20 years Islamist Iranian women have strenuously worked to prove that what men have been imposing in the name of Islam is not what God has decreed.

They have accepted the veil and thus become the public face of Islamification. But they have successfully used their own interpretations of the Koranic laws to regain access to almost all university faculties. They did so by demonstrating that Islam demands of all Muslims to be educated to the best of their ability. They have regained much ground in the judiciary and have made divorce and polygamy subject to rulings by the Family Courts. The reduced age of marriage is now being contested as a misunderstanding of what true Islamic teachings are about.

The successful battle for Islamic rights by women has had unexpected outcomes. Since they are the standard-bearers of the faith and the public face of Islamism in Iran, women demand their Islamic rights absolutely legitimately in the name of the faith and the revolution. It is hard to brand them as subversive oppositional groups. The élite Islamist women have emerged from the very core of the revolution; they are often closely related to leading theologians, and their arguments are always firmly rooted in the Koranic teachings. They are fighting for Islam. Nevertheless, what they are doing is opening up a path towards much greater participation by civil society in Islamic politics. They have created a legitimate form of opposition to draconian measures that cannot be easily denied by the theocracy. The need to gain internal legitimacy and establish an international credibility, particularly in the eyes of the Islamic Middle Eastern countries, has made the State gradually more responsive to women's demands.

Women have managed to demonstrate their centrality in Iranian politics. They are determined to extract a price for becoming the emblem of Islamification. They want to dictate the meaning of the Islam that their veiled presence has upheld: it is something to aspire to and something that accommodates their needs. They have refused to be brow-beaten by the more misogynistic of the religious leaders and have insisted that the revolution should pay them their due for both supporting it from the beginning and for becoming an exemplar to the rest of the Islamic world. Iranian women have constructed a multifaceted Islam which is increasingly delivering what elsewhere could have been called feminist demands. Elite Islamist women have set up new standards in the light of the lives of the women of Islam at the inception of the faith: standards that the State has had to meet in order to live up to its own slogans and avowals of fairness and revolutionary concerns.

In the absence of organised political parties, Iranian women, both secular and religious, have found common cause and have acted as an important political force in the more recent elections. They have bridged the large gap that divides the believers from the non-believers, by fighting together for the cause of women. The road has been long and hard. But they remain indomitable. Despite Khomeini's opposition to female suffrage in the 1960s, after the revolution he and the post-revolutionary State recognised the valuable contributions that women had made to the cause and rewarded them by lowering the age of suffrage to 16 years. Women have used this right wisely. From the very beginning, the Islamic parliament, Majlis, has always had a few female representatives. In the 1990s, however, the women's vote gained momentum, and the women Representatives, who eventually increased to more than a dozen, managed to push through a series of laws that at least firmed up the ground and in some cases opened new opportunities for women. Throughout, the arguments for women's liberation have been couched in the language of Islam, and every demand has been backed by the relevant textual religious evidence. They have created a new, dynamic Islam, specifically suited to their needs. They have accepted that they are different from men, but have contested fiercely that in no way can that difference be interpreted as women's inferiority to men. Their arguments have been both scholarly and politically astute, and they have obliged many of the leading male theologians and politicians to reconsider their views and their politics. It is no longer acceptable publicly to denounce women as inferior. As the presidential elections of 1997 clearly demonstrated, those, like the contender Nateq Nuri, who ignored women or denied their rights, lost out. Against the expectations of the theoreticians and the political architects of the revolution, Iranian women are now at the centre of the political stage. President Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Khatami recognised this reality and in his inaugural speech, in August 1997, declared his commitment to furthering the cause of women in Iran. Eventually he gave a vice-presidential post to a woman, the first to have reached such heights since the revolution.

The struggle has been long and hard and the religious establishment has done its best to deny women's rights. But there have been some remarkable supporters among the Islamic scholars, such as Hojatoleslam Seyed Mohsen Saeedzadeh. One of the best revolutionary scholars, he teaches in the holy city of Qum. But the religious establishment, unable to silence women, has resorted to arresting Saeedzadeh. At the time of writing, he was under arrest awaiting trial by the religious courts!

So although Islamist women in Iran have managed to extract much from their government, they, in common with most women around the world, have not succeeded in breaking down the patriarchal power structure that rules over them. Even the laws of the God of Islam, who must be obeyed by all Muslims, have all too often been interpreted by men against the interests of women.

## Challenges for feminists, questions for development agencies

Nevertheless, Iranian women's relative success in their own country has posed some difficult questions for some feminists and developmentalists who wish to be advocate for and facilitate – rather than impose – aid. It is relatively difficult to contextualise these changes within the mainstream intellectual and economic frameworks. It could be argued that in the domain of politics the need to legitimise universal positions in terms of particular conditions has enabled women to re-construct the Islamic discourse radically and to carve out not only a place, but actually a central position, within both the theory and practice of Islamic politics in Iran. This specific trajectory, however, does not lend itself easily to mainstream analytical forms and, like much of the more recent fragmented feminist experiences, must be located firmly within its own historical and geographical context. For development agencies who have a commitment to empowerment and respect for diversity (Afshar 1998; Rowlands 1997), it becomes essential to move away from centralised uniform positions to differentiated ones that are formed according to the exigencies of time and place and the perceived needs of different peoples (Afshar 1985).

Thus, although globalisation has linked the world economically and has facilitated easier intellectual exchanges among the international intelligentsia, the gaps between cultures, histories, and millennia have not been bridged. But despite the wide disparities, what allows a degree of optimism is the ability of many women worldwide to recognise and accept their differences, while retaining their solidarity in the struggle against patriarchy – and maybe, even, masculinities.

## References

- Afkhami, M. (ed.)** (1995) *Faith and Freedom*, London: I.B. Tauris
- Afshar, Haleh** (1982) 'Khomeini's teachings and their implications for women' in Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh (eds.) *The Shadow of Islam*, London: Zed Books
- Afshar, Haleh (ed.)** (1985) *Women, Work and Ideology in the Third World*, London: Tavistock
- Afshar, Haleh** (1994) *Why Fundamentalism? Iranian Women and their Support for Islam*, Department of Politics Working Paper No. 2, York: University of York
- Afshar, Haleh** (1998) *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case Study*, Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Afshar, Haleh and Stephanie Barrientos (eds.)** (1999) *Women, Globalisation and Fragmentation in the Developing World*, Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Ahmed, Leila** (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam*, London: Yale University Press
- Amin, Samir** (1997) *Capitalism in the Age of Globalisation*, London: Zed Books
- Dennis, Carlyne** (1991) 'Constructing a "career" under conditions of crisis and structural adjustment: the survival strategies of Nigerian women' in Haleh Afshar (ed.) *Women, Development and Survival in the Third World*, Harlow: Longman
- Franks, Myfanwy** (forthcoming) *Women and Revivalism*, Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Frobel, F., J. Heinrichs and O. Kreye** (1980) *The New International Division of Labour*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Gole, Nilufer** (1996) *The Forbidden Modern: Civilisation and Veiling*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
- Mitter, Swasti** (1986) *Common Fate, Common Bond: Women in the Global Economy*, London: Pluto Press
- Karam, Azza. M.** (1998) *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*, Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Rahnavard, Zahra** (no date) *Toloueh Zaneh Mosalman*, Tehran: Mahboubeh Publication
- Rowlands, Jo** (1997) *Questioning Empowerment*, Oxford: Oxfam