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Jimmy Carter and women's rights: From the White House to Islamic feminism

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ABSTRACT

Since 2009, former US President Jimmy Carter has been outspoken in his condemnation of abuses of women around the world. This appears to be a departure from his stance while in the White House (1977–1981), when many feminist groups criticized him for his lack of effort on women's issues. This paper analyzes the historical record and Carter's own writing to compare his work since 2009 with his position on women's issues during his presidency. I argue that although women's issues have become a higher priority for Carter, his approach still has much in common with attitudes that that angered feminists in the 1970s, including an emphasis on the morality of male leaders – rather than the actions of feminist women – as the means to improve women's lives. What has changed since the 1970s, however, are his views on religious leaders. While in the White House he courted the support of evangelicals, despite their opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and other feminist policies; in the intervening years he has come to view conservative religious leaders as barriers to women's rights. The views of Zainah Anwar and other Islamic feminists are foundational in Carter's new approach to religion and women's rights.

Introduction

James Earl "Jimmy" Carter, a moderate Democrat from the southern state of Georgia, was the 39th president of the United States. During his four years in the White House (1977–1981) Carter had an uneven – and at times contentious – relationship with the US women's movement. During his campaign he courted feminist organizations and pledged support for their agenda, especially the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). But by his unsuccessful 1980 reelection campaign, feminists were divided about the president. Some praised Carter for progress on women's issues, including the record high number of female appointees (e.g. King, 1980). Others were deeply critical of his performance. The executive board of the National Organization for Women (NOW) voted not to endorse Carter's re-election race against Ronald Reagan, claiming Carter's support for women was "more illusion than reality, more lip service than performance" (Kelber, 1980, 626). Nor did Carter himself claim progress on women's issues as part of his legacy. In *Keeping faith,* his (1982) White House memoir, his only mention of his support for the ERA is buried a list of evangelical and conservative criticisms of him, a far cry from his campaign promises to be a leader in the fight for women's rights.

In the light of this history, Carter's more recent bold statements on women are unexpected and merit further analysis. In his 2014 book, *A call to action: Women, religion, violence and power,* Carter condemns the human rights abuses of women around the world, and in 2015 he announced that fighting violence and injustice against girls and women was "the highest priority for the rest of my life" (Botelho, 2015). The central focus of the book is the culture of violence that keeps women and girls from exercising their full rights, a focus that is in line with his longstanding commitment to human rights. The book and his more recent work also are in line with some approaches that earned him the criticism of feminists in the 1970s. In particular, Carter's approach to women in both eras has emphasized the morality of individual male leaders as protectors of women, rather than challenging gendered power relations and supporting women's movements.

Although Carter's views on gender and power have not changed, his views on conservative male religious leaders have. It is this change that has allowed and informed his approach to women's issues. A devout Southern Baptist, Jimmy Carter has spoken widely about his faith, and written about the relationship between religion and politics (e.g. Carter, 1996, 2002). Although many evangelical Christians supported Carter's 1976 election, his presidency saw the rise of the conservative Religious Right, who actively opposed the ERA, abortion, and many other policies of Carter's Democratic Party. While in office Carter struggled to maintain a collation containing both feminists and evangelicals, often pleasing neither (Flippen, 2011). His efforts to find common ground

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with Christian conservatives ended in 2000 when he broke with the conservative leadership in his own Southern Baptist faith. Since then, he has articulated a critique of sexism in religion informed by Islamic feminism, especially the work of Zainah Anwar.

Carter and women's issues in the White House

The first president since the Civil War to come from the Deep South, Carter is a devout Southern Baptist, who had been a naval engineer and peanut farmer before entering politics (Bourne, 1997; Carter, 1982). Before running for president, Carter was the governor of Georgia, where he distinguished himself as a moderate who opposed racial segregation, championed human rights, and believed in small government. In 1976, Democrat Jimmy Carter defeated Republican incumbent Gerald Ford, who had replaced Richard Nixon after his 1974 resignation. Carter served just one four-year term before losing in 1980 to Republican Ronald Reagan. His presidency was troubled by high inflation, high unemployment, an energy crisis, and a hostage situation at the US embassy in Iran.

