

An Interview with Kelly J. Shannon

Kelly J. Shannon, Ph.D., is associate professor of History, the Chastain-Johnston Middle Eastern Studies Distinguished Professor of Peace Studies, and director of FAU's Peace, Justice, and Human Rights Initiative (PJHR) at Florida Atlantic University. Shannon is the winner of the 2019 Stuart L. Bernath Lecture Prize awarded by the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. Her publications include book chapters and journal articles on President Harry Truman and the Middle East, the international movement to end female



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genital mutilation (FGM), U.S. encounters with Saudi gender relations during the first Gulf War, and U.S. relations with Iran. Her first book, U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), is the subject of our interview.

Interview by Alexander Poster

How did you first become interested in Muslim women's human rights?

Back when I was a master's student at the University of Connecticut, I volunteered to TA for a women's studies course that included a unit on Muslim women and hijab. The professor assigned Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* to the course, which I read with great interest. That got me interested in the subject of women's rights in Muslim countries (and in Iranian history), so I started reading memoirs and novels by women from Iran and other Muslim-majority countries for fun. By the time I started my Ph.D., I knew I wanted to explore the subject in my own research. That eventually led me to my dissertation topic, which became the basis for this book.

Overall, how and why did women's human rights in the Islamic world become a concern for U.S. policymakers and activists beginning with the Jimmy Carter administration and continuing to the present?

That's a big question—it took me an entire book to explain that! The short version is that non-Muslim Americans had long exoticized, “othered,” and criticized Islamic societies for their treatment of women, but people in the United States didn't particularly feel compelled to advocate for women's rights in the Islamic

world until after 1979. There are a few reasons why 1979 was the turning point. First, the Iranian Revolution provided Americans with a stark example of women losing rights they already possessed, which drew Americans' attention to the issue and couldn't simply be dismissed as a matter of cultural difference. Second, the "rights revolution" in the United States in the mid-20th century—especially the civil rights movement and the Second Wave feminist movement—had made Americans more sensitive to issues of inequality. Third, the growth of the grassroots, transnational human rights movement by the 1970s also gave Americans new ways of understanding and talking about inequality and oppression worldwide. In the years after the Iranian Revolution, the American public expressed sustained and growing interest in the issue of women's rights in Islamic countries, for various reasons. As the global feminist movement grew and matured in the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. feminists joined forces with feminists from Muslim-majority countries to found transnational NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations] and lobby the UN and nation-states for policies that supported gender equality, etc. These activists successfully leveraged the U.S. public's interest in Muslim women to lobby the U.S. government in the 1990s to incorporate women's rights into its foreign policy. While it was the public and feminist activists who first identified Muslim women's human rights as a policy issue, their campaigns were successful by the mid- to late 1990s because the Clinton administration was sympathetic to feminists' arguments and included feminists in high-ranking positions, most notably First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. The Clinton administration then set the policy precedent that later administrations—with the exception of Trump's—followed.

What role did Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play in creating a lobby for Muslim women's human rights?

NGOs were central to the policy process. The story I tell simply would not have happened without them. Feminists acting through NGOs were the ones who gathered information about women's status in various countries, created transnational information and activist networks, educated women in Islamic communities about their rights, and hashed out the conceptual language, main issues, and tactics for activism by and for women in Muslim-majority societies. NGOs were also increasingly media- and politically savvy, so they were often successful in getting U.S. public support for their campaigns. Two of the big organizations I discuss in the book are Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and the Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI), both of which were led by women from Muslim countries in the 1990s. They were instrumental in

publicizing human rights violations against women, particularly in Afghanistan after the Taliban seized power in late 1996. SIGI was also instrumental in lobbying and advising the Clinton administration regarding how to respond to the Taliban's oppression of women. Yet it took more than NGOs to get women's rights on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Historically, NGOs had limited access to policymakers. One of the policy innovations introduced by the Clinton administration was the creation of a more systematic way of engaging with the NGO community. This change allowed groups like SIGI to have a seat at the table really for the first time.

