



PROJECT MUSE®

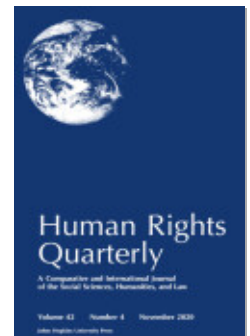
---

*U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights* by Kelly  
J. Shannon (review)

Sarah B. Snyder

Human Rights Quarterly, Volume 42, Number 4, November 2020, pp. 967-969  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2020.0055>



➔ *For additional information about this article*  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/773458>

and provide statistics, but they never offer sources, which sets a poor example for general readers and especially our students. However, the suggested reading sections that end each chapter offer a thoughtful and sometimes extensive list of scholarly recommendations for further study on the topics explored in each chapter. Resources such as these contribute to this book remaining a foundational text in human rights.

**Sarita Cargas\***  
**University of New Mexico**

\* *Sarita Cargas is an Associate Professor teaching human rights at the University of New Mexico. Her research focus is on the pedagogy of human rights in higher education and methods for teaching critical thinking. Her new book, *Disciplining Human Rights* (2020) University of Pennsylvania Press is about teaching human rights in higher education.*

**Kelly J. Shannon, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), ISBN 9780812249675, 269 pages.**

Kelly J. Shannon's well written and concise account explores how and why the American public and later the United States government came to care about the human rights of Muslim women. She shows that concern about Muslim women's rights has intersected with US foreign policy in meaningful ways over the last forty years, yet no historical work has previously examined this aspect.

In particular, with *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women's Human Rights*,

Shannon demonstrates the link between the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the "human rights revolution" of previous years. Her work studies how Americans concerned about the abrogation of women's rights in Iran worked to make women there "less alien" to the US public.<sup>1</sup> Shannon shows how activists engaged in a process of "symbolic politics," to use Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's term, by representing Iranian women in the US.<sup>2</sup> Such an effort, through which distant victims are made immediate, has been central to effective human rights advocacy.

As the chapters progress, Shannon investigates a second intersection of revolutions—that of the rise of the international women's movement with the human rights movement. There has been limited scholarship on the United Nations Decade for Women (1975 to 1985), and Shannon's book shows why many scholars may benefit from greater examination of the role of the United Nations in shaping attention to human rights internationally. In Shannon's analysis, the decade was essential: "Without the United Nations Decade for Women, it is unlikely that the growing American attention to Muslim women's rights following the Iranian Revolution would have moved beyond the public sphere and into policy."<sup>3</sup>

Breaking with the traditional methodology of histories of US foreign relations, Shannon uses limited documents from presidential libraries or the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series. In part this is because, as she highlights with the Carter years, the documentary record is silent on the is-

- 
1. KELLY J. SHANNON, *U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND MUSLIM WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS* 35 (2018).
  2. MARGARET KECK & KATHRYN SIKKINK, *ACTIVISTS BEYOND BORDERS: ADVOCACY NETWORKS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS* 16 (1998).
  3. SHANNON, *supra* note 1, at 77.

sue of Muslim women's human rights. Furthermore, Shannon undoubtedly faced issues of inaccessible records given the recent period in which she was working. But, it also reflects a different appraisal of the sources most significant to her analysis. Shannon frames each chapter with a cultural phenomenon of the time, such as Betty Mahmoody's memoir *Not Without My Daughter* and Nawal el Saadawi's book *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Here, like Mark Philip Bradley's recent work *The World Reimagined*, she seeks to show how cultural production influenced those in the United States to care about violations of women's rights in the Muslim world. Her approach reveals how human rights issues permeated and resonated in US culture and public life.