In many ways, Carter's stance on women's rights was progressive for a wealthy, white, Southern military man. He and Rosalynn had a partnership marriage, and she played an active role in the presidency, often sitting in on cabinet meetings and serving as his proxy. The Carters were supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and like many "liberal feminists" of the south, equated feminism with equal rights and opportunities for women (Carter, 1984; Hartmann, 1998). This limited approach was at odds with a feminist movement who saw itself as growing in political power and influence. In Washington, there was finally a critical mass of feminist think tanks and lobbying groups, including the National Organization for Women, the National Women's Political Caucus, the Center for Women Policy Studies, Women's Action Alliance, the National Abortion Rights Action League, and the Women's Lobby. Unlike the early 1970s, when the majority of feminists working inside the federal government were focused primarily on eliminating discrimination, Washington feminism in 1976 was increasingly diverse and progressive. The earlier distinction, however imperfect, between "liberal" feminist insiders seeking to end legal discrimination, and "radical" feminist outsiders in pursuit of revolutionary change, was blurring. Issues such as sexual violence, pornography, and reproductive rights, many of which had emerged from grassroots radical movements, were being championed by new single-issue organizations in the capitol. Simultaneously, mainstream feminist and traditional women's organizations were expanding their scope to include new issues, and most women's organizations were increasingly aware of and advocating for the concerns of poor women, lesbians, and women of color. Within the Democratic Party, feminists had participated in an overhaul of party rules to increase the influence of women, and they were determined to influence the new administration (Banaszak, 2010; Costain, 1992; Evans, 2003; Ferree & Hess, 1994; Mattingly, 2015).

Most feminists supported more progressive candidates in the 1976 Democratic Party primary election, but Carter did his best to win them over. In a speech before a gathering of women's organization leaders he announced he "wanted to be known as the President who achieved equal rights for women, just as President Johnson had won civil rights legislation for blacks" (Abzug & Kelber, 1984, 50). Nevertheless, many were cautious. Carter was personally opposed to abortion, had no track record on women's issues, and spoke about religion and family in a manner that raised feminist hackles. At the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York City, women's groups showed their displeasure at the party's nominee. They threatened a disruptive protest about Carter's lack of support for quotas for delegates to the convention, only backing down when Carter promised that he would support their issues and appoint women to high levels (Hartmann, 1998; Mattingly, 2016).

Once in office, Carter supported the women's movement in some important ways. His administration sponsored the successful 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston and the state conferences leading up to it, during which a diverse and largely feminist gathering articulated a national agenda that included support for abortion, gay rights, and the passage of the ERA. Carter also appointed a number of strong women to high office where they were able to influence policy, including three members of his cabinet: Juanita Kreps (Secretary of Commerce), Patricia Roberts Harris, (Secretary of both Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services), and Shirley Hufstedler (Secretary of Education). He also appointed a number of accomplished feminists in high-level positions, and more than forty women as federal judges (Dumbrell, 1993; Hartmann, 1998; Martin, 2003). Many of his administration's accomplishments on women's issues were achieved by these female appointees. For example, the administration dramatically increased enforcement of laws banning employment discrimination, in large part due to the work of Eleanor Holmes Norton in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Similarly, the administration held the first White House meeting with gay and lesbian activists, due to the efforts of Carter's top female aide Margaret "Midge" Costanza (Mattingly, 2016). And in the State Department, feminist and civil rights activist Patricia Derian's work as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights was instrumental in checking the abuses of dictatorships in Latin America (Damico, 1999).

Despite the number of women appointed, many women's movement leaders in Washington were disappointed by Carter (Hartmann, 1998; Kelber, 1980). Unrealistic expectations were a factor in the disenchantment, as many overestimated the power of both the women's movement and the presidency. New to party politics, many feminist activists were especially dismayed that Carter viewed the women's movement as one of many competing special interests, rather than as a moral imperative. For many feminists in Washington, unhappiness with Carter was borne of frustration at the labor required to get him to keep his promises. While they had some success on appointments, influencing policy proved to be more difficult. When a group of women's organization leaders presented the president with their policy agenda, Carter responded by scolding them for their confrontational style. "I have a hard time with my own staff members and I have a hard time with some of my male and female cabinet members who come to me and say, no matter what we do we will never get anything but criticism from the strong and forceful militant women spokesmen" (White House Press Secretary, 1977). Two of the most outspoken feminists that Carter appointed, Midge Costanza and Bella Abzug, were both pushed out after high-profile conflicts with Carter and his male advisors. Time and again, feminists in Washington were reminded that while Carter supported a limited version of women's equality, he was not comfortable with many feminists themselves. Nor was he willing to participate in the normal political process of negotiating with interest groups within the Democratic Party, including feminists (Mattingly, 2016). Carter believed that the most important element in leadership was the individual morality of people in power, rather than the nature of institutional structures or the virtues of specific ideological positions (Morris, 1996). As a result, Carter believed his role as president was like that of a trustee. His job was to weigh varying interests and make the best decision for the American people, not to engage in negotiations with self-interested interest groups nor tolerate criticism from supposed allies (Jones, 1988). To a generation of feminist leaders pushing for a seat at the table, Carter's "trusteeship" approach to the presidency felt paternalistic and patronizing (Mattingly, 2015). As columnist Ellen Goodman quipped, "He's alternated between ignoring and manhandling the women's-rights constituency" (Goodman, 1980).