You assert that the UN Decade for Women was an essential vehicle for NGOs that wanted to bring about policy changes. Do you believe that those NGOs would have failed without the UN Decade for Women?

No, I don't think NGOs would have failed without the UN Decade (1975–1985). I don't particularly like dwelling on counterfactuals. However, without the UN Decade—and its three world conferences on women, plus the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995—it would have been more difficult for women's rights activists to connect across national borders and form the networks necessary for creating NGOs like SIGI and WLUML. A lot of the NGO activists who later had a policy impact regarding Muslim women's human rights met and formed bonds through attending various UN conferences and events. With the rise of the internet in the 1990s and after, I think feminists from around the world still would have connected, but it would have been a much slower process. The NGOs central to my story likely wouldn't have existed in time to influence Clinton-era policy. The UN conferences also gave women's rights activists from around the world space to disagree and hash out the main issues facing women globally; those disagreements also would have played out over a much longer period. Without the face-to-face discussions, disagreements, and collaboration that emerged at the UN Decade events, non-Muslim U.S. feminists would have had a much harder time realizing that their concerns were not necessarily universal and that they should let women from other parts of the world speak and set the agenda. That realization was key to successful transnational feminist cooperation.

Which U.S. government records were the most useful to you?

Where do you wish you could see more records?

U.S. government records were very challenging for me to get. Since much of the book focuses on the 1990s, I faced the problem of government records classification. The records available at the Clinton Presidential Library were very

useful—mostly records from the First Lady’s Office—but the majority of records that looked like they were available at the library at the time turned out not to be available. I encountered box after box of withdrawal slips (stating the records had been re-classified) at the Clinton Library. It was frustrating. Luckily, the investigations related to 9/11 meant that many documents regarding Afghanistan had been declassified, so I ended up relying a lot on the State Department and CIA online FOIA databases for documents to help me flesh out the policy side of the story. I also conducted some oral history interviews to fill in the gaps, which were invaluable. I’d like to see a lot more presidential records and State Department records for the 1990s and after be declassified and made available to researchers. In my research in general, FRUS [Foreign Relations of the United States series] is invaluable. I hope the planned future FRUS volumes on the Clinton period are published on schedule.

How did the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the events that followed change American perceptions of Islam?

An important Iranian in my book—one who appears in most of my chapters and who had an important influence on U.S. policy—is Mahnaz Afkhami, the former minister of Women’s Affairs under the Shah who was exiled to the United States during the revolution and who was the leader of SIGI in the 1990s. The Shah mattered to my analysis only insofar as his policies on women’s rights—which were largely driven by elite Iranian women, like Afkhami—opened up opportunities for women and, in some cases, represented some of the most progressive women’s rights policies in the world by the 1970s. While many different groups of Iranians rose up against the Shah, the fundamentalist faction counted the Shah’s women’s rights policies among their grievances against his government. Because the fundamentalists eventually won the power struggle for control of Iran after the Shah fell—represented by Ayatollah Khomeini—rolling back women’s rights was central to their agenda of imposing a radically conservative version of Islam on the country. I argue that this moment—the revolution and Iranian women’s loss of rights—was the catalyst that captured Americans’ attention around the issue of Muslim women’s human rights thereafter. Different groups of Americans opposed the Khomeini government’s treatment of women for different reasons—as I outline in Chapter 1—but the common wisdom in the United States that emerged out of the revolution held that Muslim men were fanatics who oppressed women. Iran became the poster child for the Islamic oppression of women. Yet because Iranian women fought against their loss of rights in 1979–1980, they emerged as sympathetic figures who wanted the same freedoms many Americans enjoyed.

While by the 1990s many Americans saw Muslim women as silent, veiled victims of oppression in need of saving, I think at least in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian revolution, Muslim women became more legible and more human in the American public discourse than they had been earlier.

