AMERICAN GLOBAL FEMINISTS: CHAMPIONS OF EQUALITY OR CULTURAL CHAUVINISTS?

Shari Stone-Mediatore

The rights of women in fundamentalist Muslim regimes has recently become a cause célebre for Americans. Oprah Winfrey, for instance, has helped rally support for Amina Lawal, the Nigerian woman who, upon becoming pregnant outside of marriage, was sentenced to death by stoning, while Laura Bush and Nicholas Kristof have added their voices to the many feminists who decry misogyny in the Middle East. However, while everyone from Oprah to Mrs. Bush seem to agree on the need to advance women's welfare worldwide, fierce dispute remains—even amongst feminists—on the problem of how to balance respect for women's rights with respect for cultural differences.

How can Americans concerned about women across the globe adjudicate the seeming tension between promoting the rights of women and respecting diverse cultural traditions? Political theorists Adamantia Pollis and Peter Schwab warn that a focus on universal rights risks "cultural ethnocentrism," whereas philosopher Susan Okin fears that "respecting cultural differences" has become "a euphemism for restricting or denying women's rights." It may be, however, that the choice between respect for rights or respect for culture is a false one. I argue here that both women's rights and cultural sensitivity are advanced when we attend to marginalized elements within cultural communities and when, aided by the insights of marginalized groups, we confront the complicity of our own lives with other women's oppression.

Women's Rights as Universal Human Rights

In her recent essay, "Feminism, Women's Human Rights, and Cultural Differences," Okin argues that universal women's human rights should always trump culture. Women-specific universal rights are necessary, Okin and fellow women's rights advocates argue, because neither the 1948 U.N. Declaration of Human Rights nor the 1979 U.N. Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have stopped governments from turning a blind eye to abuses including forced marriages of minors, "honor killing," rape in war, female genital mutilation and women's unequal access to education and healthcare.

The problem here is not only the common tendency of governments to embrace rights more in rhetoric than in practice but, more fundamentally, a male model of rights. The model of rights t that emerged in the 1700s and that still informs human rights doctrine presumes that the rights bearer is a male head of household. Thus it emphasizes the right to be free from state intrusion in one's "private" realm of family, marriage and religion, but

ignores the pressing concerns of many women, who are threatened less by government meddling in their family and religious practices than by family and religious practices themselves and by abusive husbands and fathers. Keep-the-state-out-of-my-private-life rights also fail many women (along with economically marginalized people) because many women require for their autonomy, not simply that the state leave them alone, but that the state help to provide basic goods and services, such as education, healthcare and childcare.

In light of the male bias of current rights doctrine, Okin and fellow women's rights advocates seek "women's human rights." Such rights, they argue, must have explicit priority over cultural and religious practices and must compel governments to intervene when necessary to protect women's dignity. This approach was endorsed at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, whose Platform for Action included a "no cultural exemptions clause" stating that: "Any harmful aspect of certain traditional, customary or modern practices that violates the rights of women should be prohibited and eliminated."

Okin criticizes other academic feminists for being at loggerheads with this burgeoning women's rights movement. According to Okin, the emphasis that postmodern and postcolonial feminists place on the differences amongst women is often "exaggerated and carried to absurdity." Their fixation on women's differences, she claims, impedes women's unity and is "hardly conducive to the framing of women's rights as universal human rights." In fact, however, it may be Okin's criticism of her difference-sensitive colleagues that is exaggerated.

Attending to Cultural Differences

The "anti-universalism" decried by Okin is exemplified by Pollis and Schwab in their influential essay, "Human Rights: A Western Construct with Limited Applicability." Despite the provocative title, the authors do not reject human rights, although they do argue that "human rights" and "human dignity" mean different things in different contexts. As noble as individual rights may sound to some of us, they warn, such rights "may not be successfully applicable to non-western areas," where the culture emphasizes the individual's commitment to the group or where economic security is more urgent than civil liberties.

