



CLAIMING OUR RIGHTS:

A MANUAL FOR WOMEN'S
HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION
IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES

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INSTITUTE

Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI) is an international non-profit organization established in 1984 to improve women's rights on the local, national, regional, and global levels. SIGI has members from 70 countries, maintains a network of over 1,300 individuals and organizations worldwide, and has branch offices in several regions. SIGI's main goals are to:

- Inform the public about human rights abuses committed against women;
- Inform women of the basic rights guaranteed to them in international human rights conventions and further empower them to achieve the rights they consider significant;
- Facilitate participation of women from the Global South in international debates on women's human rights;
- Encourage all women from all races, cultures, religions, classes, ages, sexual orientations, and abilities to work together to define and achieve common goals.

SIGI is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). SIGI is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit, publicly supported, tax-exempt organization.

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PART 1: OVERVIEW OF GOALS, PREMISES, AND METHOD



INTRODUCTION

The idea of a human rights education project for women in Muslim societies originated during a series of meetings, discussions, and conferences held and sponsored by SIGI since 1993. Specifically, SIGI members Mahnaz Afkhami, Fatima Mernissi, and Nawal Saadawi, as well as several women scholars from Muslim societies, discussed the idea at the 1993 Middle East Studies Association's women's human rights meeting at Duke University in North Carolina.

Subsequently, at several SIGI-sponsored conferences—including the conference on “Religion, Culture, and Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World” held in Washington, DC in September 1994—participants emphasized the need for taking the internationally recognized human rights concepts to Muslim women at the grassroots level. Participants in the Commission on the Status of Women meetings of March 1994 and 1995 reiterated the same point. Invariably, women underscored the lack of material employing culturally relevant language to convey the message of international human rights documents to Muslim women. At the SIGI steering committee meeting of May 12, 1995 in Washington, DC, members stressed the need to develop models that could use indigenous ideas, concepts, myths, and idioms to explain the rights contained in international documents. Then, at the Aspen Institute Conference in Berlin, on May 21-24, 1995, representatives from 16 Muslim countries debated strategies for improving women's human rights in their regions. They identified the production of material using indigenous concepts and ideas to support international rights documents and the training of national and regional intermediate leaders as projects of the highest priority. SIGI then undertook to produce a manual based on a model that would approximate the requirements the participants in these conferences had identified. The present volume is the outcome. Because prevailing economic, social, cultural, and political conditions affect the patterns of information flow, individual behavior, and community interaction, the resulting volume, *Claiming Our Rights: A Manual for Women's Human Rights Education in Muslim Societies*, was based on a multidimensional, dialogical, flexible and user friendly model. The manual's objectives, premises, model, and structure are explained below.

THE MANUAL'S OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this human rights education manual is to facilitate transmission of the universal human rights concepts inscribed in the major international documents to grassroots populations in Muslim societies. The manual seeks to enable grassroots populations to convey universal concepts in association with indigenous ideas, traditions, myths, and texts rendered in local idiom. It aims to empower grassroots women to articulate and demand their human rights through interactive communication at home and through the political process in the community and society.

MAJOR INTERNATIONAL SOURCES OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

We have used documents for this study that are particularly relevant to women's human rights, including: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993), and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights (1994). The first four of these documents are appended to this manual.

The Mission Statement to the final Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) summarized the main points of these documents. The first and second articles of the Mission Statement read:

1. The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims at accelerating the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and at removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. This means that the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centered sustainable development. A sustained and long-term commitment is essential, so that women and men can work together for themselves, for their children and for society to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.
2. The Platform for Action reaffirms the fundamental principle set forth in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights, that the human rights of women and of the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. As an agenda for action, the Platform seeks to promote and protect the full enjoyment of all human rights and the fundamental freedoms of all women throughout their life cycle.

The Platform for Action identified 12 focus areas for the improvement of women's human rights: poverty, education, health, violence against women, effects of armed conflict, economic structures and politics, inequality of men and women in decision-making, gender equality, women's human rights, media, environment, and the girl child. The Conference emphasized that the objective of a reasonably efficient national human rights policy must be to operationalize the rights identified, articulated, and guaranteed in the international documents within particular political, economic, and cultural settings. This formulation implies that governments are committed to the promotion of women's human rights in their respective societies. When this is not the case, the difficulties that may exist in the transmission of universal human rights to the grassroots are exacerbated.

MAJOR PREMISES

Many Muslims believe that Islam contains the essentials of human rights and that its content, as God's revelation, is superior to ordinary law. Consequently, human rights documents must be presented in dialogue with Islamic tenets if they are to succeed in Muslim societies. Thus, a promising human rights education model should examine the argument that universal human rights contradict Islam.