Importantly, in Shannon's evaluation of how films, memoirs, and novels influenced US awareness of and concern about violations of Muslim women's rights, she highlights how many influential cultural works were written or created by Muslim women. They claimed human rights for themselves and rebutted critiques circulating at the time that human rights were merely a foreign ploy to impose a new form of Western imperialism. Their work was significant because, as Shannon shows, Western women too often focused on the veil, which distorted their understanding of Muslim women's concerns. In other methodological innovations, she illustrates how scholarship by historians Judith Tucker and Nikki Keddie as well as anthropologist Lois Beck shaped United States attitudes regarding women's rights.<sup>4</sup> In her analysis of US reactions to the "gender apartheid" in Saudi Arabia during the First Gulf War,

Shannon makes excellent use of Department of Army oral history interviews with women who served there. She has also done considerable analysis of the US media coverage in the years after the Iranian Revolution and found that it characterized Islamic fundamentalism as "a threat both to U.S. interests and to women's human rights."<sup>5</sup>

Shannon shows that she is well versed in Orientalist tropes, identifying them in many cultural and media depictions of Muslim women in these years. Her work, among others, shows that in the years since Andrew J. Rotter's *American Historical Review* article, "Saidism Without Said: Orientalism and U.S. Diplomatic History," diplomatic historians have been far more willing to engage with Said and his ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Her research studies women in two respects: most significantly as those suffering violations of their human rights and also as the architects of US foreign policy. They are not just victims or objects but also actors with agency who can shift the direction of US policy, in part because in the years Shannon studies, they—Madeline Albright, Condoleezza Rice, Karen Hughes, and Hilary Clinton—are formulating and implementing it. As notable as the prominent place of female diplomats will be for many readers of this book, Shannon could have done more to highlight the place of men, or male allies more specifically, in these movements.

Shannon slowly builds up to what she sees as the real impact of changing discourses about and interest in Muslim women's rights, including the 1996 passage of legislation criminalizing female genital mutilation. For Shannon, the Clin-

4. *Id.* at 200.

5. *Id.* at 48–49.

6. Andrew J. Rotter, *Saidism Without Said: Orientalism and U.S. Diplomatic History*, 105 *AM. HIST. REV.* 1205 (2000).

ton administration was characterized by a “broader, revolutionary shift in foreign policy priorities” that included efforts “to institutionalize the protection and promotion of women’s human rights as a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy.”<sup>7</sup> She reveals how Clinton administration officials drew upon the language of the international women’s movement to frame US policy, whether in international conferences or testifying before Congress. The Clinton administration’s new approach was manifested not only in its rhetoric but also in bureaucratic reforms at the White House and the State Department, including a new President’s Interagency Council on Women and a Senior Coordinator for International Women’s Issues. Shannon’s research shows how bureaucratic reorganization can produce new policies such as the administration’s decision not to recognize the Taliban, which she argues was “the crucial moment when women’s human rights concerns were integrated seriously into U.S. foreign policy toward the Islamic world.”<sup>8</sup>

In analyzing George W. Bush’s administration’s use of Afghan and Iraqi women’s human rights as a matter of concern to US foreign policy, Shannon acknowledges its “appropriation” of a feminist discourse but argues this act was a signal of these feminists’ “success in reframing the terms of U.S. foreign policy debate.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Shannon highlights a number of elements of Bush’s human rights record that she evaluates positively, revealing a nuanced approach not adopted by many who evaluate his administration’s record on human rights.

Despite the positive movement of the Clinton and Bush years that Shannon details, she appraised Obama’s

presidency disappointedly and expresses alarm at Donald Trump’s election. Future scholars will assess the degree to which the integration of women’s human rights into US foreign policy was long lasting or ephemeral.

**Sarah B. Snyder\***  
American University

\* Sarah B. Snyder is a professor in American University’s School of International Service. She is the author of two award-winning books, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2018) and *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

**Gamze Erdem Türkelli, *Children’s Rights and Business: Governing Obligations and Responsibility* (Cambridge University Press 2020) ISBN 9781108681841; 392 pages.**

Gamze Erdem Türkelli’s book *Children’s Rights and Business* is an extraordinary academic achievement that will be quite useful to human rights practitioners. For one thing, it brings together two topics that, inexplicably enough, have generally remained apart from one another. Beyond this, the book delivers a devastating blow to the state-centric myopia of international law, including international human rights law, simultaneously providing a broadside against the way in which “responsibility” under human rights law has been assigned.

Erdem Türkelli begins by establishing the particular vulnerability of children to business and then goes on to show

7. SHANNON, *supra* note 1, at 125.

8. *Id.* at 154.

9. *Id.* at 168.