Pollis and Schwab make a compelling case that, when scholars and policymakers declare "human rights," we must take care that our rights doctrine is consonant with the everyday moral culture of the community in which it is applied; otherwise, declared rights have little force or meaning for the people we expect to enforce and to enjoy them. Feminists have long recognized this insight, for they have worked, not only for legal and political rights, but for educational and cultural practices that treat women as autonomous and dignified beings. As Aquila al-Hashimi, one of the few women on the Iraqi Governing Council, put it before she was assassinated, "[c]ulture creates laws, not the other way around."

Less convincing is Pollis and Schwab's claim that political rights may not even be appropriate when poverty makes economic goals urgent. I doubt that their characterization of political rights as expendable in some Third World contexts would sit well with political dissidents across the globe who languish in jail due to lack of protection for free speech. Neither would it be amenable to Dunstan Wai, who argues (in Pollis and Schwab's own anthology) that political rights, including the right to select leaders, to remove abusive

chiefs, and to express political criticism, were integral to traditional African societies and that, when some African leaders deem political rights "foreign constructs," they merely try to rationalize their tyranny.

If, however, Pollis and Schwab's affirmation of "alternative conceptions of human rights and human dignity" comes perilously close to defending despots, this is not the intended nor necessary implication of their analysis. Their intention is, rather, to strengthen human rights by highlighting the variety of ethical cultures and concerns that give meaning and force to rights doctrine in everyday life. Certainly, we cannot accept cultural difference as an excuse for misogyny or tyranny. Nevertheless, neither can we ignore different cultural traditions in our articulation of human rights, for to do so risks making rights doctrine alienating to the people who are supposed to enjoy and enforce rights on a daily basis.

In addition, even if we cannot accept Pollis and Schwab's undervaluing of political rights, we cannot ignore their insight about the importance of economic rights. Confirming their concern, Harvard medical anthropologist Paul Farmer identifies poverty as the single greatest threat to human rights worldwide. This has particular relevance to women, given that poverty hits women hardest and that even gender-specific abuses such as rape, forced marriage, and women's unequal access to education vary along class lines, taking their greatest toll on economically marginalized women.

Unfortunately, however, while Okin fails to pursue either the urgency of economic struggle for many women or the differences among the concerns of differently located women, Pollis and Schwab are content merely to recognize such differences, without relating such differences to the international division of labor and resources.

Redefining Women's Rights

In their pathbreaking anthology, Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, transnational feminists Angela Gilliam and Chandra Talpade Mohanty pursue women's "differences" a step further: They examine how women's oppression is affected not only by cultural differences but by differences of power in the global arena. Moreover, whereas Okin and Pollis allege to speak, respectively, for "the women's movement" and "Nonwestern" people, Mohanty and Gilliam address the activism of specific Third World women, whom they locate within specific national and transnational power hierarchies.

By examining the struggles of specific Third World women, Mohanty and Gilliam demonstrate the inseparability of feminist politics from a confrontation with multi-tiered transnational power hierarchies. For instance, the women of Bolivian mining towns who have organized under "Housewives Committees" suffer as women in terms of not being able to afford milk for their children, working a 19-hour "double-day" to supplement their husband's meager wages, and facing eviction from their company homes when their husbands die from silicosis or mine accidents. Their hardships are related to the general undervaluing of women's labor but also to the history of exploitation of miners by mine-owners, the exploitation of Bolivia's resources by transnational corporations, and the neoliberal policies of international lending agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund, which have pressured the Bolivian government to restrict credit and subsidies, increase taxes, and suppress unions and peasant councils. Regrettably, when a representative of the

committees, Domitila Barrios de Chungara, attended the 1979 U.N. Women's conference in Mexico and raised issues of imperialism and exploitation, she was accused by North American and middle-class women at the conference of caring too much about "men's issues."

Mohanty and Gilliam have challenged U.S. and European women to move beyond the narrow vision of feminism expressed at the Mexico conference and to engage with the multifaceted activism of Third World women. Reckoning with the interrelated ethnic, class, and gender dimensions of Third World women's struggles demands that feminists in more privileged positions take seriously not only gender-specific "women's rights" but also broader social struggles, including struggles that can divide women. It likewise demands the acknowledgment that broader relations of exploitation and oppression will not disappear simply by empowering women.

