



**Women's Foreign Policy Group**  
**The Faces of Contemporary Islam: Practice, Theory, and Foreign Policy**  
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**Panel 3: Interpretations of Women's Rights and Realities for Muslim Women**

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**Madhavi Sunder**, University of California, Davis  
**Farzaneh Milani**, University of Virginia

Moderator: **Patricia Ellis**, President, Women's Foreign Policy Group

**Patricia Ellis:** In the interest of time, as you know, in your packets you have the full bios, so I am just going briefly to introduce the speakers in the order that they will speak and the order in which they are seated. Lila Abu-Lughod, who is from Columbia University and as a Carnegie Scholar has been working on the ethics of politics of Muslim women's rights in an international field. Next to Lila is Madhavi Sunder, who is from University of California Davis law school, currently at the University of Chicago Law School, and her research is on the new enlightenment – how Muslim women are bringing religion and culture out of the dark ages. And next to Madhavi is Farzaneh Milani, who is at the University of Virginia, and her research is on mapping the cultural geography of Iran – women, Islam, and mobility. And so Lila. Thank you.

**Lila Abu-Lughod:** Thank you, thank you Pat for putting together this conference and everybody else who has worked so hard on it and thank you for inviting me to be a part of it. And thank you all for coming to hear us talk with a great group of Carnegie scholars. Some of us know each other's work but some of us don't and many of us haven't had the chance to be together in the same room, so it's wonderful.

We've talked a lot about women so I'm a bit embarrassed to do it again but this is the topic of the panel, and I wanted to begin by talking about the kinds of images of women that circulate in the US and the West more generally, popular representations that are promoted by the media, although we've heard the media is more complicated and I know it is, but also has a bulk of power. And these images shape our thinking, our attitudes, and ultimately our policies towards the Muslim world. And I think they're dangerous, they're dangerous for us and I think they're dangerous for Muslim women. So as an anthropologist I've spent the last 30 years of my life working in the Middle East and particularly in Egypt and I've done field work in several different communities in Egypt,

I'm puzzled by these images whether they're visual or literary or pseudo-scholarly. One thinks of the forbidding white shrouds that cover inaccessible women in photos, or the women in black, often with only their eyes showing. I think you know the images I'm talking about, I didn't bring my PowerPoint.

They grace the covers of *The New York Times* magazine, *The Economist*, airline magazines, you know KLM, *National Geographic*, and these images illustrate articles that are on countries as diverse as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, or Iran even when the articles are not about women at all. And we all know Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*, what he pointed out in this study of the history and politics of western representations of the Muslim East, is that these images gain their authority by citing each other, referring to each other in a kind of endless chain that need not have anything to do with realities on the ground. They must be true we think, because they're so similar, they're so familiar, we've seen them so many times.

But, these images are quite limited, and they exhibit this kind of strange uniformity, and I think Susan has pointed out there are differences and we can maybe talk about that, but I think there is a very striking uniformity, and I think that uniformity makes us think that we're looking at a single culture or monolithic religion. They also present the Muslim woman as alien, different, distant, and unconnected to us. And through these forms of extreme and stylized covering they suggest that the Muslim woman is of course silent, or silenced, passive or oppressed. And of course we've already talked about the veil before but we can talk about it again if you'd like but I think the use of these images to advertise articles on different parts of the world send us a subliminal message that these parts of the world are defined by these women's un-freedom, symbolized by the veil, and you just have to think of an analogy. What if every article in a magazine in Pakistan on the US or Sweden or Italy were to be illustrated by a blonde woman in a bikini? We'd laugh. You know, that's so absurd, this stereotyping this is generalizing about Western women and about the West. But we're not so suspicious when we see yet another Muslim woman draped in black on the cover of a magazine talking about whatever. And I think these images are dangerous because they blind us to important realities about the Muslim world.

First of all the images, I think, hide from us the incredible variety of lives that Muslim women lead. We've already heard about some of those today but there are devout women who go out into the public sphere to do good works and who've taken to the mosques to educate themselves about their religion and their faith. But there are also women rappers, in t-shirts, who sing about the military occupation and police brutality. We were talking about that last night. There are wealthy women I'm sure you've seen them who shop for lingerie in Harrods in London covered in black. There are also hardworking peasant women raising sheep and chickens who wear modest homemade clothes and maybe get a pair of shoes once every five years. These women's lives and their aspirations and their values and their clothes of course differ wildly, but this variety never comes to mind when we think of the Muslim woman.

Now the second thing that these images blind us to is the things that we all share. Now this is very obvious but somehow I don't think we think about it enough the similarities across the borders. Don't Muslim women get scared when they hear the word cancer? Don't they want their children to thrive and be safe, don't they like to dance and sing? Don't they care about their clothing? They do. Don't they grieve when they lose loved ones, don't they feel pride in their accomplishments? Don't they feel humiliated when they're insulted? Of course there are differences in the exact circumstances we all live in and there are lots of differences in the ways we all cope with what life brings us but I don't think these fall neatly along lines of east and west, Muslim and non-Muslim.