Less than a year into his presidency, Carter and some pro-choice feminists had a very public disagreement over abortion. During his campaign Carter had emphasized his personal opposition to abortion when speaking to conservatives, while assuring his respect for the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion when talking to liberals. This delicate balance was disrupted in the summer of 1977, when he was asked at a press conference about the proposed Hyde Amendment,

which ultimately banned all federal funds for abortion. Carter's response became infamous. “Well, as you know, there are many things in life that are not fair, that wealthy people can afford and poor people can't. But I don't believe that the federal government should take action to try to make those opportunities exactly equal, particularly when there is a moral factor involved” (Carter, 1977). The comments infuriated supporters of abortion rights, including many of his own staff. Press reports that dozens of his high-level pro-choice appointees met to discuss a collective response fueled anger on both sides of the abortion issue. Across the country, the “women's rebellion” fanned the flames of pro-choice feminists and others concerned about the impacts of the Hyde Amendment on low-income women reliant on federally-funded healthcare. The conflict did nothing, however, to improve Carter's standing with opponents of abortion, already angry that Carter would not support a proposed Constitutional amendment banning abortion. From their perspective, Carter's failure to fire the dissenting female appointees was just more proof that he was not the kind of Christian they had hoped for (Flint & Porter, 2005 40–42; Mattingly, 2016 133–35).

Not all of Carter's women troubles were due to abortion. Particularly disheartening to feminists was Carter's unwillingness to push for legislation on domestic violence initiated by his own appointees. High-level feminist appointees collaborated with women's groups to host a series of unprecedented meetings about family violence. The meetings led to the creation of numerous programs in different federal departments, an Office of Domestic Violence, and a handful of domestic violence bills. Opposed to expanding government programs and concerned about controversy, the White House refused to take a position on the bills. The 95th Congress (1977–78) ended with no action on domestic violence, a failure many of the bill's supporters blamed on lack of support from the Carter administration. When a new domestic violence bill was introduced into the 96th Congress (1979–80), it had support from a wide-ranging coalition of women's groups and 50 co-sponsors. Despite pleas from activists and members of Congress, Carter again withheld his support for the legislation until it was too late (Hartmann, 1998; Mattingly, 2015; Zeitlin, 1983).

Economic issues also created conflict with some progressive feminists. Carter's conservative fiscal policies meant cuts to domestic problems that supported low-income women and their families, and his unwillingness to increase spending meant he would not support bills for comprehensive child care or displaced homemakers. When his National Advisory Committee on Women publically criticized him for prioritizing defense spending at the cost of social programs, Carter abruptly fired the chair of the committee, the outspoken former Congresswoman Bella Abzug. Many committee members resigned in protest, a move they hoped would force Carter to take his female advisors and women's issues seriously. For Carter, the criticism of his budget and the resignations were political ploys by the very people he was trying to help (Abzug & Kelber, 1984).

Carter's reputation with feminists also suffered because some of his administration's work on women's issues did not capture the attention of media and women's groups. Such was the case with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). From 1974 to 1979, a draft of the convention was moving through various committees in the UN, where few US feminist activists were even aware it. At the 1977 IWY conference, the plank on International Affairs emphasized the need for disarmament and more women employed in foreign affairs, but made no mention of CEDAW (National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, 1978, 63–66; see also Baldez, 2014, 154). CEDAW was adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 18, 1979 and signed by the US and dozens of other countries at the Second World Conference for Women in Copenhagen in March 1980. Unfortunately, news of CEDAW was lost in the more contentious aspects of the Copenhagen conference, including tensions between Israel and Palestine. After signing CEDAW, Carter submitted it to the Senate for ratification in November 1980, shortly after losing re-election to Ronald Reagan. The Senate did not ratify CEDAW in that or any subsequent session (Baldez, 2014).

