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Book Review: Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism

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Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism.
Faegheh Shirazi. 2009. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 277 pages.
Photographs, references and index included. \$65 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Stephanie Chaban¹

Jihad is an evocative word. Recent decades have seen the corruption of the word to the point where its primary definition (at least in Western media) is that of 'holy war.' Far from such a bellicose summoning, *jihad*, the Arabic word for 'struggle,' has a more personal, religious meaning. For the practicing Muslim, *jihad* can represent a spiritual struggle from within. In spite of the corrupted meaning, or because of it, female activists and authors discussing women's lives in the Muslim world have, in recent years, taken pains to provide an innovative spin on *jihad*, proposing a new, woman-centered position for its interpretation and practice. From Amina Wadud's "Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam" (2006) to Azadeh Moaveni's "Lipstick Jihad" (2006), recent women writing about gender, Islam and the Muslim world, have energetically been documenting the ways in which Muslim women living under Islamic fundamentalism and within patriarchal cultures have confronted and resisted their oppression in the name of religion. Such is the case with Faegheh Shirazi, author of "Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism."

Borrowing from the 1989 anti-communist Velvet Revolution that swept over then-Czechoslovakia, Shirazi's text attempts to draw parallels between the non-violent resistance to the expansive communist regime and women activists living in the Muslim world who are struggling against Islamic fundamentalism. The velvet jihadist is one who, "respond[s] to extremist policies by engaging in activism at the grassroots and global levels and (quoting Miriam Cooke), 'articulat[ing] their criticism and opposition to the various institutions that oppress them'" (4-5). Thus, Shirazi sets about documenting not only the environment of the fundamentalism, but also notable forms of resistance taken up by women.

In Chapter 1, Shirazi begins locating female oppression within the concepts of honor, shame, and virginity, outlining the ways in which women are affected worldwide, yet making particular note of women in the Muslim world. It appears that Shirazi seeks to present the control of women's bodies and sexuality as an ongoing struggle throughout known history and across cultures; while this is an edifying effort, this discussion covers quite a bit of the map and is not solely focused on women in the Muslim world, leaving the reader to question the relevance to the title. Rape during recent and historical conflicts is covered, as is killing in the name of honor (or 'crimes of passion' as they are known in the Christian context). The reader is introduced to the text's first velvet jihadist: Pakistani gang rape survivor and women's rights advocate Mukhtar Mai. Almost two pages are dedicated to her yet, unfortunately, the only information about her is provided by Wikipedia and a website in her honor.

Hymen repair features prominently in this chapter, and much discussion is allotted to the websites that promise 'revirginization' and offer religious guidance. However, there is little critical discussion of this procedure as a form of women's resistance. Yes,

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Shirazi writes that, "With this surgery, women can overcome social taboos and the obsession with female virginity. It makes them marriageable and allows them to avoid shame, dishonor, and gossip" (40). Shirazi fails to provoke a discussion on whether hymen repair is a tactic employed to subordinate women or a strategy of resistance for Muslim women who will not deny that they are sexual beings. What does proceed is much focus on and discussion of websites providing hymen repair, religious guidance and 'revirginizing' cosmetics. Again, it is unclear whether the author finds these resources to be empowering or oppressive.

Chapter 2, similar to Chapter 1, seeks to look at women in general and Muslim women in particular, with a focus on sterility, childbirth, taboos, and popular religious practices. The importance of fertility and remedies for infertility are discussed, as well as strategies for conceiving male babies and the protection children. Such remedies include talismanic objects, manuscripts with magic formulas, and 'protection poems' (77-9), crafted specifically for the devout Muslim. Focusing on Iran and Central Asia, son preference is discussed, but an equally detailed discussion is provided on sex selective abortion in India and China, leaving unclear whether this is a product of Islamic fundamentalism or not. There is an interesting amount of information on Iran's family planning policies that, according to Shirazi, are, "one of the most progressive ... in the developing world" (91). Not only does the Iranian state provide sex education classes for engaged couples and a multitude of family planning options for married couples, abortion is legal, "if the woman is willing to jump through multiple hoops" (92).

The final portion of the chapter concludes with a list of women and women's rights organizations that supposedly are related to the chapter's topic, but a connection is not necessarily made obvious. The list is long and diverse: from Egyptian doctor and feminist Nawal Saadawi to Zanan, Iran's now defunct feminist magazine; from RAWA in Afghanistan to the global network, Women's Learning Partnership; from unnamed cottage industries in Bangladesh to the Federation of Muslim Women in Canada. It is not wholly spelled out why these women and organizations are mentioned given the theme of the chapter. Furthermore, only a paragraph is devoted to each, giving the impression that they are a last minute addition rather than integral to the text.

Chapter 3, entitled "Even Dolls Must Wear Hijab," provides a discussion of the manuals and guidebooks generated on how a pious Muslim woman might lead a more moral life. Such documents outline information related to hygiene, attitude, veiling and dress. The chapter fails to document any individual as a velvet jihadist; rather a significant amount of space is spent on female fundamentalists.