And I've been researching – as part of my Carnegie project – a third thing these images blind us to, and that's the forms of connection, among us all in terms of women's rights. And one connection, or I guess failure, I could point to would be the inability to achieve gender equality or even safety for women either here or there (if there is a "here," if there is a "there"). It's intriguing to me how we're distracted by the sensationalized differences in appearance, dress and the kinds of horror stories that we're told, from thinking about the challenges that we still face here. The Women's Policy Group is probably one of the organizations working in light of the challenges we face here: significant wage gap, unequal representation in government and business, date rape, domestic violence. Poverty in the US, as you all know, is woman's issue with most families under the poverty line being headed by women. Our daughters have eating disorders and feel pressures to aspire to impossible body and beauty ideals. Congress never passed the ERA, the Equal Rights Amendment and even though 90% of UN member nations have ratified CEDAW the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, including most majority Muslim nations, the US has not ratified it.

Now I don't bring up these issues to excuse problems elsewhere but just to say: let's just think for a minute about the kinds of commonalities that exist. We have cultural values too, we have religious faith too we have failings in the arena of women's rights too.

But the really interesting connections that I'm studying are those that have to do with women's organized and individual struggles for rights and dignity. The images of Muslim women that we have don't even hint at the long existence of lively discussions and struggles about women's rights in all parts of the world where Muslims live. Elizabeth talked about some. It's as if only we are active and they are passive, except for those few exceptional women who make it into the media that just prove that all the rest of them are silent.

The Egyptian Feminist Union was formed in 1923, in 1907 a Muslim Bengali women activist wrote against seclusion and started girls' schools. In Iran they started girls' schools and in the 1950s and 60s various countries had what they called state feminism, guaranteeing equal access to schooling for girls, labor rights for working women, jobs for all college graduates irrespective of gender, paid maternity leave, and so forth. Egypt and Iraq were among these countries, and today in places like Egypt there are astonishing numbers of nongovernmental organizations devoted to women's issues and women's rights. Some of them share a language of rights with international organizations, and

some take funding from foreign sources. Others use a different language of rights, sometimes drawn from Islamic law and the Quran, and these organizations are formed, founded, and staffed by Muslim women. This is the way the world of women's rights is now. It's international, it's interconnected, and I think Madhavi Sunder is going to be talking more about some of these organizations so I won't say more about that.

But what interests me even more than women activists are ordinary women, and the variety of rights that they enjoy or invoke in their everyday lives. And I'm an anthropologist, that's the kind of thing I like. So as an anthropologist, I'm asking how women in various parts of the Muslim world think about their rights. What languages do they use to talk about them? Are they the same languages used by women's rights activists in these organizations? What do any of us mean when we say "women's rights"?

So I'll just close by telling you about a conversation I had with a village woman in Egypt last spring. She's a woman called Nafeesa whom I've known for many years through my research in this village in Upper Egypt. My research was on television soap operas – Egyptian television soap operas – which is where a lot of people get their ideas in the Muslim world, and in the Arab world for sure. So when I told her that my new project was about women's rights in Egypt (whenever I told anyone this was my project they always had something to say) her first reaction was, "let me tell you, the woman in Egypt" – this is a barely educated woman in this little village – "let me tell you, the woman in Egypt enjoys the highest level of rights. Did you know, Lila, that we have women ministers in the cabinet: the minister of Social Affairs and the head of the Finance Ministry, all of them are women? Here in Egypt the government has given women their rights 100%" but then she went on to qualify this, she said, "but people, a woman's family, they're the ones who sometimes undermine a woman's rights. Say my father happens to leave me three acres of land when he dies, her brother comes along and says 'no, she shouldn't take it, the girl shouldn't take the land.' Here the government gives her her rights."

So I asked if this had happened to her, because the pronouns were all mixed up, but she just laughed and said "this is just an example, praise be to God, I'm not complaining, my family doesn't own any land" but then she continued "so the brother takes his sister's land – it happens in some families – he steps in and says 'I'm a man, I should take the land'." But let's listen to what she said as kind of a retort to the imaginary brother. She said, "But God, glory be to him, gives the women an inheritance." She then quoted a Quranic passage that mandates that women inherit. And she finished up, "So if God sent down in the Quran word that a woman is entitled, how dare you fight this?"

When I asked what a woman does if her brother tries to take her share, she responded: "She goes to the government." But then a few seconds later she said, "well, first she goes to complain to the family, to the elders in the family" and then a few minutes after that she gave yet a third answer. She asked if I'd met the respected religious figure in the next village, and he's a professor at Al Azhar, the Islamic University in Cairo, whose father before him was also a local religious figure, very respected family. She said, "We go to the Sheikh al-Tayyib with any problem like this. Women do. "Just then her older brother

walked into the room and she confirmed with him: “Isn’t it true that a girl goes to Sheikh al-Tayyib if she has a problem with her uncle or her brothers? She brings a complaint to him? It’s standard. And he listens to her.” Her brother nodded, and went on to tell me a long story about a major problem that the Sheikh had in fact resolved.