The tension between Carter and feminists ran through the push to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, the most urgent and visible – and ultimately unsuccessful – women's issue of his presidency. When Carter took office in January of 1977, thirty-five states had ratified the amendment. For the ERA to become law, three more state legislatures would have to vote for ratification before the 1979 deadline. Although Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter were supporters of the ERA and lobbied for its ratification, they were concerned about the political implications of tying his fate to an amendment that was controversial and very likely to fail. Instead the Carters opted to work behind the scenes, calling key state legislators to ask for their support. When a bill was before Congress to extend the ratification deadline, Carter administration officials helped lobby for its successful passage. In addition, Rosalynn Carter, and their daughter-in-law Judy Carter, spoke in favor of the amendment, especially to women's groups. None of his administration's efforts were sufficient; no additional states ratified before the extension expired in 1982. Nor did the Carters' efforts satisfy pro-ERA groups, who wanted the president to dedicate more staff and energy to the amendment, and use a major speech or “fireside chat” to educate Americans about the amendment (Mattingly, 2016). Feminists were also offended by the attempts of Judy and Rosalyn Carter to frame the ERA as something supported by “nice women,” while distancing themselves from “vocal extremists,” implying that feminists were hurting the amendment and women's rights (Judy Carter, n.d.; R. Carter, 1984; Cook, 1995). ERA supporters also were angry that the Carters targeted their lobbying to maximize its political value to the campaign to reelect the president, rather than to have the maximum impact on ratification. When the ERA was debated by the Florida legislature, where many activists believed ratification was possible, the Carters took little action, and ratification failed by a narrow margin. But when the Georgia legislature voted on ratification during the 1980 re-election campaign, the Carters were visibly active, despite warnings that there was little hope of success. The amendment was defeated in Georgia, but it meant Carter could claim in the reelection campaign that he did all he could for the ERA. For feminists, it was “one more piece of evidence that the Carters would push for the ERA when the circumstances were politically right, not when the amendment needed their support” (Cook, 1995, 208).

By Carter's 1980 reelection campaign, many of the nation's leading feminists were openly opposed to Carter, campaigning for Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy in his primary challenge or supporting independent John Anderson in the general election. In her scathing *Nation* article, Mim Kelber proclaimed “The anger and disgust with Carter among feminists is indisputable” (1980, 628). As election day neared, Carter received lukewarm endorsements from some women's groups. Few were genuinely convinced that four more years of Carter would produce meaningful gains for women, but all were certain that the victory of Ronald Reagan would bring losses (Bennetts, 1980; Clendinen, 1980).

Carter and the religious right

During the 1976 campaign, battles over family values, women's rights, gay rights and abortion were not yet divided along partisan lines, allowing Carter to garner support from both secular and religious voters. In Carter's native South, a region with large numbers of conservative Christian voters, Carter's professions of faith attracted supporters. He assured liberal audiences that he opposed discrimination and believed in the separation of church and state, while telling conservative audiences of his personal beliefs that abortion and homosexuality were sins. Aided by the equally murky stances of his opponent, Republican President Gerald Ford, Carter was able to squeak to victory with a coalition that included evangelical Christians as well as

feminists and gay rights groups (Flippen, 2011; Freedman, 2001).

Like feminists, evangelicals had high hopes that their votes for Carter would translate into his support for their issues. Even more than feminists – who had some influence within the Democratic Party – evangelicals were disappointed. Carter neither appointed evangelicals to key posts nor supported socially conservative legislation. The IRS added to the unhappiness of conservative Christians when they made it more difficult for segregated private schools to keep their tax-exempt status (Diamond, 1998). Two years after coming to Washington, Carter tried to mend fences with religious leaders, appointing Robert Maddox as a religious liaison and speaking before religious organizations, including the increasingly conservative Southern Baptist Convention (Ribuffo, 2006).