A central premise of the human rights education model presented here is that universal human rights are consonant with the spirit of Islam. This foundational statement is based on the following propositions:

1. The Qur'an as the word of God is eternal, infinite, and mystical, understood in its eternal and infinite function by the Prophet only. All other mortals have received and understood it according to their human gifts. The religious experience—the experience of the “Word of God”—therefore, is by definition a personal experience, whereas obeying “religious law”—the *shari'a* rendered as *fiqh* in the major schools of jurisprudence—is obedience to man-made law.
2. The *shari'a*—the rules which have governed Muslim societies throughout the centuries—is historically determined and temporally situated because it has had to be rendered understandable to each age and community by reference to the needs of that age and community.
3. Because human society has been organized hierarchically and patriarchally across the ages, the *shari'a*, like all other religiously inspired laws, reflects the social realities specific to that age. Consequently, the *'ulama* have interpreted the Qur'an as well as the *sunna* to reflect the historical reality they have belonged to and favored. The interpreters of the Qur'an and the *sunna* have been able to offer different interpretations during different epochs precisely because the original “Word” is infinite in depth and scope. Hence, it is applicable to innumerable circumstances and is able to define evolving conditions infinitely.
4. There are specific verses in the Qur'an attesting that God foresees human limitation and consequently enjoins the Prophet not to force human beings in religious matters. Where the

Qur'an clearly states that some social policy must be followed, the statement is, by implication, always bound to the requirements of time and space.

5. The moral impulse of the “Word”—its eternal thrust—is toward equality for all. All instances of inequality are time and space dependent. Since the Qur'an values the human person as God's creation, it also values the individual person's right to live in equality with other persons under God.
6. These points produce a moral imperative to achieve gender equality within Islam's ethical compass. Thus, the political system must promote gender equality.
7. The Qur'an and the *sunna* substantiate these positions, provided that one moves significantly outside the traditional epistemology of Islamic *shari'a*. The Islamic Gnostic tradition directly supports them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE MODEL

Education models are communications models. Analytically, such models require a communicator, a medium, a message, and an audience. Interactively, the components mesh: the communicator and the audience become participants in the production and interpretation of the message as well as in the construction and validation of the medium. When successful, the process leads to constructive discourse. A successful communications model is always open-ended. Rather than aiming at incontrovertible truths, it produces dialogical frames where ideas can be freely discussed and analyzed. Thus, it helps individuals become participants in defining the relevance and validity of ideas regardless of their source or age. The appropriate function of a human rights education model, therefore, is to promote “rights” by facilitating individuals' participation in the definition of law or truth. In this sense, a successful education model problematizes and politicizes concepts, designing and defining freedom as it unfolds. This is what the present model hopes to do.

Communicator

Transmission of a women's human rights message may begin at any individual or organizational locus. The most natural places for it, however, are women's organizations, human rights organizations, and, where possible, appropriate government agencies. In this model, we assume that the originator and the facilitator will be the existing or future women's organizations aided by local and international women's rights advocates and human rights organizations. In many cases, we expect that the state or particular government agencies will assist.

Women's organizations in Muslim societies are mostly composed of and led by women in middle positions in public and private organizations, particularly women teachers in intermediate and higher education. Since they can reach a wide audience of young women and men, these women are favorably placed to promote human rights concepts. Many of them are well educated in values that transcend parochial boundaries. More importantly, their position as teachers and

role models for the youth give them moral authority and social acceptability. Furthermore, communicating is the very essence of their profession, an important advantage in constrained political and cultural conditions.

Human rights groups work to defend the rights enjoyed by individuals under existing constitutions and to promote rights not yet achieved. Although they may not possess the direct means of person-to-person communication available to women's organizations, they are, in theory, better equipped and usually better connected to the media.

When in the past Muslim states have supported women's human rights, they have usually done so as a component of their modernization policies. However, the resurgence of militant fundamentalism has caused a decrease in or reversal of this support in recent years. Hence, mobilizing the state in support of women's human rights is imperative if the goals of the Platform for Action are to be met. When fundamentalists do not directly control states, a human rights education model should help women's organizations and human rights groups empower the state to confront fundamentalism by opening political space to women, enacting affirmative action, and proposing legal reform. To achieve these goals, women's advocacy groups must engage in networking and building constituencies at both national and international levels. These activities, in turn, require a reasonably free and open political environment. The model, therefore, is geared to ideas, structures, and actions that enhance democracy and promote civil society.