Now in this one conversation Nafeesa talked about rights in many different registers. She invoked national, legal rights for women, she invoked women’s rights in terms of political representation, she talked about more local conflicts within families, and then the God-given rights granted to women in the Quran or what we call sharia or Islamic law. And she indicated that there are various places where women could turn when their rights were being infringed: to the courts, to the elders in the family, to a local religious figure who would intervene. Now where did Nafeesa get all these ideas, all these registers? She got them from national TV, and radio she got them from her everyday experience in her community, she got them from her own religious family, she got them from the larger community and they were very proud that they had a very major religious figure nearby. My question is: how can we take into account these many ways that women talk about their rights throughout the Muslim world? This is just one little village, in one country, so forth, but I think you can find these kinds of things everywhere and I think we need to ask how can we take seriously the many situations like this that I run across in my research in which women did things or refused things – not by using a language of rights – but by using a language of self-respect, or dignity. Here’s yet another register in which we might talk about rights for women in a Muslim community. And the question is: aren’t these important? Aren’t these interesting? Why aren’t they a part of our image of Muslim women?

**Madhavi Sunder:** I also know that I speak for all of us in this room to say that this has been an incredible morning and I just want to first thank Pat Ellis and the Women’s Foreign Policy Group for having the vision to bring us all together. I’ve been a Carnegie scholar now for a couple of years but this is my first time also, like Lila mentioned, to have this opportunity to meet the other scholars face to face and, as we’ve discussed, these face to face meetings are still incredibly important despite the fact that we read one another’s work but to actually have this opportunity to engage. So I thank Carnegie and all of you for making this possible.

Now I come to you from the perspective of a legal scholar. And my specific interest is then in how law understands or – unfortunately more often – misunderstands religion and culture. And going further, I’m asking: what are the specific consequences for women’s rights, in particular, from law’s misconceptions of religion? And so I want to begin then with an assertion. And that is that today, human rights law has a problem with religion. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, abuses that are no longer tolerated when committed by states, are paradoxically however, tolerated in the name of the human rights called the freedom of religion or the right to culture. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is an important case in point here. Known as the international bill of rights for women, the convention has the dubious distinction of being one of the most ratified international conventions to date, but it is also one with the most

reservations to it by states claiming exceptions based on cultural and religious grounds. And they object to, in fact, core provisions of the CEDAW agreement.

But I submit that contrary to the conventional literature in this area, that religion qua religion is not our problem. Rather the problem is laws' conception of religion. Law has inherited an enlightenment view that heralded freedom and democracy and reason in the public sphere, but left the private spheres of culture and religion in, as we have already heard, the dark ages of imposition and unreason. Law today has a static, homogenous view of religion as an extra-legal sphere without rights. It is a space where inequality is not only accepted, but it's to be expected. And I've argued in my work that this view of religion has the unfortunate consequence of often seeing legal authorities deferring to traditional leaders within religious communities who present this and confirm this monolithic view of religion, and this deference often has the inadvertent effect of suppressing the actual plural claims on the ground for democracy and equality within real live religious communities today. In short, religion often gets the bad rap, but really law is often the problem. But on the ground today women reformers in the Muslim world are in fact leading the effort I submit, to critically confront both the fundamentalist view and depiction of religion as static and monolithic and incontestable but also law's view of religion as incontestable and imposed from the top down.

So to that end, let me introduce you to one such reformer, Zainah Anwar. Anwar grew up in a Malaysia tolerant of many religions and of women's freedom and equality. She had studied journalism both in Malaysia and later abroad, but by the time she returned to Kuala Lumpur in the late 1980s the pluralist modern and tolerant country of her youth had changed. Through her journalism she saw the havoc that a newly introduced "Islamic" family law was wreaking on women's lives in particular. The main problem was that because these laws were justified in the name of religion, they appeared immune from critique. Traditional legal challenges were to no avail, and critics were labeled blasphemous, daring to go against divine law. Women's rights activists appeared paralyzed. As time went on however, these activists began to realize, "we cannot just deal with the law," Anwar recounts, "we felt we really needed to study the religion" she said. "Does the religion really say that a woman is equal to half of a man, and all that stuff we were hearing? So we decided that we needed to read the Quran for ourselves."

The year was 1989. These were women of letters – lawyers, journalists, academics – and they began meeting weekly in Anwar's home, just as the philosophers had met in salons. Anwar and her colleagues began reading the Quran. Their discussions were led by Dr. Amina Wadud, an African American Muslim scholar who fortuitously had landed her first teaching job at the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur. Wadud had just completed her dissertation at that time, titled "Quran and Women" and aimed was to teach these women the prerequisite skills for reading the Quran on their own and offering their own interpretations of the text with enough authority to question and stand beside counter-interpretations. Wadud called this group Sisters in Islam, and in 1991 the Sisters first went public. On the ground women were pushing for a domestic violence law, but legislators were arguing the law would not apply to Muslims. The Sisters published a

polemical in retort, provocatively titled, “Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat Their Wives?”

