APPENDIX I
Faith and Freedom Presentation

Faith and Freedom

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Over a decade ago I edited a book titled *Faith and Freedom*, subtitled *Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*. The contributors, coming from across the Muslim world and beyond, discussed the lives of over half a billion Muslim women living in diverse geographical, social, and cultural conditions. They agreed that though the women they studied were different from one another, they all shared one over-arching characteristic: for most of them modernity meant conflict—a spectrum of values and forces that compete for their allegiance and beckon them to contradictory ways of looking at themselves and at the world that surrounds them. The most intractable contradiction they face is between the demands of living in the contemporary world, and the requirements of tradition as determined and advanced by the modern Islamist world view. At the center of this conflict is the dilemma of Muslim women's human rights—whether Muslim women have rights because they are human beings, or whether they have rights because they are Muslim women. At the center of this dilemma is woman in the family—her rights and her obligations. The conclusions they then drew still hold; the challenges and the potentials still exist, though both have become more pronounced since then because of the global events in the past two decades. The challenges we face have been exacerbated, but our potential and capabilities have also increased dramatically. Faith and Freedom, my subject today, addresses these issues.

Before I move on this point, let me recall what I believe is critical for Muslim women—that it is not Islam that holds us back; rather it is the path history of patriarchy in Muslim-majority societies has taken that limits our freedom. Otherwise, the status of women in society has been fundamentally the same across history for a majority of the world's population regardless of religion, creed, ethnicity, or nationality. Except for superficial differences in manner and style, the basic arrangements for division of labor and power between men and women have been the same across the world. A woman's rights over major decisions about her children's future, place of residence, marriage, inheritance, employment, and the like have been severely curtailed in most of the world during most of human history. Until the turn of the 20th century, when New Zealand became the first country to give women the right to vote, there was no

place on earth where women shared in the political process. Nor did they have the same chance to train for a job, get a job, or, once having gotten a job, receive equal pay. Indeed, in some socio-economic fields, for example, ownership—especially ownership of land—Muslim women fared better than women in the West.

It is also interesting to note that the first fundamentalist movement was Christian Protestant, launched in the United States early in the 20th century very much in response to a particular aspect of modernity, namely, a new energetic mobility and visibility of women. As in the case of fundamentalist Protestantism, Islamism is also a reaction to change. As was true in the case of fundamentalist Protestantism, Islamism is also fundamentally political, focusing on the status of women. Indeed, for Islamists every domestic issue is negotiable except women's rights and their position in family and society. They insist on singling out women's position in the family and their relation to society as the supreme test of the authenticity of the Islamic order.

We know that traditionally all religions—from Shinto and Buddhist and Confucian to Zoroastrian and Abrahamic—considered woman a complement of man. Insofar as it pertained to gender relations, the idea defined patriarchy. Naturally, the patriarchal order jealously safeguarded this key to its core identity. When societies set out on the path to modernization, family relations were last to change. Woman continued to remain man's other half: man the master, woman man's complement. The framework assigned a highly valued position to woman, but the value was qualitatively different from the value assigned to man. Patriarchy abstracted women's identity and honor, concretizing them in the thought, judgment, and behavior of men—fathers, brothers, and husbands. Women's actions expressing even a modicum of individual freedom almost always contradicted the governing social norms, vitiating men's honor, making life routinely hazardous for women. Historically, this dualism was so strongly entrenched in culture that men and women equally considered it self-evident.

Today, however, women see the contradiction in the self-evident belief because they have become conscious of their individual identity. Individual consciousness, as distinguished from communal consciousness, is a discovery that comes with time as science and technology provide the foundations for doubt about unchanging communal law—that is, law that springs directly or indirectly from God or nature. In this sense, history moves from law to right, as the individual begins to perceive that she has a right to participate in the making of the law rather than submit to the existing law as immutable and eternal. In this, all societies that develop and change move in the same direction, though not every move has the same shape or takes place at the same time or proceeds at the same speed. That is why we have fundamentalist reactions of various sorts in all societies and all religions. Contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is also a reaction by a section of society to inevitable change, taking naturally an Islamic hue, rather than being an innate or exclusive property of Islam. Women are its key victims, their plight worsening when religion becomes political.

The Islamists attack this new consciousness on two prongs—one internal, the other external to the Muslim community. Internally, the argument invokes

Islam and the inviolability of the text. The formulation is intellectually false, but politically well organized and ideologically inter-connected across the Muslim world through chains of traditions, clerical fatwas, and periodic government resolutions and legislation.

Externally the Islamist position meshes with the idea of cultural relativity developed in the West, where relevant arguments are waged for reasons that usually have nothing to do with Islam. In the contemporary West, especially in academic circles, relativity is often advanced and defended to promote diversity. In its theoretical forms, for example, as a critique of positivist and Marxist theories of history, cultural relativism sometimes suggests that universalist discourses are guilty of reinforcing Western hegemony by devaluing non-Western societies. Whatever other merits or faults of the Western relativist position, it insists on free choice and equal access. Islamists, however, use the argument to justify structural suppression of women's freedom and formal enforcement of women's inequality. This use of the argument is morally unjust and logically flawed. Rather than addressing real, evolving societies, Islamists abstract Islam as an esoteric system of unchanging rules and then equate it with complex, changing, and historically specific social and political conditions. As a result, they transform the practical issue of women's historical subjugation in patriarchies—which is a matter of the economic, social, cultural, and political forms that power takes as societies evolve—to archaic ideas of historical permanence, moral negligence, and religious slackness. The argument becomes dangerous when it seeks to portray women who struggle for rights as women who are against Islam, their religion in which they firmly believe. The Islamists try to confound the issue by positing their interpretation of religion for religion itself.