To what extent did feminist activists cooperate with the patriarchy in charge of U.S. foreign policy when it came to Muslim women’s human rights?

I discuss in the book how some non-Muslim U.S. feminists, like the members of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), engaged in “colonial feminism” that cast women in Muslim societies as in need of American rescue. This attitude led the FMF to support policies that most other feminists opposed at the time, like the FMF’s staunch support for the George W. Bush administration’s invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. Most feminists see war and military intervention as always harmful to women. War was the reason the situation for Afghan women had declined so precipitously since the 1970s. Most Afghan feminists vocally opposed U.S. military intervention in 2001, as did many other U.S.-based feminists, both Muslim and non-Muslim. I think that groups like the FMF ended up advocating the positions they did because those were the American women—mostly white and elite—who had not participated in the transnational discussions and debates during the UN Decade. They didn’t have international experience or real knowledge of Muslim women’s situations.

If by “cooperating with the patriarchy” you mean feminists engaging with U.S. foreign policymakers, then I think it’s a matter of perspective. There were (and are) debates within feminist circles about this. Do you work within the system to some extent in order to change it? Or do you refuse to engage with the system and then try to work outside it to replace the system with something better? In my view, the feminist NGOs like SIGI who engaged with U.S. policymakers and the feminists working from within the U.S. government were not necessarily cooperating with the patriarchy. They were being pragmatic and using the power systems that existed to make positive change for women and to try to change the system incrementally to become more equitable and just. In the process, they did change the system in important and, in some cases, durable ways. It takes power to create change, and a lot of power resided in the U.S. government. Feminist NGOs like SIGI were also able to steer Clinton-era policymakers away from embracing a “colonial feminist” approach toward one that was more in line with transnational feminism at the time. Plus, the Clinton administration attempted to address gender inequality at home and did not single out Islamic societies in its women’s rights policies. This made those policies more successful than those of the Bush administration,

which embraced a rescue narrative, embraced only a limited definition of women's rights, did not advance women's equality at home, and paired its gender policies in Afghanistan and Iraq with U.S. military intervention.

Many documents from the Clinton administration will be declassified during the next 10 years. If you were to continue this project, where could you see your research going?

I've moved onto different projects, so I don't know if I'll come back to this period. I'm currently working on a book on U.S. relations with Iran from 1905 to 1953. For now, I decided not to continue with the 1990s precisely because of the issue of document declassification and some problematic changes that have happened within NARA [National Archives and Records Administration] and the presidential libraries that will make it more difficult for researchers to access information. Even though I did the research for my book several years ago, getting government documents from the 1990s is still really difficult. If hypothetically a lot more documents become available from the Clinton administration in the next decade, I would love to write a book analyzing the administration's human rights and democracy-promotion policies more broadly—HIV/AIDS, peacemaking attempts in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, the conundrum of responding to the genocides in Rwanda and the Balkans, women's rights policies (of course), etc.—and put those policies in conversation with the administration's other, more conventional policies. How, for instance, did the administration square its general emphasis on human rights with imposing sanctions on Iraq, which mostly harmed Iraqi civilians? A lot of interesting work remains to be done on post-Cold War foreign relations, so I hope the records become available soon.

There was an “ethnic cleansing” of Bosnian Muslims during the 1990s. How did that event affect the public narrative toward women in the Muslim world?

To be honest, I didn't really include Bosnia in the book because it didn't appear much in my sources. I think there was a lot of public sympathy for Bosnians in the United States during the genocide, but because most Bosnian Muslims were not particularly religious, they were European, and Americans had little understanding of the history and cultures of the Balkans, I didn't see much discussion of Bosnian women's problems at the time as being part of the broader problems facing Muslim women. The genocide they faced was its own issue. If I were to write that second book on the Clinton administration someday, I would include an analysis of how feminist activists and Clinton-era policymakers addressed women's rights issues that came out of Bosnia

(and Rwanda), like the use of rape as a weapon of war or a tool of “ethnic cleansing.” But aside from Bosnians being killed by Serbs because of their ethnicity and religion, I didn’t see much American discussion at the time of Bosnians as Muslims. I don’t think it had much impact on the American narrative about the Islamic world, specifically.