Over the next decade these modern day Thomas Paine’s as I call them published pamphlet after pamphlet, penned tens of letters to the editor, provoking robust public debate over contentious religious questions from the prophet’s views on polygamy to family planning. Piercing the veil of religious sovereignty that typically shields religious authorities from critique, Sisters in Islam used common sense and reasoned argument to question religious authorities’ claims, expose dissent and plurality within the religion, and force reasoned dialogue that would require justifying laws beyond the talismanic claim that they were simply Islamic.

The enlightenment took us from a world of empire to an age of reason and equality in the public sphere, but it left the private spheres of culture and religion in the dark ages of unreason and imposition. But today on the front lines of women’s movements in the Muslim world we’re hearing the rumblings of what I call the new enlightenment. No longer content to accept freedom in the public sphere and tyranny in the private, increasingly individuals are seeking to bring democracy, reason and the call in Kant’s words to “think for oneself” to the private spheres of religion and culture. The new enlightenment seeks to bring light to these dark spaces, and a core aspect of this movement is that it rejects the traditional human rights framework that would force women to choose between religion and rights. In the modern world, as we heard from the Gallup World Polls, individuals want both. Muslim women are themselves at the forefront then of forging strategies though to take to women at the grassroots level for operationalizing how we can now begin to reconcile democracy and equality in the cultural spheres or religion and culture.

Now what Mark Lilla<sup>1</sup> has called the great separation between religion and the state was also, as we can begin to see, a great compromise. Today the core enlightenment values of democracy, critical thinking, and equality are recognized only in the public sphere. But women reformers in the Muslim world are engaged in just what might be the next great separation. They are separating that part of religion which is ineffable and divine and that part which is in fact the result of human interpretation and construction and is thus eligible for reconstruction.

We heard earlier the concern that Muslim women dissidents aren’t in fact engaging the work of Muslim scholars enough but the women reformers who I am studying are in fact engaging with the work of theological and academic progressive Islamic scholars, who distinguish, importantly, between sharia which reflects divine law and timeless principles, and the actual interpretation and actualization of sharia in real societies, in the form of legal rules or fiqh. These legal rules or fiqh, they argue, are the result of human interpretation, and as such are historically determined, fallible and most importantly subject to change. There are really two prongs to strategies of the women’s movements that I’m studying. The first of course is recognizing the plurality of actual options and to contest this monolithic depiction of Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Lilla is professor of the humanities at Columbia University

But going further, we see that women are also engaged in grassroots efforts to facilitate dialogue throughout the Muslim world among women at the grassroots level: to engage religious texts just like Sisters in Islam had begun to read the Quran for themselves. I've been following the work of a particular manual written by Mahnaz Afkhami called, *Claiming our Rights*<sup>2</sup>, which has been adapted in more than a dozen countries to facilitate grassroots workshops. I've covered some of the workshops in Jordan in particular. These workshops have been taking place for more than a decade now, where women are encouraged to read religious texts for themselves but also then critique and question and debate these texts and offer their own interpretations.

We heard earlier today about calls for operationalizing democracy and freedom within an Islamic framework and I would suggest to you that this is in fact what's already being done on the ground. But at the same time the strategy exposing the plurality of options also changes our conception of what an Islamic or religious approach to rights is, because inevitably these women are engaged in reasoned dialogue and are using arguments from religious sources as well as from other sources. Let me give you a final example before I conclude and that is the legal reform movement, which has actually been quite successful using these strategies in the case of Morocco. Borrowing arguments on polygamy and guardianship offered by Sisters in Islam in Malaysia in the early 1990s, Moroccan activists embarked on a "One Million Signatures" campaign to show widespread dissatisfaction with the country's family law there, which said that women should obey their husbands, gave husbands unilateral right to divorce, and deprived divorced women of custody of their children. That movement too began with the premise that Islamic family law is not sacred or doomed to remain unchanged and these women also engaged in reasoned argument to contest 100 measures of the old family code. And they offered reasoned arguments at four different levels. These arguments included religious doctrinal arguments, but also they offered arguments from national law, international law and they presented changing sociological facts based on women's actual live experiences today. The Moroccan campaigners emerged victorious in 2004 with a new Muslim Family Law code that recognizes women and men as equals, allows women to remarry, to retain custody of children, and make polygamy nearly impossible. The new Moroccan family law has in fact been hailed as one of the most progressive in the Muslim world and now is seen as a model law for other countries to emulate.

Just like the old enlightenment the new enlightenment is a transcontinental, transnational movement. Today Nigerian lawyers turn to members of the Pakistani Bar for progressive legal arguments to use in sharia courts. And in fact sharing this information has helped to prevent even a single stoning for adultery from being carried out in the country of Nigeria. Reformers in Mauritania and Malaysia study the strategies of the Moroccan campaign to reform its family law, and now in Iran reformers have started their own One Million Signatures campaign, and the Moroccan family law reformers have published their handbook in Persian to assist their Iranian counterparts. This viral transnational nature of these reform efforts suggests that reading the Quran in Kuala Lumpur may ultimately prove more radical than reading Lolita in Tehran.