Audience

This model is based on interaction, reciprocity of roles, and exchange of positions between communicators and their audiences. It does not aim to teach a particular truth but rather to establish dialogue. This model foresees communication among equals. The audience varies depending on the purpose of communication. It may be a government agency, a religious group, a village gathering, women in a workshop, or family members. The preponderant focus of rights communications, however, must be the youth. The young are not only more receptive intellectually and ethically, but as students, they are also more accessible. They constitute a significant majority of the population in the target societies. They are the future leaders. Given the criteria of human rights education, their participation in the discussion of rights, in and of itself, is a strong impetus to the development and democratization of civil society.

The model assumes that whenever a sustained dialogical situation develops, rights are promoted regardless of the content of the dialogue. For example, only when all sides have achieved a significant degree of consciousness of rights can a young woman in a Middle Eastern village or small town maintain an ongoing conversation about her rights as an individual in matters of love and marriage with her father, brother, or teacher.

Medium

The medium is multifaceted, including the mass media, formal and informal organizations, and groups and individuals. The more extensive and numerous the communications channels, the

more successful the human rights project. A good medium allows for dialogue. But even a one-way channel, such as radio or television, is better than no channel at all—even though radio and television are usually controlled by governments that may hold and advocate views which conflict with universal human rights.

The model assumes that most governments officially promote rights, even though many define rights in terms of values that may diverge with universal rights concepts. Still, when governments are forced to defend their vision of rights, they do so in recognition of a social consciousness they feel they must address. This makes the mass media, which is generally controlled by governments, a vehicle of rights. Thus, rights advocates must either convey their vision of rights on radio and TV broadcasts directly, or promote it indirectly by pressuring the government and other adversaries into defensive positions as often as possible. The globalization of communications technology—radio, TV satellites, the Internet, etc.—has enabled international rights organizations, states, and the corporations that control the international media to play an overwhelming role in transmitting the rights message.

In this model, the primary medium is face-to-face communication. We assume, however, that the facilitator and participants will bring to the dialogue a wealth of knowledge and experience derived from their personal and social circumstances. We also assume that due to the political dimension inherent in any dialogical situation, interpersonal communication will produce not only a new awareness of rights but also a propensity to communicate this awareness through the mass media whenever possible.

Message

The model assumes that a message of rights is authentic if it leads to the strengthening of a dialogical condition. This means that an efficient message cannot be validated independently of the communicator, the audience, and the medium. An efficient model designs messages that users can operationalize in the existing cultural, political, and technological environments.

As we have stated, all human rights messages in this model proceed from the universal values contained in the international human rights documents. This model will facilitate the problematization of patriarchal values. Individuals will discuss these in relation to the existing conditions on one hand, and to the universal precepts of rights on the other. The operative concepts here are identity and authenticity in a context of freedom and equality. Because individuals must receive and understand the message, the model must attend to the cultural and technological environment of the target population.

As with any collective social good, achieving women's human rights also requires an understanding of the political process and the importance of organizing for political action. Thus, human rights messages must promote the following activities: constituency building, networking, affirmative action, legal reform, and resistance to extremism.

THE GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE MANUAL

This manual consists of five parts: (1) an introductory statement about goals, premises, and methods; (2) a note to facilitators; (3) the learning exercises, comprising the material used by facilitators and participants to discuss women's rights; (4) an evaluation form; and (5) appendices of auxiliary material, including relevant *sura*, *hadith*, and proverbs, biographies of a number of Islam's early heroines, texts of four international documents, and a list of human rights and women's organizations in selected Muslim societies.

The manual's learning exercises may be conducted in 12 weekly sessions, with each (ideally) lasting between two hours 30 minutes and three hours 30 minutes. However, the manual yields itself to different time arrangements according to the participants' needs and convenience. The sessions begin with the more personal and familiar experiences of home and family life, moving gradually to the more distant subjects of community-oriented activity such as economic and political participation. Each session consists of several exercises designed to problematize otherwise routine social practices that impinge on women's basic rights and to optimize audience participation. In fact, the success of the exercises may be gauged by the extent of interaction among the workshop participants and between them and the facilitator during each session.

The facilitator plays an important role in bringing sessions to life by encouraging debate. The education model assumes that in most cases the facilitator is reasonably familiar with the basic ideas and principles contained in the international rights documents. The most relevant of these documents are attached to the manual in the national or local languages. Nevertheless, the manual is designed to work even when such familiarity does not exist—by focusing on the workshop participants' right to take positions on each issue and to interact, rather than on imparting or receiving the “correct” answers.