On the ERA, gay rights, and abortion, his administration tried to carve out an acceptable middle road between the increasingly polarized positions of the left and right. In the end he pleased no one. Carter's statements of support for the ERA, the advocacy of his feminist appointees on gay rights and abortion, and national conferences on women's issues and the family may not have been enough for feminists, but they were too much for the new Religious Right. Carter and his appointees became targets of leaders of new "family values" social movements, including the anti-gay rights crusader Anita Bryant and anti-ERA leader Phyllis Schlafly. The 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston was challenged by anti-ERA and anti-abortion women who organized a pro-life, pro-family rally at the same time. The rally has been credited with "inspiring the rise of the 'Religious Right' and the right turn in the Republican Party" (Spruill, 2017, 292). Carter's lukewarm support for feminism and gay rights also provided ammunition to professional political organizers like Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie, who were trying to bring white born-again Christians into the Republican Party. Activist clergy like Jerry Falwell joined the effort, attacking Carter's leadership and his faith, and campaigning instead for Ronald Reagan (Diamond, 1998; Ribuffo, 2006; Spruill, 2008).

Carter aide Midge Costanza warned Carter of the need to take a side in the quickly developing culture wars, but he was slow to see the threat that the Religious Right posed to women's equality or to his presidency (Mattingly, 2016, 161). Some of hesitation was rooted in his own experience. Until the late 1970s, conservative fundamentalists held less power among Southern Baptists, and many evangelicals shared Carter's progressive approach (Balmer, 2014). Perhaps he was also influenced by his cultural and regional similarity with conservative religious leaders, which led him to focus on the similarities rather than the differences. As late as January 1980, he wrote in his diary, "I had a breakfast with evangelical leaders. They're really right wing: against ERA, for requiring prayer in school, against abortion (so am I), want publicly committed evangelicals in my cabinet, against the White House Conference on Families. In spite of all these negative opinions, they are basically supportive of what I'm trying to do" (Carter, 2010, 394). It took over thirty years for Carter to agree with the women's movement that Christian conservatives had led to the defeat of the ERA, writing "Despite widespread support for granting American women equal rights with men, some church leaders – Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim – opposed the amendment. By exerting their influence, they probably made the difference" (Carter, 2010, 254).

Religion and gender: beyond the White House

Since leaving the White House, Carter has remained a world leader in human rights and international diplomacy, winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. Jimmy and Rosalynn founded the Carter Center in 1982 with the ambitious mission of "Waging Peace. Fighting Disease. Building Hope" (www.cartercenter.org). The accomplishments of the Carter Center include the virtual elimination of guinea worm disease, diplomacy in conflict areas, and support for human rights defenders around the world (Bourne 1997; Brinkley, 1998; Carter, 2007; Troester, 1996). For almost three decades he had little to say publically about women's issues, but this changed in 2009, when *The Observer* published his essay, "The words of God do not justify cruelty to women" (Carter, 2009a). In the piece Carter argues vehemently, "The male interpretations of religious texts…excuses slavery, violence, forced prostitution, genital mutilation and national laws that omit rape as a crime…[and] costs many millions of girls and women control over their own bodies and lives, and continues to deny them fair access to education, health, employment and influence within their own communities." In the article he also called on male religious and secular leaders to "challenge and change the harmful teachings and practices, no matter how ingrained, which justify discrimination against women." In 2014, Carter explained his position more fully in a book titled *A call to action: Women, religion, violence and power*. In the same year, the Carter Center initiative called Mobilizing Action for Women and Girls as well as a new Forum on Women, Religion, Violence and Power (Carter, 2014).

What can explain Jimmy Carter's decision to place women's rights at the center of his commitments? And given his ambivalence about feminist policy initiatives, including those addressing domestic violence during his administration, why his clarion call for action now? One reason was his interactions with women during humanitarian work. In *A call to action*, Carter discusses learning about the special challenges and contributions of women while travelling the world to work on elections, health campaigns, and building homes. Through these interactions he realized that women and children were the ones most harmed by war, disease, and poverty, and that his best allies in making change were everyday women already working for peace, health, and their children's future. *A call to action* tells the story of Ethiopian housewives who contributed to Carter Center work eliminating the guinea worm by building latrines. The project was successful because "word spread from village to village as Ethiopian housewives adopted this as a practical move toward liberation… [D]espite their inferior social status, these women were strong and even dominant, deeply involved in all aspects of improving health care, and extremely effective in solving their own problems, with associated benefits to the entire community" (Carter, 2014, 79). Although most of the women Carter describes were not explicitly working for women's rights, they suffered gender-related abuses and oppression that limited their work on behalf of the community as a whole. Particularly troubling to Carter, it was religious leaders and rules that legitimated, and in some cases initiated, discrimination against these women who were, in Carter's view, doing the ultimate Christian work of caring for their communities.

