

## Gender Across Cultures: An Interview with Nonie Darwish

Joanie Eppinga

*Nonie Darwish grew up in Gaza and Cairo. When she was 8 years old her father, a high-ranking military officer, was killed in an act of terrorism, making him a shahid, or martyr for jihad. Darwish came to America when she was 30 and was struck by the freedoms enjoyed in her new country; she has felt compelled to speak out for tolerance since 9/11. She is the author of *Now They Call Me Infidel: Why I Renounced Jihad for America, Israel, and the War on Terror* and the originator of the group *Arabs for Israel* ([www.arabsforisrael.com](http://www.arabsforisrael.com)). Darwish's second book, *Cruel and Usual Punishment, about the conditions of Muslim women under Sharia (Islamic law)*, will be published in 2008. Darwish spoke with our editor on February 29, 2008.*

*\*Editor's note: Any opinions expressed by the interviewee are hers alone and are not necessarily those of the Institute for Action Against Hate.*

EPPINGA: *In your first book you wrote, "In the world of the Muslim man, the female in his family is the one object over which he may have power." Can you say more about that?*

DARWISH: Islam gives men so much power over women. In some instances some of the *hadith* [religious teachings] ask a woman to almost worship him. Total obedience is expected. He has the right to beat a rebellious wife, and "rebellious" could be anything; he can interpret that. At the same time, he does not, according to Sharia, Islamic law, he does not have to give a reason why he beats his wife. Beating is allowed for a rebellious woman, but "rebellious" is not defined. And then if it happens, he doesn't have to give a reason. A man doesn't have to give a reason for divorcing his wife, for beating his wife, or for having a second or third or fourth wife. It's within his right, as he interprets his right. Islamic law is based on the Qur'an, but also on sources written hundreds of years after Mohammed died about what he supposedly had said, and also his example in his life. So Muslims have to live—even if you are not a Muslim born in the Arabian Peninsula culture—that culture has been codified into laws for all Muslims to live by through Sharia wherever you live, wherever you are. So if the Arabian Peninsula environment, because of the desert sandstorms, made people wear head garments to protect their faces from the sandstorms, they codified it into Islamic law.

EPPINGA: *How does the subjugation of women in the Arab culture affect the men in that culture?*

DARWISH: It affects them, in my opinion, when you smother someone with too many laws for his own pleasure, which is what Islam did—Islamic law has given so many privileges to men: sexual privileges, authority privileges, power privileges—over his women, that it has corrupted many of them. It doesn't mean that every Muslim man is bad; but it's really tempting to be corrupted by all these laws. Especially in a time of trouble in a marriage, instead of going to counseling, or trying to improve the marriage, get a second wife! Or beat her up! Unfortunately, a Muslim man who wants to be corrupted can be easily corrupted under Islamic law.

Islamic Sharia law has created a very hostile relationship between men and women. The relationship is not based on love. A woman doesn't become an intellectual partner. I have lived in the Middle East for 30 years, and I have never seen a couple just having fun together! The roles are so defined.

EPPINGA: *Do you see couples being affectionate at all?*

DARWISH: No, it's prohibited.

EPPINGA: *I mean not just in a physical way—*

DARWISH: Oh yes, of course. There are love stories. But dating is not allowed, so if affection happens, it has to be in secret. You can't hug your girlfriend if you meet her on the street. You just can't. I was just reading a book by an Egyptian [Mark Gabriel] called *Islam and the Jews*, and he mentioned that after the peace treaty when the Israelis started coming to visit Egypt, in a tourist area an Israeli man hugged his Egyptian girlfriend, or gave her a kiss or something, and he was actually stabbed to death. It's so unacceptable that you can attract hostility if you do that.

EPPINGA: *How do these conditions affect relationships among women in Arab cultures?*

DARWISH: Because women are limited by Sharia from doing a lot of things on their own, like traveling—they don't even go to mosques—you don't have areas of congregation for women to really get to know each other and compare notes. Women are mostly in the home, and lately, in the last few decades, they do work in Egypt, of course, but even when they work, they're supposed to go to work and come home and that's it. Friendships between women are not close friendships. It's very superficial. There's a

2007/08]

GENDER ACROSS CULTURES

125

lot of jealousy and envy. There's a lot of manipulation. There's a lot of *fear* from each other. And all of this, in my opinion, goes back to polygamy. Because when a woman feels that any other woman could be a rival, it makes her look at her own sex in a different way, not as somebody to support or feel like you have mutual interests that you have to help each other with. The attitude is not like that. There is a lot of hostility and jealousy between women. Women in Islam don't support each other.

For my second book I'm doing so much more research; I really delved into this and found so much material as to why women in Islam *don't* support each other. The women of Afghanistan are so oppressed. In Iran right now, there are about seven women who are awaiting being stoned to death. Where are the Muslim women who say, "We are moderates"? Where are they? Why aren't they demonstrating? These are questions the West has to ask, and they're not asking. Why do we have to wait for Westerners, Christians and Jews, to stand up and say, "It's not a good idea"? We have to stand against, for example, the death penalty for apostasy, or stoning women for having extramarital affairs, or killing women who have sex outside of marriage. Where are the moderate Muslim women? The West doesn't even ask these questions.