Islam is practiced across the world, including by millions in China and Southeast Asia. Did you find a racial component in how Muslims in different nations were portrayed by western activists and policymakers?

I think race is always a factor, but it wasn’t explicit in a lot of the sources I used. Historically, Americans have long racialized Muslims. Karine Walther’s *Sacred Interests* provides a really good exploration of American racialization of Muslim peoples, like the Filipino Moros, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But in the sources for my time period, Americans in general evinced a really narrow understanding of what the “Islamic world” actually was/is, so the issue of race became both complicated and subtle. Most Americans thought of the Arab Middle East when they thought of Islam, and I explain why in the book. So, while the U.S. discussions of Muslim women’s rights that I traced did sometimes expand to include women in places like Somalia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, I think most Americans didn’t (and still don’t) have a sense of the great variety of Muslim peoples worldwide. They also didn’t understand that not all Arabs are Muslim, that not all Middle Eastern countries have Arab majorities, etc. I think it’s also important to treat the issue of race and Islam carefully because a religion is not a racial group. Muslims hail from all races and many, many countries across the globe. The feminist activists and most of the policymakers I studied in the book understood this, so race was not as much of a factor in their discussions of Muslim women as you might expect. In public discourse, yes, racism often mixed with Orientalism and Islamophobia, but the racial discourse was mostly focused on Arabs.

The presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia seems particularly important in retrospect. Not only did it give rise to narratives in America about Muslim women’s human rights, but it also infuriated Islamic extremists such as Osama bin Laden. In which most critical ways was the First Gulf War (1990–91) a watershed moment changing how different peoples perceived each other?

It was the first war when American servicewomen served near the front. Although women were still not allowed to hold combat positions, the U.S. military had to navigate having large numbers of female soldiers deploy overseas during a war. The fact that those servicewomen were deployed to a country—Saudi Arabia—where

gender roles were radically different was a culture shock for the American women soldiers and for the Saudis. As I explain in the book, because U.S. journalists were often not allowed access to the battlefield, they began intense reporting on this gender-related “clash of cultures.” These stories cemented the idea in the mind of the American public that Muslim men oppress women, and American servicewomen of course brought their experiences of being limited by Saudi gender norms home with them. Meanwhile, Saudi women who wanted more equality and rights, like the right to drive, used the presence of the global news media to stage the country’s first “drive-in” protest. These protests were crushed, but I think the presence of the Americans during the war emboldened the protesters. That protest paved the way for the more recent Saudi women’s activism, which also included a “drive-in.” I wasn’t able to do research in Saudi Arabia, but of course the presence of U.S. soldiers in the country—the home of Islam’s two holiest cities—certainly infuriated people like Osama bin Laden and added to their grievances against the United States. Finally, American feminist organizations and some vocal members of the public protested the Gulf War because the U.S. allies of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait oppressed women and practiced what feminists called “gender apartheid.” There was a noticeable gender gap in public opinion on the war as a result. These protests did not succeed in influencing George H.W. Bush’s policies, but it was the first time a large number of Americans argued that women’s rights should be a major factor in U.S. foreign policy decisions. That laid the groundwork for future feminist lobbying campaigns that were successful during the Clinton years and after, and groups like the FMF used the term “gender apartheid” later in their campaigns against the Taliban.

Did you find any meaningful discussion of differing traditions of masculinity after the rise of the Taliban?

No. That doesn’t mean the discussion wasn’t there. I just didn’t explore it and didn’t come across much discussion of differing traditions of masculinity in my sources. Plus, the overwhelming majority of books in my field focus on men. Even the ones who use gender analysis mostly focus on men and masculinity. I wanted to keep women central to my analysis. I know there is a growing literature on Islamic masculinities that has been published in the past several years, but that topic wasn’t my focus.