For Carter, the role of religious leaders in obstructing the contributions of these unselfish women added to his longstanding struggle to reconcile his religious faith and his political work. He was 'reborn' following his failure in the 1966 Georgia gubernatorial race, and subsequently came to see politics as a means of alleviating human suffering and despair on a larger scale than possible as an individual. Carter was especially influenced by liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who believed that Christians could not only participate in politics without compromising their beliefs, but that they should be involved. For Niebuhr and Carter, politics has the responsibility to "establish justice in a sinful world" (Balmer, 2014, 28). In his application of Christianity to issues of civil rights and human rights, Carter embodies a religious perspective known as progressive evangelicalism, which that "took its warrant from the New Testament, especially in the words of Jesus… who instructed his followers to show compassion and care for 'the least of these'" (Balmer, 2014, xiv). Thus, his approach to oppressed people was in the spirit of responsibility– caring for "the least of these." It was an approach that was in line with his "trusteeship" view of leadership.

Carter's faith also influenced his leadership, especially his emphasis – both while in the White House and after leaving – on advancing human rights. His White House efforts to draw attention to and combat human rights abuses around the world were an application of his religious and moral principles on the world stage (Stuckey, 2008). It was also a practical policy, in that it helped restore US stature following the Vietnam War. Responding to world events, including the Soviet

invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution, ultimately dominated his foreign policy agenda, leaving scholars to debate the actual impact of his human rights policy (e.g. Kaufman, 2008; Muravchik, 1986). Nevertheless, Carter is remembered for his commitment to human rights, in part because of his continued commitment after leaving the White House (Brinkley, 1998).

After leaving the White House, his individual beliefs were increasingly at odds with the rightward shift within his own Southern Baptist faith. Carter was "dismayed" when "the fundamentalists took control of the [Southern Baptist] Convention's organization and began purging more moderate leaders" (Carter, 1996, 33–34). For Carter the dominance of fundamentalism was a break with central doctrines of the faith, including the separation of church and state, the importance of ministering to the poor and marginal, and the "the primacy of the individual and his right to find his own relationship with God" (Bourne, 1997, 497). His response was not immediate, but he and Rosalynn were finally moved to action by the growing sexism of the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1998 the Convention issued a call for wives to be submissive to their husbands, and in 2000 it declared its opposition to women as pastors. The statement on women in church leadership proved to be the final blow; four months later the Carters they announced their "painful decision" to sever ties with the Convention (Sengupta, 2000).[1]

The decision to leave the Southern Baptist Convention seemed to also mark the end of his attempts to find a common ground with conservative evangelicals. Following the break, he turned his attention instead to the problems – and possibilities – of religious leadership for women's human rights. The first organized effort of the Carter Center in this direction was a 2007 Human Rights Defenders Forum on the topic of "Faith and Freedom." The Forum brought together secular and religious leaders, scholars, and activists to discuss "how religious leaders and communities can become stronger in their advocacy of human rights," especially rights for women (Carter, 2014, 91). One of the speakers was Zainah Anwar, who was then the head of the Malaysian organization Sisters in Islam (SIS). For Jimmy Carter, meeting Anwar was a watershed event that gave shape to his evolving beliefs about the relationship between religion and women's rights.

Zainah Anwar discussed how she and her Islamic feminist collaborators managed to integrate their faith and their support for women's rights. The label Islamic feminism is generally used to refer to a groups of scholars and activists – like Anwar – who argue that the Qur'an, properly interpreted, is a force for equality and the liberation of women, and that a key pathway for women's liberation is therefore the study of scholarly texts. Just as Carter struggled to balance commitments to faith and feminism during the dawn of the US culture wars, contemporary Islamic feminists also labor within highly polarized contexts, negotiating between a history of imposed liberation for women in the guise of modernization and westernization on the one hand, and sexism that runs through fundamentalist Islamic nationalism on the other (Moghadam, 2002; Mojab, 2001). At the forum, Anwar argued that the original teachings of the prophet Mohammed are not discriminatory themselves, the bias against women has come through their interpretations of the Qur'an by men. "The choice before us is: Do we accept what these mullahs are saying, or if we want to be a feminist, do we then reject our religion? For us, rejecting our religion is order to become a feminist is not a choice. We want to be feminists, and we want to be Muslim as well" (Carter, 2014, 106). Women in groups like SIS dealt with the apparent conflict between religion and feminism by studying the Qur'an and the traditions of the prophet for themselves. They discovered that the Qur'an supports the "universal values of equality, justice, and dignity for women" but has been misinterpreted by male religious leaders, and codified into law" (Anwar, 2005, 338. See also Anwar, 2009).