When I spoke about the oppression of Muslim women at Wellesley College a few months ago, I was attacked by a large number of Muslim girls. This is an all-girls college, and because it's an all-girls college it's a little bit attractive for many Muslim girls to go there. There was a huge number of Muslim covered-up girls in the audience. Not that all Muslim girls disagree with me. There are always at least one or two Muslim girls who come up to me and hug me, buy my book, and say, "Thank you so much, you opened our eyes" and stuff like that. But there was a Muslim student union on campus headed by a chaplain, a Muslim chaplain hired by the college. She congregated this large number of Muslim girls. As I was speaking about oppression of women, I was saying, "Where are the Muslim moderates? In the name of Islam, we have to stand by those Muslim sisters of ours," and they were making faces at me as I was saying that. They couldn't care less. They acted like they couldn't care less about the tragedy I'm exposing. They looked at me as though I'm a liar, I'm exaggerating; and when I spoke about the Jews being called apes and pigs in mosques—which I grew up with, Jews being called apes and pigs from the pulpits of the mosques—when I said that (and it's documented, it's not like I'm inventing it), one of the girls in the audience screamed, "You're a liar!" She left the Arab world when she was three. She never heard it in a mosque, so she doesn't judge by people who lived there all their lives.

EPPINGA: *What, in your opinion, would be the attitude of a truly moderate Muslim man toward women?*

DARWISH: I know lovely Muslim men who treat women well. But they do that *despite* what the Qur'an tells them, not because they are good Muslims. It is because their humanity rises above their religious education. It's out of their own human nature that they treat women right, and also by emulating the West. They see how Western men treat women and use that as an example.

EPPINGA: *Tell me more about the differences in the way women are perceived in Arab culture and Western culture.*

DARWISH: Women in Arab culture are given a lot of messages of shaming. Shaming of their bodies, shaming that they should cover up. The word *ourah* means the genitals of a woman. In Muslim religious teaching, the whole body of a woman is *ourah*. It's as erotic as the genitals, and that's why every part of her body has to be covered. People say, "Even her face is *ourah*. Even her hands are *ourah*." It's so erotic for a man to see it that it's her responsibility to hide it, not the man's. So a man, at the same time, is flattered by and boasts about his sexuality and his sexual appetite; he's proud of it, and it's the problem of the woman to cover up. I have never seen a nationality on earth that gets aroused so much by women! It's unbelievable! A woman in the West is respected if she wears a bikini in the summer heat; men learned how to respect the choices of clothes for women. I could walk half naked in the summer heat and it might be that nobody would look; but in the Arab world a woman's business and her body comfort is everyone's business. It is the right of men to look and criticize and even attack women who do not abide by Islamic law. In Turkey, lately, two schoolgirls were attacked by having some chemical acid thrown on their legs when they wore knee-length skirts!

EPPINGA: *So would it be accurate to say that in your opinion women are perceived primarily and almost exclusively as sexual objects?*

DARWISH: Oh, absolutely. The Muslim marriage contract itself has three spaces in it for other women. I have a chapter in my new book called "The Muslim Marriage Contract." Marriage itself is, "Here's your dowry, now give me your sexual organs for my pleasure." It's a contract. It's a contract for sex.

Not all Muslim countries are the same. It's a huge world with a lot of variations.

2007/08]

GENDER ACROSS CULTURES

127

EPPINGA: *Is female genital mutilation still widely practiced in Arab cultures?*

DARWISH: The religious law changes depending on the sect of Islam. For example in Syria they don't practice it; in Egypt they practice it. It depends where you're located in the Muslim world. In Egypt they follow a tradition, an Islamic Sharia tradition that allows it; however, lately the Egyptian government has denounced it. But it still happens because deep down people believe this is a religious order, even though the government and some Muslim leaders have denounced it officially.

EPPINGA: *What is it supposed to accomplish?*

DARWISH: It's supposed to make the woman not behave sexually, so she will not be easily aroused and men can trust her more. It's a barbaric thing. It happened to my mother and all her generation. Ninety-six percent of the Egyptian women in her generation have undergone that.

EPPINGA: *Did they just accept it?*

DARWISH: Yes. Women took their daughters to have it done. Recently an Egyptian girl died from an infection after it, and that's why they spoke against it, but until today probably eighty percent of Egyptian girls have undergone it. After World War II the government was speaking against it, but only the educated class stopped doing it. And the educated class in Egypt is about ten percent, twenty percent.

EPPINGA: *What has been the response to your book among Arabs?*

DARWISH: My book will probably never be sold in the Muslim world. There is a lot of censorship in the Muslim world. Mostly nobody's reading it there, but I have a few people there who have read it and admire it a lot—more Christians than Muslims. I received one email from an Egyptian Muslim, an intellectual, who read it and admired it very much; however, most of the Arab world is very angry about this book.

EPPINGA: *Do you feel threatened?*

DARWISH: Absolutely, yes. I haven't had direct death threats, but I do get emails arguing about the book and telling me, "You know what happens to people who write this and that?"

EPPINGA: *I wonder if the fact that women are seen as inferior might protect*

*you in an odd way, because people might think, "Well, she's a woman; she's not worth listening to anyway."*

DARWISH: Oh no, that's a bigger violation! The rebellious woman has to be punished under Islam. Actually it's like, "She's a woman, she's supposed to be quiet." A man can speak out more. If a woman speaks out that's even worse. It doesn't protect you, being a woman.