Finally, this manual is a first approximation of a truly dialogical model of exercises for promoting rights in Muslim societies. It was tested, evaluated, and improved in workshops in local conditions as follows:

During the first part of phase one, Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI) undertook the following activities:

1. SIGI conducted preparatory workshops in Washington, DC, Bangladesh, and Iran to identify themes, concepts, and priorities:
 - a. A group of Middle Eastern women scholars and activists, including SIGI members and affiliates, met to review, discuss, and propose themes and strategies for the promotion of women's human rights and gender-inclusive democracy in the Middle East, and by association, other Muslim societies. The meeting took place concurrently with the Middle East Studies Association's annual meeting in Washington in December 1995.

CLAIMING OUR RIGHTS

- b. Four regional workshops were conducted in Bangladesh to address the relationship between women's human rights and political participation in connection with the June 1996 national elections in Bangladesh.
 - c. A workshop was conducted in Tehran for ten Iranian university women to develop a methodology that would employ fiction as a catalyst for subverting cultural patterns which rely on traditional authority to deny women their rights and the opportunity to develop an authentic identity. The workshop participants used both personal experience and characters from fiction to illustrate the tension between individual freedom and communal authority.
2. SIGI identified and classified relevant Islamic as well as universal human rights-related texts and other materials for use in the development of the education model during part one, phase one, and, subsequently, in workshops that would test the model during phase one, part two of the project.
 3. Fiction and non-fiction sources, such as the Iranian epic *Shahnameh (Book of Kings)* and the Middle Eastern classic *A Thousand and One Nights*, were studied to identify role models for women in Muslim societies.
 4. SIGI studied various human rights and other education models to design a general framework for a dialogical model of women's human rights education.
 5. Facilitators from Bangladesh and Iran presented the results of their preparatory workshops. The SIGI Project Advisory Group evaluated these results at a day-long meeting on May 14, 1996 in Washington, DC, offering suggestions according to which modifications were made.
 6. SIGI developed a preliminary framework for a women's human rights education model to be tested in five Muslim societies during the second part of phase I of the project, October 1996 to October 1997.

During the second part:

1. Facilitators in five Muslim countries—Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, and Uzbekistan—tested the components of this model. SIGI chose these countries because of their diverse socio-political systems, cultures, and approaches to Islam.
2. The following women activists and educators conducted the workshops as facilitators: Mashuda Khatun Shefali (Bangladesh); Asma Khader (Jordan); Afifa Dirani Arsanios (Lebanon); Sharifah Tahir (Malaysia); and Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva (Uzbekistan). Each of these women has a distinguished history as women's human rights activist and educator. They will remain in regular contact with SIGI headquarters as advisers to the project.

3. The facilitators selected workshop participants to reflect a variety of educational, economic, and social backgrounds. For example, in Bangladesh the participants consisted primarily of village women, whereas in Uzbekistan the participants were educated, middle-class professionals. In Jordan, activists and university students were selected as participants, whereas the Lebanese participants were lower and lower middle class women, both Shi'is and Sunnis, from Beirut and the surrounding areas.
4. Workshops convened ten to 12 sessions, each lasting approximately three hours.
5. Facilitators conveyed to SIGI headquarters a detailed account of the operations and the results of their respective workshops at regular intervals.
6. The information received was collated, and when appropriate, incorporated into the manual in preparation for the meeting of the facilitators and the Project Advisory Group.

The diversity of the workshop participants enabled SIGI to adjust the model wherever necessary in order to produce a manual that has proven increasingly relevant and applicable to Muslim societies. For example, SIGI learned that the workshop participants in the test societies relied to varying extents on verses from the Qur'an to support their basic human rights. Consequently, we also sought to integrate portions of the major international human rights documents into the learning exercises, thus juxtaposing the universalist discourse with Islamic texts. Moreover, SIGI responded to the facilitators' and participants' concern that the manual should allow more time for discussions of women's rights to bodily integrity and to political participation. Specifically, we have added new learning exercises in Sessions 4 and 5 in order to link explicitly violations of women's bodily integrity to the violence perpetrated against them. In Session 11, which examines women's right to political participation, we added a new learning exercise that encourages women to tackle the circumstantial and personal challenges they face in assuming leadership positions.

The manual, designed to work in diverse social, cultural, and economic environments, will be reevaluated and readjusted as it is produced and implemented in different countries. The process of readjustment shall reflect SIGI's view that the underlying model, particularly as reflected in this human rights education manual for Muslim women, imparts both content and method. As content, it draws on specific texts and traditions to reinforce women's basic human rights. As method, it stimulates women to question those patriarchal understandings of culture that vested interests impose on society. Women may then reclaim their own cultures, interpreting texts and traditions in self-empowering ways. In this way, women may truly claim their rights.