For Jimmy Carter, Islamic feminism provided a much-needed framework to integrate his concerns for women's human rights, his faith, and his frustration with sexist religious leaders. Rather than allowing faith and women's rights to be opposed, Anwar and other Islamic feminists blame misguided religious leaders for wrongly using religion to oppress women. Following suit, Carter turned to his deep knowledge of the Bible and the life of Christ to argue against the anti-women positions of many Christian fundamentalists, and for a Biblical defense of women's rights. In 2009 he laid out his basic argument in a major speech before the Parliament of World Religions. He began with a discussion of sexism within his own faith, telling the audience, "I realize that devout Christians can find adequate scripture to justify either side in this debate, but there is one incontrovertible fact concerning the relationship between Jesus Christ and women: He never condoned sexual discrimination or the implied subservience of women" (Carter, 2009b). Like Anwar and other Islamic feminists, Carter distinguishes between the rights and respect given to women by Jesus (or in the cases of Islamic feminists, Mohammed) and the bias against women found in the interpretations of male church leaders. In *A call to action* he argues, "Jesus Christ was the greatest liberator of women in a society where they had been considered throughout biblical history to be inferior" (Carter, 2014, 22). Like Anwar and other Islamic feminists, Carter contrasts this interpretation of the text to that used by male leaders to maintains their power over women. "The truth is that male religious leaders have had – and still have – an option to interpret holy teachings either to exalt or subjugate women. They have, for their own selfish ends, overwhelmingly chosen the latter. Their continuing choice provides the foundation or justification for much of the pervasive persecution and abuse of women throughout the world" (Carter, 2009a).

Rights without power

Carter's perspective since 2009 on religious leaders differs in many ways from his view during his presidency. During the 1970s he downplayed the impact of conservative religious leaders on women's rights, or tried to balance their interests with those of feminists; by 2009 he was blaming them for women's oppression. Given the wide respect for Carter's integrity and faith, it is a potentially significant shift. It certainly has been a boon for US organizations like the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus (EEWC), who also argues that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches equality between women and men. Like Carter, the EEWC advocates for women to have roles in church leadership and argues for a partnership view of marriage (Ingersol, 2003). Carter's positions also have the potential to influence the gender politics in the resurgence of progressive evangelicalism more generally (Balmer, 2014).

Nevertheless, Carter's new views on women remain troubling for some feminists. In particular, Carter continues to emphasize the role of moral leadership as the means to improve the lives of women. It is a view of leadership informed by his Christian faith as well as his family upbringing, military experience, and the ethos of his era. When campaigning for the presidency, Carter emphasized his own integrity and competence, and while in the White House framed many decisions in terms of his personal morality (Morris, 1996). Emphasizing his own morality on issues like abortion put him at odds with a women's movement critical of the role traditional morality has played in justifying patriarchal control. In addition, moral individualism is, by definition, in conflict with the concept of ideology, while feminism and other social justice movements are ideological at their core. This conflict contributed to Carter's dismissiveness about the stakes in mounting ideological debates over abortion, the ERA, and gay rights. Indeed, while in the White House he prided himself on 'doing what is right, not what is political" (Jones, 1988, 6). Insisting that decisions should be based on his personal moral compass, rather than negotiations with

[1] Because Southern Baptist congregations are autonomous, leaving the Convention did not require leaving the Baptist faith. He and Rosalynn remained active in their local Marantha Baptist Church, which is affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a missions-focused organization that allows for women into some leadership roles (Carter, 2014, 22).

interest groups, was a style of leadership that frustrated many in Washington, including labor unions and civil rights leaders. For feminists, who were challenging the very premise that a male leader could be the best judge of what women needed, Carter's leadership style was paternalistic and disempowering. In the words of Bella Abzug, "It is not enough to ask men what they can do for us. We must ask what we can do for ourselves" (Abzug & Kelber, 1984, 15).