Did you find a Sunni-Shi’a divide in how activists or policymakers treated women’s human rights in the Muslim world?

Not really. There is certainly a divide at the local and regional level at times, but because I was focused on the transnational activist and policymaking level, I didn’t

see very much discussion of Sunnis vs. Shi'as. Feminist activists tended to treat patriarchy as the problem, so for them whether groups were Sunni or Shi'a tended to matter more on the local, strategic level and less at the global, UN, and U.S. level. All major religions are patriarchal, so Islam wasn't the particular problem for most feminists. American policymakers of course had to be knowledgeable about the societies and cultures of the different countries they dealt with, but at least during the Clinton years, women's rights policies were about women's human rights everywhere. Clinton-era policymakers didn't single out Muslims in particular, so they adopted a transnational feminist and human rights approach to the issue rather than one focused on religious particularities (at least at the macro level—when implementing policy at the local level, obviously local cultures mattered in how that policy took shape). Even within the Islamic world, the divide isn't always that meaningful. The Islamic Republic of Iran, for instance, which is Shi'a, sought to serve as a model for Islamic movements around the world and offered support, usually regardless of whether those groups were Sunni or Shi'a.

Did you find any activist groups that tried to address Muslim women's human rights on the ground without appealing to the global patriarchy?

I'm not sure I understand your question. What specifically do you mean by "the global patriarchy"? If you mean the UN and the U.S. government, then yes. A lot of women's rights groups have operated locally and have not sought to engage the global policy community in their work. Their work is embedded in their local contexts and communities. In a lot of instances, if these groups appear to be the lackeys of foreigners, it can damage their credibility and hamper their efforts. These groups, however, still have had to navigate their own government's policies. Many of these groups still have sought support from women's rights activists and organizations in other countries. Solidarity across borders, sharing resources, and outside public pressure on local governments are often very useful to on-the-ground campaigns for women's rights. This support structure has created a global network of feminist NGOs that operate from the ground level to the state level to the international and transnational level. And this wasn't a factor in the time period I examined, but I think social media today allows a lot of grassroots women's organizations to build global networks and get international public support without engaging with the UN or United States government. Yet, I think it's getting harder and harder for women's rights organizations not to get tangled up with capitalism in some way, which is part of the global patriarchal structure. U.S. policies and behavior also do continue to have an outsized impact on people around the world, so it's important for at least some feminist activists to remain engaged with U.S. policymakers. The

past four years certainly demonstrated the damage that an actively anti-feminist U.S. presidency can unleash on women everywhere.

Can you elaborate on how the George W. Bush administration's approach to Muslim women's human rights differed from that of the Clinton administration?

I lay this out better in the book. In general, the Clinton administration avoided taking a colonial feminist approach in its women's rights policies, while the Bush administration's approach was openly colonialist. The Clinton administration sought to advance women's equality everywhere, including at home, and it did not cast the United States as a paragon of gender equality. That made its efforts to work with women's rights activists worldwide more authentic. Its willingness to work alongside local women's groups and let them set the agenda was noteworthy. The Clinton administration didn't single out Muslim societies as particularly oppressive of women. Its policies on Muslim women's human rights were part of its broader focus on women's rights and democratization everywhere. It also brought in NGOs with expertise on the particular countries it was dealing with and women from those countries—like consulting SIGI on Afghanistan, which not only had women from Afghanistan and other Muslim-majority countries as its members but also had close ties with grassroots Afghan women's organizations. The administration also had feminists in high-ranking positions, as I already explained, who knew the issues. That made a difference in how the administration saw women's rights, and it led the administration to try to mainstream women's rights as a policy priority across the executive branch.