Focusing on arts and athletics, Chapter 4 is the most comprehensive in sharing the "innovative ways" in which Muslim women share, "their beauty, creative talents, and athletic skills with the wider world" (122). While fundamentalist websites contemplate whether women in the performance and visual arts are *halal* or *haram*, it is clear that the Muslim world has produced a number of well-respected female performers. The famous (Umm Kalthoum) and the unknown are noted (Hausa women of northern Nigeria and village women in Bangladesh), and Shirazi takes efforts in revealing the various ways in which Muslim women have taken to the stage and the screen despite performance restrictions and gender norms. In examining Muslims female and sports, Shirazi documents the hurdles women and girls face as they exercise, and the greater threats female athletes face when they compete. Shirazi specifically details the work of Faezeh

Hashemi Rafsanjani, an Iranian women athletics advocate and coordinator of the Islamic Countries Women Sports Games. As a velvet jihadist, Rafsanjani has courageously advocated for women's sports despite butting heads with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Chapter 5 addresses lesbianism in the Muslim world. While Islamic jurisprudence comments extensively on male homosexuality, lesbianism receives absolutely no acknowledgement, yet another indication of women's sexuality denied. That said, in the not so recent past, there appears documentation outlining what many perceive as consensual lesbian relationships in Persia, but no modern day accounts exist (165-7). Shirazi thus chooses to list a number of online organizations that provide an outlet for lesbian women living within the Muslim world to connect and speak out. These organizations are able to survive and unite women because they are primarily internet-based. According to Shirazi, the internet has proven to be an effective shield for lesbian organizations working to reach women throughout the Muslim world, where being gay is a crime. In turn, the internet also provides cover to fundamentalists running Islamic websites and chat rooms that seek to issue corrupt Qur'anic interpretations, issue imaginary *fatwas* and threaten the safety of gays and lesbians in the Muslim world.

Lastly, Chapter 6 focuses on gendered spatial segregation and the way in which women have both embraced or rejected this division. For a number of women, the use of women-only spaces becomes a way women can come together to lend "comfort and support" (184) to each other. Whereas, the use of *sharia*' or Islamic law as an excuse for separating the sexes, compels some women to speak up and out. Shirazi highlights the tenacity of women such as Nadia Bakhurji, a successful candidate for the Board of the Council of Saudi Engineers, or Malalai Joya, the parliamentarian who challenged male colleagues within the Afghan Loya Jirga. In Malaysia, Shirazi writes of the Sisters in Islam, progressive Muslim women are who arm themselves with Qur'anic knowledge to push for moderate reform benefiting women, including revision of the Islamic family law.

In various parts of the Muslim world, devout women are attempting to reclaim sacred spaces through a combination of state-supported participation and their own unique resistance. State-supported participation is revealed through *morshidat* or female religious guides dispatched throughout Morocco to teach women about Islam, or *vaizes* in Turkey who serve as female preachers. More controversially, are the Chinese Muslim *ahongs* who are female imams, leading women-only mosques in Central Asia. In Tamil Nadu, women are starting their own mosque to create a space for women's full religious expression, while in the United States, the Council on American-Islamic Relations is promoting brochures and a website for women-friendly mosques. Special attention is given to Amina Wadud, the African-American Muslim woman who was the first to lead a mixed-gender gender congregation in a New York City art gallery after no mosque in the area was courageous enough to be associated with such a radical act.

In her concluding remarks, Shirazi notes, "In this book, I have attempted to counter stereotypes, while detailing the unorthodox ways Muslim women resist oppressive patriarchal systems" (226). However, in many instances, especially the first half of the book, Shirazi speaks in generalities and cannot decide if she is documenting women's oppression and resistance worldwide or just in the Muslim world. When the focus is gained and the topic reclaimed, there is little substance in understanding exactly

who or what these women or organizations are that are quietly working against Islamic fundamentalism, i.e., the velvet jihadist. The occasional in-depth profile is given but, overall, a sentence or two is dedicated to these innovative women or organizations; little effort is made in providing earnest discussion of the velvet jihadist. Additionally, the ways in which women resist are never fully fleshed out or pursued to it's fullest. Had the text been more focused on a specific form of resistance, i.e., the internet, sports, religious observation then, perhaps, the text would be more powerful. Or, had Shirazi focused on one specific region or country, like her homeland Iran, where she already has a substantial amount of information that is rarely made public there would be less opportunity to derail the book. For this reason, Chapters 4 and 6 provide enough evidence of the (not always quite) resistance Muslim women are offering against Islamic fundamentalism.

While Shirazi tends to use internet sources a little too freely, failing to balance there use with academic scholarship, she raises a very good point about the internet and activism in this day and age. As the world has seen with the political upheaval in Iran, the internet provides a safe amount of anonymity so that information is shared freely and networks formed, without having to fully reveal one's self.

In closing, while the text is scattered and does not provide enough in-depth information on the velvet jihadist as an individual, or the progress made in dismantling Islamic fundamentalism, Shirazi does excel at her examination of the Qur'an and the hadiths which she uses to her advantage when contesting fundamentalist rhetoric. Shirazi's linguistic abilities (Persian, Arabic, English) allow her special access to documents, websites, objects, and individuals; it is a pity that she does not pursue the contents of these resources more thoroughly. This text leaves only a taste of the types of resistance women have employed in countering religious fundamentalism. It is an interesting starting point, but not a substantial reference.