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<sup>2</sup> *Claiming our rights: A manual for women's human rights education in Muslim societies*



I just want to say two last things. One is that it would be a mistake to cast these efforts as merely strategic and employing religious discourse because this is the best avenue for change today. The reformers of what I call the new enlightenment are offering an important challenge to the enlightenment vision of freedom itself, which envisioned freedom in the public sphere as freedom. These women are suggesting that we need a richer theory of freedom that would also secure democracy and equality within those spheres of life which are most dear to us, specifically religion, culture and within the home.

To conclude, I just want to say a couple things about how now that we prepare to transition to an Obama administration, I want to suggest that we as Americans have a role to play as outsiders vis- à-vis these internal reform movements. On November fourth, President-elect Obama spoke, “to those who seek peace and security everywhere” declaring “we support you.” I suggest that in fact merely recognizing these movements and showing solidarity with them can empower them. As I’ve already suggested, deference – in contrast – to religious elites buttresses their power and obscures and suppresses internal dissent. Similarly, rhetoric of “saving Muslim women” and justifying wars for this cause also strengthens anti-western hardliners as Professor Thompson’s history retold earlier today, and as we’ve seen in Iran today as well. Women’s reform movements most certainly become all the more difficult in such political contexts. In contrast then the right kind of support can go a long way. As leading reformers in the Muslim world from the Nobel laureate Shireen Ebadi to Iranian dissident journalist Akbar Ganji have emphasized, Western recognition and support of their efforts promotes peace. It’s harder to justify war on a nation when we recognize that their majorities in fact share our values. But going further, cross-cultural dialogue also lends a most needed and cherished affirmation to internal reformers and provides an important source of new ideas to reformers on the ground. We witnessed historic change in America this month and let us not doubt that Muslim reformers abroad will not similarly be able to achieve their own grassroots change as well.

**Farzaneh Milani:** Well good afternoon. It’s an honor to share the podium with such eminent scholars and to be in the presence of such a distinguished audience. I am also very grateful to Carnegie Corporation of New York in particular to Patricia Rosenfeld and Hillary Wiesner, and to Women’s Foreign Policy Group and in particular Patricia Ellis for giving me the chance to share with you some thoughts on how women in Iran are remapping the cultural geography of their country and reorganizing its political and visual landscape.

My Carnegie project revolves around the freedom of movement and its impact on the lives of Iranian women. My thesis is very simple: a woman not only needs a room of her own as Virginia Woolf remarked in her delightful seminal work, *A Room of One’s Own*, but also the freedom to leave it and return to it at will because a room without that very right is a prison cell. The unconditional untainted and unrestricted right to entry and exit is a basic individual right. It epitomizes in its embodied form the capacity for exercising and enjoying an elemental sense of freedom: self-propelled, self-willed, and self-choreographed. Denial of freedom in the form of incarceration, institutionalization, sex

and race segregation like forced movement (there are many examples of that) deprives human beings of the integrity, dignity, and control of their bodies. It denies them autonomy and authority. It is a small wonder then if Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that everyone has the right to freedom of movement. With the advent of modernity, with the increasing access to motorized mobility freedom of movement has become even more important, more valuable. In fact so much so that its denial has become the modern instrument of punishment. Consider the multiplication and expansion of prisons as a modern form of punishment, a punishment that has shifted its focus from death and torture to mechanisms of coercive immobilization. Incarceration – which occupies such a central place in modern penal systems – deprives the prisoner of a wide range of personal rights.

But I believe at the basis of all these degradations is indeed the lack of freedom of movement. The privilege to enjoy self-directed movement, the power to pick up and go as one pleases, without incurring any penalties has not been a right granted to all. Often it has been recognized as a masculine prerogative, often it has been denied to women. Women have found themselves locked in or locked out, the first ones in the door or the first ones out of it. Sanctioned in the name of religion, chastity, safety, beauty, or autonomy, and anatomy, women's restricted mobility has been assumed or prescribed. A woman on the loose in many cultures is viewed as a woman of loose morality. Consider for a moment the enigmatic figure of the female witch, condemned for her disregard of prescribed boundaries. To his day she is popularly portrayed flying on her broomstick the very symbol of her restrained mobility and domesticity, turned into a magical vehicle able to carry her to forbidden places.