The divergence of this transnational feminist approach from Okin's approach is apparent in their different responses to female genital mutilation and its white critics. Okin praises U.S. critic Fran Hosken for bringing international attention to genital cutting. Gilliam and Mohanty, by contrast, criticize Hosken and her colleagues for their "singleminded preoccupation" with the issue, by which they reduce Third World women to helpless victims, ignore broader health and economic issues, and sometimes compel African and Arab women long critical of genital cutting to defend the practice against Western cultural chauvinism. Hosken, Gilliam suggests, might heed the advice of the women she seeks to help by broadening her critique to include a study of labor exploitation by transnational corporations.

In effect, when Mohanty and Gilliam rethink feminism in light of Third World women's complex struggles, they remind us that "women's rights" are inseparable from broad social change. Contrary to Okin's fears, their approach does not thwart but, on the contrary, helps to strengthen global feminist alliances, for it prepares those of us in more privileged positions to resist our own community's domination over other women. It promotes the kind of activism recalled by Gilliam in which North Americans, in reaction to Nestle's misleading advertisements for infant formula in India and Africa, boycotted Nestle products. In a more recent and closer to home example of this approach, Ohio Wesleyan students supported women (and men) sweatshop
workers by collaborating with the Workers' Rights Consortium to help workers to press their demands for better working conditions in the companies that produce university clothing.

Rethinking 'Culture'

Uma Narayan recasts "culture" in light of the same complex of power relations of concern to Mohanty and Gilliam. "Cultures," Narayan explains, are not fixed entities but evolving, multifaceted phenomena that state policies as well as our own everyday activities continually endorse or modify. When religious extremists demand "loyalty to culture," when popular writers (such as Nicholas Kristof and Samuel Huntington) counterpose "Western" to "Nonwestern" cultures, and even when well-meaning critics like Pollis and Schwab seek "respect for culture," each of them reduce heterogeneous and amorphous cultural communities to a select few elements on which they fixate as "the culture."

The oversimplification of culture, Narayan warns, has harsh consequences for women, for

it leads us to identify "the culture" with those practices promoted by powerful social groups, namely upper-class men. Mohanty offers a case in point: In colonial India, wealthy Indians and British colonialists effectively invented "Indian culture" when they found it in their common interests to embrace a practice, which had always been questionable under Hindu law, in which widows were forced to re-marry within their deceased husband's family. (Their common interest was in keeping land-ownership stable.) When Indian widows challenged the practice, the British rejected the widows' demands and sanctified the long-contested practice on the grounds of "respecting Indian custom".

The escalating violence against women in post-war Iraq underscores the dangers of confusing dominant practices and ideologies with "the culture." On the surface, the misogynist practices, which include laws inherited from Saddam permitting "honor killing" as well as newly rampant kidnaping, gang-rape and sex-slavery which is denied by police and ignored by the occupying powers, seems to be a function of the patriarchal culture. However, according to Amnesty International writer Laura Sandler, the outwardly "patriarchal culture" may be less an effect of cultural tradition than of political upheaval. In the 1950s and 60s, Iraqi women worked as professionals for equal pay and headed government ministries. Saddam shifted from a fairly secular and gender-equal legal system to the sexist laws only in the 1990s, in a seeming attempt to regain the support of male populations demoralized from the Iran-Iraq war. U.S. sanctions and the recent invasion have exacerbated Iraqi men's humiliation and their consequent need to "control something" (as one Iraqi man told Sandler), which is often women.

Conclusion

Neither "respect for women's rights" nor "respect for culture" provides an adequate agenda for global feminism. Calls to respect "Nonwestern culture" often ignore women within those cultures, while calls to respect "women's rights" can marginalize the struggles of women whose social justice work does not fit the stereotype of "women's rights." Nevertheless, if we consider the legitimate concerns of both women's-rights and cultural-respect advocates, certain more effective approaches to cross-border feminism suggest themselves.

Both Okin's concern to eliminate culturally sanctioned abuses against women and Pollis and Schwab's concern to avoid imposing ethnocentric moral standards, although seemingly in conflict, converge in their commitment to rethink "rights" in response to the struggles of people whose concerns have been marginalized in current rights doctrine. Their common insight, despite their differences, is that human rights institutions must be continually overhauled in light of the struggles of people whom current institutions fail.