Women, of course, are becoming increasingly aware of this trick. Our response is simple and matter of fact. The questions we as Muslim women pose and answer are: Why should we not have the right to determine how to organize our lives? What gives another person the right to interfere in our personal life? Why is it that a Muslim cleric arrogates the right to forcibly place us in a preordained framework? Does he derive his authority from God? Does he derive it from the text? Does he derive it from tradition? We reject all these claims. We argue that as Muslim women we know in principle as well as any man what God ordains or what the text says. We argue that tradition is no longer a valid source because societies change, cultures change, and we are both willing and able to discuss these points with him. Before we begin this discussion, we grant him every right to be who he wants to be; to do what he wants to do; to preach what he wants to preach. We only demand that he does not force us to do what he wants us to do against our wish, in the same way that we do not force him to do what we wish.

We argue that right is related to obligation. This is the most central point to the concept of right, namely, that to demand it for ourselves we must defend it for others. We cannot have rights without obligation because we cannot have, let alone sustain, rights that are not reciprocal. But we know as a fact that we can be and have been forced to submit to conditions or to perform tasks under threat of sanctions that are disguised as obligation. This is precisely what many women in contemporary Muslim societies are forced to suffer and valiantly object to.

And we realize that in modern times, cultures, though changing constantly, do not change uniformly, and that therefore there are others in Muslim societies, men and women, who interpret reality differently than we do. This fact of cultural multiplicity, important as it is politically, nevertheless does not alter the moral foundation of our position—the frame of reference that rejects force and violence in religion and which respects the identity, privacy, freedom, and integrity of the human individual. This position recognizes that religious experience is a personal experience, and that all enforcements of religion are essentially not religion but political acts that are perpetrated by one group of people over another. The basic principle, therefore, that as a human being I have the right to choose is, by definition, a universal principle, morally true whether I live in Beijing, Katmandu, Kuala Lumpur, New York, or Tehran. The fact that in practice I may not be able to exercise it everywhere is a matter for political and social analysis, planning, strategizing, and acting.

So, we have learned that it is one thing to be entitled to rights in theory and another to exercise rights in practice. We know that despite the truth of the claim of universality of rights, there is a widespread disparity between rights in theory and rights in practice. This disparity has alerted us to the concept of relativity of means, which is a matter essentially of politics and implementation. That is why we have chosen many different ways to promote women's human rights across the world. We have learned and are learning to gear our approach to the prevailing cultural and political conditions. We seek dialogue. Not only because we need to communicate if we are to effect change, but also for a more fundamental reason. Right being universal, it is not a property of any particular culture but a potential of all cultures. In practice, it is a product of the evolution of human consciousness and the demands that the process produces. It has to do with the ability to choose, rather than the choice itself. Thus, each culture will produce its own appropriate language and process as its practice of rights evolves, but the frame of reference, the universality of the possibility of choice and the freedom to choose, is maintained.

Here is where we Muslims have an extra burden, because in our case universality is challenged, a challenge that is camouflaged in theology but is fundamentally political. Note that from the mid-19th century to the latter part of the 20th century, the ethos of history was toward emancipation, including the emancipation of women. Everywhere the fundamentalists were on the defensive. It is with the fall of the socialist counter-balance to capitalism and the seeming triumph of the liberal creed that varieties of fundamentalism surged and Islamism achieved prominence, energized by the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the late 20th century. This may represent the last historical gasp of patriarchy; nonetheless, it presents a horrendous challenge to women in Muslim-majority societies. It also offers us the opportunity to debate the nature of our religion from a woman's viewpoint.

We are now engaged in this struggle and debate across the world, as exemplified by this conference. We are taking advantage of globalization and the information technology that defines and propels it to exchange ideas, share strategies, and provide solidarity and support as we build a movement for change across the

globe. We are coming together in significant numbers and from all social strata to object to the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The dimensions of our struggle are being defined as we strive for our rights in the family and society, working together to define what these rights are, how they relate to Islam epistemologically, how they resonate with social and political power in specific Muslim societies, and how strategies that seek to promote them will or should be developed. High on the list are the ways and means of interpreting religious texts: how should we approach the issue, what sort of expertise is needed, how can the issue be bridged to grassroots leaders, how can the intelligence received from the grassroots be brought to the interpretative process? We are also looking into ways of educating the Muslim political elite: how to identify responsive decision-makers, how to communicate reinterpreted text, how to develop criteria for judging the limits of political engagement, how to help executives, legislators, and judges sympathetic to women's human rights to implement change in the condition of women. We are also searching for appropriate patterns of mobilizing grassroots support, including ways of identifying and supporting women leaders at different levels, communicating methods of pressuring political decision-makers, and, most important of all, protecting women activists against moral and physical violence. The list, obviously not exhaustive, nevertheless signifies the dynamics of the relationship between women's human rights, politics, the Islamic texts, and the dimensions of our struggle. The family is the kernel of our life; unless we secure our rights in the family, we will remain a complement. As a complement, we will not—we cannot—have rights, as rights are due autonomous human beings. That is why this conference is so timely, and signifies so profoundly our march to achieve and secure our faith and our freedom.