Now Iran: for centuries we Iranian women have been denied freedom of movement, especially in open and public places. For the last 160 years, it might be of interest to you to know that exactly at the same time as the fantastic congregation of Seneca Falls happened in July 1848, we had something to similar to that happening in Iran. So for the last 160 years, especially during the last two decades women have renegotiated boundaries and emerged as a most moderating, modernizing force in my country of birth. Let me give you some specific examples. Women's life expectancy has increased from 64.7 in 1990 to 71.9 today. Although the Islamic Republic proceeded quickly to lower the age of marriage for girls to nine, the median age of marriage today for women is 24. Fertility rate has dramatically decreased from 5.6 in 1990 to 2.3 today. Attendance at elementary school is at 94% and gender disparities do not increase in institutions of higher education. As a matter of fact, 64% of all students admitted to Iranian universities are women. In fact, some of the members of Iranian parliament are considering affirmative action for men.

Let me give you some examples about the literary scene, one area I am very interested in. Let us consider fiction for a moment. From the 1930s to the 1960s only about a dozen women published works of fiction in Iran. The number of women who have published novels has now reached 370 which is 13 times as many as 10 years ago and equal to the number of men novelists. Often, women outsell their male counterparts and I'm proud to say as a judge occasionally on these literary awards women are truly some of our best

novelists too. This same phenomenon of growth of women producers of prose can be witnessed in the number of women translators. Whereas in 1997 Iran had only 214 women translators, the number soared to 706 six years later in 2003. The same is true of women working in the publishing industry, which for now (just to cut it short because I see 3 minutes) we have 103 women publishers. As for poetry, for the first time in Iran's glorious literary tradition we have a woman as our national poet. The elegance and beauty, the candor and courage of Simin Behbahani, and I'm embarrassed to say that most of these women have not even been translated into English, has bestowed upon her the status of a cultural hero. And Forough Farrokhzad who was banned soon after the revolution has become now the Iranian equivalent of a rock star, a guru, a cultural icon.

With 23 million internet users and an amazing 7,100% rate of growth between 2000 and 2007 Iran has the fastest growing number of internet users in the whole Middle East, and women here too play a most important and active role. And as my colleague referred to something unheard of in Iranian history has begun: a far reaching campaign taking by Iranian women, the campaign for One Million Signatures. It was launched on August 27, 2006, and it is really doing some amazing work inside the country.

Now please allow me to hasten to add that I do not entertain any illusions about the Islamic Republic of Iran. Repression, political and religious purges, censorship, and gender inequity are facts of life. Women lack equitable political representation, but they do everywhere. The pantheon of the highest government offices in the land is monopolized by men: the supreme leadership, the presidency, membership in the Guardian Council, the national security council, and the expediency council do not include even a token woman. Although an increasing number of women nominate themselves for presidency, they have so far all been disqualified. I have a number of other statistics, but I have to conclude.

So what am I saying? All I am saying is that it is this complex mixture of advancements and drawbacks, of protest and accommodation, of resistance and acquiescence, of tradition and modernity that reflects most accurately a woman's life in Iran today. Focusing on either side of this equation is a willful misrepresentation of facts with dangerous consequences. Iran is a land of paradoxes; it's a society in transition. And surely no one can accuse the Islamic Republic of Iran of intolerance towards its own contradictions, especially when it comes to the treatment of its women. Iranian women can vote, and run for some of the highest elected offices in the country, but must observe an obligatory dress code. They can drive personal cars, even taxis and trucks, and fire engines, but they cannot ride bicycles. They are seated away from men in the back of buses, but they can be squashed in between perfect strangers into overcrowded jitney taxis. They have entered the world stage as Nobel Laureates, human rights activists, bestselling authors, but to leave the country of their residence they need the written permission of their legal guardian, always a man.

So, allow me to conclude with a question. In view of such a complex but definitely dazzling sense of movement; in view of such refusal to be assigned a walled-in space or role, why is the dominant image of the Iranian woman in the United States that of a

virtual prisoner, without a pardon or parole? Why are best-sellers portraying Iranian women as victims of an immobilizing fate, captives of a country made of up male guards, detainees in a veritable giant gulag the size of the whole country? Why are we, as readers in the US, are more interested in abducted daughters, incarcerated girls, and invisible women? Thank you.

**Patricia Ellis:** We are running a little bit late, but we have such richness in this panel that we are going to open it up for questions, and because this is a working lunch, we will cut short a little bit of the time to get your food. We'll get to the food and go to the buffet after this, because we really need to have a bit of a discussion right now. I'm going to take the questions together and I'll lead off very quickly with: what do we do to break the stereotypes – in addition to having fantastic speakers like you – and who would be the people who should be out there representing the differing and new faces that we have heard so much about this morning?

**Farzaneh Milani:** I'm going to be presumptuous and offer a couple of suggestions. Since my field is literature, I will confine myself to the one area that I think I might understand better. Let me give you an example of the last two decades of the literary scene in Iran. I gave you some statistics. We have women novelists in Iran now that sell in the hundreds of thousands of copies and the average print run of novels in Iran right now is about 5,000. I just want to leave you with this one question: why isn't even one of these novels translated into English? So one of my suggestions is that we need to have better access to these women, who have been assigned speakers for them, who are truly, not necessarily their speakers, I'm not saying it's not important to read these books. Some of these bestsellers ought to be read. They offer a different perspective and that's important and valuable. But we need to diversify our pool of information, and the pool of information available on Muslim women – definitely on Iranian women – is very limited in this.