While I think George W. Bush believed in certain rights for women—particularly political and civil rights—he and his top policymakers were not feminists. They lacked real knowledge of the issues and of the countries with which they dealt. They consulted NGOs like the FMF that did not have global experience and that adopted a colonial feminist approach to places like Afghanistan. They tried to roll back women's reproductive rights at home. They singled out Muslim-majority countries for criticism when it came to women's equality. And the Bush administration tried to force women's equality on countries like Afghanistan by using a top-down approach and by pairing these policies with military intervention. That approach was bound to engender local resistance. Opposing women's rights became a way of opposing the U.S. military occupation, and it gave radical groups an effective way of casting local women's rights activists as “inauthentic” and Western lackeys. I think Bush genuinely was concerned about Afghan women's rights—and later, Iraqi women—but his administration's approach was deeply problematic.

At the same time that the George W. Bush administration was using Muslim women's rights as a political cudgel, it re-established the Mexico City Policy on international funding for abortion. How did some of the feminist NGOs you discuss react to contradictions such as these?

Most of the feminist NGOs at the time saw the Bush administration as an adversary from day one, and that never changed. So they decried the Mexico City Policy along with the administration's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, its colonial approach to women's rights, etc. Even groups like the FMF, which was cozy with the Bush administration after 9/11, still criticized Bush's retrograde reproductive rights policies. The FMF initially was a domestically oriented U.S. group that focused mainly on reproductive rights before it got interested in international affairs in the early- to mid-1990s. They kept fighting things like the Mexico City Policy, even as they supported Bush's policies on Afghanistan. But again, the overwhelming majority of feminist NGOs always saw the Bush administration as a problem. Most saw Bush's approach to women's rights in Muslim countries as a smokescreen for U.S. imperialism, so his policies on abortion just highlighted his administration's hypocrisy for them.

Do you think embedded attitudes about Muslims and women's human rights constrain foreign policy attitudes today, such as those concerning Chinese state violence against the Uighur people?

I think they do to some extent, but we're also living in a very different world than we were even back when Barack Obama was in office. Things have shifted. I think the issue with Chinese oppression of the Uighurs has less to do with American attitudes about Islam and more to do with the fact that China is a major superpower and the United States simply does not have the leverage to compel much of a change in Chinese behavior right now. The United States is not as powerful as it once was. Its main rivals—China and Russia—are not democracies and don't particularly care about human rights. The United States has also totally lost credibility on human rights because of the Trump administration. The United States has to rebuild its reputation and credibility before other countries will listen to it when it comes to human rights, and it has to make meaningful changes at home that advance human rights, as well. Unfortunately, the U.S. public in general also doesn't seem to care as much about human rights as it once did. There will always be U.S. activists and organizations who care about human rights violations in other countries, but it's more difficult presently to create a public campaign around issues like the Uighurs in China than may have been possible in the 1990s.

Overall, how do investigations of the American focus on Muslim women’s human rights over the past five decades improve our understanding of the connections between human rights and U.S. foreign policy?

I hope folks will read my book to get a clear answer on this. In sum, I think my book shows that the division between “hard power”—military concerns, geostrategy, economics—and “soft power”—culture, human rights, etc.—is artificial and has broken down since the end of the Cold War. Hard and soft power are intertwined, and issues like women’s equality are intimately connected to other areas of the U.S. national interest, like democracy and prosperity. My book also shows how activists in the past successfully leveraged public opinion to lobby for big changes in U.S. policy that took women’s human rights more seriously and that, in many cases, made the U.S. government more feminist. It also demonstrates the problems when policymakers are less informed and adopt a less feminist, more colonial approach to human rights. The United States is part of the world. It has to act like it. It has to address human rights at home. It has to create genuine partnerships worldwide and let people from other countries—like Muslim women—set the agenda in a lot of cases in order to advance human rights in a meaningful way. Human rights have to be a common project, or else they run the risk of becoming yet another form of U.S. imperialism. I think my book shows what’s possible, as well as what the dangers are, when it comes to integrating human rights into U.S. foreign policy.

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