When people overlooked by current rights institutions take the foreground, radically new perspectives on human rights will surely follow. For instance, as both Gilliam and Pollis indicate, different communities demand distinct rights. Variation in what counts as a human right occurs not, however (as Pollis and Schwab sometimes suggest), because some cultures can dispense with individual rights, but because (as all of the above authors at least implicitly recognize) some people's circumstances make certain needs particularly pressing. Okin stresses the importance of gender-specific human rights for women, but the list of group-specific human rights goes on: Indian widows have demanded rights to marriage

choice, the people of
Cochabamba, Bolivia have claimed rights to local water, Chiapas farmers land rights, Native Americans fishing rights, U.S. workers the right to unionize, indigenous communities the right to cultural diversity, and indigenous farmers the right to continue traditional methods of saving and sharing seeds. Insofar as such conditions are essential in order for some people to lead autonomous and dignified lives, they are both group-specific and serious enough to warrant international and state recognition as "rights."

In addition, the struggles of people whose basic needs remain unmet by current legal institutions underscore the need to build the social infrastructure that can substantiate legally proclaimed rights. Pollis and Schwab anticipate this need, when they suggest the importance of economic rights, such as rights to freedom from hunger. Significantly, such rights do not merely limit the state's jurisdiction over the individual or dictate individual legal protections but serve, rather, as guides for active social policy-making and social change. This radical approach to rights has been pursued by various contemporary social movements; from the Mexican campesinos who are fighting lumber companies for their "birthright" to the forests, to the maquiladora workers who are suing a U.S. owned company for their rights to back pay, from the thousands of indigenous farmers who protested in Cancún for rights to food sovereignty, to the tens of thousands of U.S. immigrants who are advocating for workers' rights regardless of citizenship status.

The linking of rights to broad social change implies, furthermore, the need for U.S. feminists to build alliances with Third World feminist activists. Such alliances require U.S. feminists to learn about others' situations, defer authority to others, acknowledge our own entanglement in relations of oppression, and devote energy to collective struggle. Members of the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN) demonstrated the power of such cross-border alliances when they traveled to Matamoros to meet with the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO), the Border Women Workers Committee, some of whom had taken the Tennessee women's former jobs when their company moved south. After attending CFO meetings, touring the community, and sharing stories, TIRN members returned to the states with ties to specific Mexican women activists and a commitment to advocate for Matamoros families against polluting U.S.-owned companies.

Effective realization of rights also demands favorable cultural practices. Regrettably, Pollis and Schwab as well as Okin tend to treat culture as fixed, something to which we either accommodate or which our "universal rights" confront head on. But Narayan demonstrates that culture, too, is an evolving phenomenon which we have responsibility to evaluate and revise. This insight is put into practice by the Iraqi feminist group Al Amal, who promote everyday practices in which women command respect and learn independence from men.

Ultimately, American feminists can pursue a broad-minded feminist agenda, and still respect other cultures, if we work with local feminist activists and if we remember, as Gilliam suggests, that social and cultural change begins at home. Thus, for instance, North Americans who are concerned about sexism in Saudi Arabia need not ignore this problem but might approach it with greater humility and self-scrutiny. Rather than follow Kristof (in his New York Times editorial) who derides Arab culture and asks Saudi women, "how [do you feel] about being repressed?," we might instead examine our own country's support for the current Saudi regime and our own consumption of Mideast oil, which underlies that

support.

Thus, when we recognize the many factors that affect women's rights and the many elements that make up culture, we can avoid the difficult choice between either respecting women's rights or respecting diverse cultures. We cannot, however, shirk the responsibility to scrutinize our own alleged moral certainty, our own state's role in political affairs across the globe, and our own social relationships and lifestyles.

Shari Stone-Mediatore teaches philosophy at Ohio Wesleyan University. *This essay is an abbreviated version of "Women's Rights and Cultural Differences" which appeared in* ***Studies in Practical Philosophy*** *4 (2).*