**Madhavi Sunder:** Just in response to your question, following up on the media discussion from earlier, I also think we need to critically analyze who are our media and our own role models, like Oprah Winfrey for example. Who are they choosing to highlight and make heroes when they find individuals and stories abroad? For example, in 2003 Oprah chose to champion the cause of a woman named Amina Lawal in Nigeria, an unwed pregnant mother who was committed to stoning for adultery, and she made this a major cause célèbre, especially among western women's rights movements and feminists here. But instead why didn't she choose to focus on the women reformers on the ground, the community organizers like our own Barack Obama, who have been there on the ground in Nigeria stopping every single one of these cases, these folks from actually accomplishing this mission and stopping every stoning that has been suggested on these grounds, for committing adultery. So who do we see in terms of our role models.

**Lila Abu-Lughod:** I'd actually like to say just a second thing in relation to that, which is maybe a little difficult and I can't articulate it but why should it be presented to us, why shouldn't we do a little work to try to learn some languages, go places, try to figure out what's happening on the ground and talk to people. I mean it's a two way street, I mean, we'll bring some things here, but I think we also have to do our own work.

**Patricia Ellis:** And you're performing the educational function, at least in making people so much more aware of things that people don't hear about on a daily basis.

**Farzaneh Milani:** I think we as scholars are also responsible for part of what's happening. Forgive me for saying that but, sometimes I say that in the academic world we have become writers without readers. We write in a language that is so convoluted, so full of jargon, that we really can't reach the average person – at least in this country – who is thirsty for knowledge. Hence they go to some of these books that claim to give them the ultimate truths, as if you can learn about Islam with an injection (and, you know, they do that in one book). So for me, and I'm grateful for Carnegie for having started that, for telling us all to try to write in an accessible language that more people will be willing to listen to.

**Patricia Ellis:** I just want to add one thing as a former journalist. It is hard; years ago, people used to use more academics on television. I don't think you see and hear from them, except in documentaries, and that might be something we should try to go back to, because you hear from the same old usual suspects all the time who pontificate on the issues. So that is something, one area, where some progress can be made and it is our responsibility. Okay so we're going to take a number of questions together.

**Question:** I'd like to tie this into the media. I'm Susan Rappaport, and I'm on the board of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. I am just so enlightened and enthusiastic about this fabulous conference with the Carnegie Scholars coming here, meeting each other, and meeting us, and so thank you to all of you and to Pat of course; it's been wonderful. I think we've been blindsided by the media because I had no idea – maybe I'm just naive or I live in a cocoon – that there were so many things happening in Iran. And I wonder if our journalists and our academics are free to go to meet people there and meet publishers there and bring those works here.

**Question:** Pam Pelletrau, and I'm just going to say, loudly, what I mentioned earlier today, which is: there is published from this building, the Arab Reform Bulletin, and some of us subscribe to that. It is not as inclusive as the panel and the discussions of today but it might provide a venue to which interested people could address themselves to get some of the scholarly work that is in process, without waiting for the books that come at the end.

**Question:** Helena Cobban. Yes I just have one little observation about media and access to the media, and that is that there are all kinds of wonderful opportunities with the new media. But, the new media have been majorly colonized by young men with sharp elbows who exclude women and it's just because they're the techno-geeks. You know, they're the people like my son who actually got me started blogging, but, you know, people like my son but who don't think about their mothers enough. So there is something, for example, called Bloggingheads.tv; there are all kinds of areas of the internet that you will find are almost 90%, 95% dominated by young men. And that's a real structural problem that we need to engage with: a lot of the web-based multimedia communication. And I've

been trying to battle that for a long time. I have a question for Madhavi Sunder. To what extent does the freedom of conscience actually feature in the kind of work that you are talking about? I can understand that engaging in the text as a woman is a very liberating thing to do, but does that include an engagement that goes to the question of freedom of conscience?

**Patricia Ellis:** Okay we have time for one or two more, and then Pat Rosenfield will have the last question, and we'll go to the panel. And please keep all remaining questions brief. Thank you.

**Question:** Hello, my name is Mishkat al-Moumin, I'm from Iraq, and I spent most of my time training women activists. What I've found, through my experience, is that women shy away from reaching out, especially in the Middle East area. Women shy to present themselves even if they are highly qualified, they write novels, and they do great things, and then when the moment of truth comes they all hide in their backseat and shy to present themselves as the true heroes if you would like. How much is that true in Iran? Do you face similar challenges with women, do they reach out, do they feel like it's okay to ask, it's okay to present themselves as the true heroes they are? Thank you.

**Question:** My name is Ashley Evans and I'm an intern with the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We touched on this a little bit but I was wondering, moving forward. How does the US and other Western groups, particularly women's rights groups, tread the line between helping and encouraging and facilitating women in the Muslim world in their efforts to change their own countries and being the scary Western people who are trying to "save" them and therefore de-legitimizing those movements?

**Madhavi Sunder:** I can speak to just the very last question, I'll begin there. I can't speak to women in Iran specifically, but I can speak – and I think it relates back to the other question we had earlier – about the women's workshops that I've attended in Jordan. These involved young women in their twenties who are Palestinian refugees, and they were born in Jordan but they have very limited rights there because of their Palestinian refugee status. The workshops that I attended were only women, so they were a safe environment and there was not a single shrinking violet amongst them, okay? They were extremely vocal, combative, ready for debate, ready to go up and give presentations on their views, and they were writing poetry, they were performing their own original plays to depict what they felt was wrong or unjust about women's status there and about their status as Palestinian refugees in Jordan as well. And so I think this goes to the question about blogging too because – not just do we need to get more women blogging around the world – but we need to have more of these spaces to empower people to feel free to question and speak and to develop their own critical abilities and to develop their voice. And that's what has been extremely important so that there's actually internal debate amongst the groups that have been pursuing these workshops for the last decade about whether to actually now have men and women in the workshops and I think that that's important to make this not just about women. These are reform movements focused on democracy and equality and men and women are partners here. But it also means that the space may not be as safe especially for young women to come out: people were dancing;

they were covered head to toe during the daytime workshop but then at the party at the end of the day they would take off the headscarf and dance and just be completely free. So I think that that's important to promote these kinds of opportunities.

**Farzaneh Milani:** The wonderful question that you had about the misperceptions of Iran – and particular about Iranian women – in the West. What I want to add about the role of the media is the unfortunate political situation. With the hostage crisis of 1979, we Iranians in the US have become hostages of our own hostage-taking. I've studied all the bestsellers published in the US in the *New York Times* bestseller list. I started in 1933 and came all the way to now. I went through every week and checked all the bestsellers. Until the hostage crisis, not a single book by an Iranian or about Iran shows up on that list and I want to remind you that in 1953 we had the CIA coup d'état in Iran so its not that Iran was not in the news but it wasn't worthy of being on the bestseller list. With the hostage crisis the scene changed. All the books that have appeared on that list, on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, from *Not Without My Daughter*, which set the trend and is the most popular book ever written about Iran in this country or in the world, has sold more than 12 million copies, to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which is next to *Not Without My Daughter*, and all the other books that have made it to the bestseller list about Iran or by Iranians, revolve around the theme of hostage crisis.

**Lila Abu-Lughod:** I just wanted to also intervene in one way to say that we shouldn't only also glorify these reformist groups or groups that are speaking in the same language that we want to hear, and that we might be open to other languages, and I tried to talk about multiple languages that women use to think about themselves and their rights. And "dignity" might be one of them. And it sort of goes back to the point this morning made by Helena, that Hamas was elected. Right? This was an election. This is what people wanted – you might want to think about why that is – but the problem is we think that's the wrong kind of democracy. If you don't elect the people that we think you should be electing, then there's something wrong with that place, and maybe we need to think about the multiple possibilities and the kinds of things that are really going on and what that might be about, without sort of only focusing on those who share views that we might have here. That's just something to think about. Again, learning the languages, learning that people might not actually share everything that we want them to share with us, and maybe that's not wrong.

**Patricia Ellis:** Well thank you, and Pat Rosenfield would like to say something.

**Patricia Rosenfield:** I just want to say very briefly: a big thank you to everyone. I know there may be a chance at the luncheon but I wasn't sure, so I just thought at this moment and on behalf of Vartan Gregorian, the President of Carnegie Corporation, who couldn't be here, I know that she would have been absolutely thrilled at what the Women's Foreign Policy Group has done, and in hearing all the scholars who have more than justified his commitment to the importance of sharing broadly the understanding and respect and dignity to give to the variety of Islamic experiences and the value of this kind of knowledge for shaping perceptions and actions. We hope through the work of the Women's Foreign Policy Group and all of the efforts of the scholars who are here and the

others who couldn't be here, that we will help to shape a different world view and a different global perspective of understanding both in access to new ideas, new thoughts, history, and different perceptions, and a respect for that. So I just want to thank the vision of the Women's Foreign Policy Group, and also Andrew Carnegie and Vartan Gregorian for promoting gifted scholarship.

I just want to say one more thing: I think what we've learned today – at least I have come away with – is this critical mass of deep knowledge and it is these scholars who are able to communicate this knowledge. What we were saying in terms of having readers: well, I think you have a lot of listeners, because all of you are so articulate and so clear that I think that this leads us to a new invigoration of scholarship in this country that will speak to a broader public here so that we will change understanding and change the misperceptions. So I just wanted to thank everybody, but particularly the Women's Foreign Policy Group, for putting this together with your leadership Pat. I just want to say a big thank you to everyone.

**Patricia Ellis:** Well thank you. It's been a real privilege to work with Carnegie and with these amazing scholars. It's just so wonderful to have them all together. Thank you.