The continuity in Carter's perspective that women's rights will be granted by wise leaders rather than achieved by the collective power of women is demonstrated by his discussion of US campus sexual assault in *A call to action*. His entrée to the issue was the harrowing experience of a college student who stayed with the Carters in the governor's mansion. When she was sexually assaulted on campus and no action was taken by the university, she moved to another school. In the narrative that follows, Carter describes his own advocacy, the work of leaders at Emory to create better policies, and the work of the leaders in the Department of Education. Missing from this narrative is the work of the student-led movement that made campus sexual violence a national issue. Carter does not mention that the very people he paints as heroes – university administrators and Department of Education staff – were brought into the battle only by the insistence and advocacy of student survivors. The reason Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was interpreted by the Department of Education to apply to sexual assault was because student activists filed Title IX complaints when their universities were not taking sexual assault claims seriously (Kirby & Ziering, 2016). Yet empowered and organized survivors are invisible in Carter's narrative; the focus is on student victims reluctant to report their perpetrators. It is a discussion that is sympathetic to the plight those who have been assaulted (all of whom are assumed to be female) but one that renders invisible their fierce and influential activism.

Carter's emphasis on women as "our most vulnerable citizens" in need of strong moral leaders, rather than as a part of organized movements for gender justice, is even more apparent in his discussion of women outside the US. For example, the chapter in *A call to action* on child marriages and dowry deaths make no mention of the robust and dedicated women's movements in Pakistan and India and their decades of work on these issues (e.g. Gangoli, 2007). Instead, he uses the chapter to highlight the work of The Elders, a group of world leaders convened by Nelson Mandela to work on global issues, as well as interventions by the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and the World Bank. Similarly, in his chapter on honor killings, the only people mentioned as opposing to the practice are King Abdullah II of Jordan and his wife Rania. The erasure of women's activism adds to the overall impression that women around the world are victims in need of rescue, and moral male leaders are their best hope. In *A call to action*, he not only criticizes religious leaders for violating women's rights, he also argues that they have the greatest potential to improve women's lives. For example, Carter extolls the work of missionaries on behalf of human rights around the world, and argues, "People of faith offer the greatest reservoir of justice, charity, and good will in alleviating the unwarranted deprivation and suffering of women and girls. This includes popes, imams, bishops, priests, mullahs, traditional leaders, and their followers who search for ideals and inspiration from a higher authority" (Carter, 2014, 31).

A second concern for feminists about Carter's new advocacy on women's issues is the pro-Western bias of his views. It is unlikely that this troubled US feminists in the 1970s, many of whom shared that bias. But in the intervening years trenchant critiques of Western feminism have made clear the limitations of feminist analyses that represent Westerners as superior in their grasp of human rights, non-Westerners as backward and ignorant, and women in developing nations as perpetually powerless and victimized (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 2013; Kapur, 2002; Mohanty, 1984). As Ratna Kapur argues, such depictions are problematic in many ways, including encouraging "some feminists in the international arena to propose strategies which are reminiscent of imperial interventions in the lives of the native subject and which represent the 'Eastern' woman as a victim of a 'backward' and 'uncivilized' culture" (Kapur, 2002, 2). Many of these representational weaknesses are found in *A call to action.* Although the book does include some discussions of sexual assault in US universities and the military, the bulk of the text is dedicated to detailing the gruesome details of practices more common the global South, such as sex-selective abortion, forced prostitution, honor killings, dowry deaths, child marriage, and genital cutting. In most of these discussions, Carter's discussion portrays non-Western women as victims, while reaffirming the power and hegemony of Western culture and institutions. One example is the following passage describing the work of the Carter Center in Liberia, where they were asked to help establish a regime of human rights in rural areas. "We worked to inform people, for the first time, that rape was a crime and perpetrators could be published, that women could own property, that a wife could inherit her deceased husband's estate, that both parents had claims on their children, that there was a minimum legal age of marriage, that female genital cutting was not mandatory, and that a dowry was a gift that did not have to be returned if a marriage broke up. Most of this was new to them, of course, and there was opposition in a society where women had never demanded or been given these rights" (Carter, 2014, 84). This passage reads like a textbook example of the very discursive practices that Third World feminists have been criticizing for decades.

No effort is needed to apply this critique to Carter; he is very forthcoming about his belief in the moral leadership of the United States. Indeed, "restoring America's position as a champion of human rights and democratic ideals" is the explicit goal of the Carter Center's Human Rights Defenders' Forum (Carter, 2014, 90). Carter not only advocates for US hegemony, he also joins many Western feminists in essentializing Third World women as a powerless and oppressed group. Yet the comparison breaks down of further scrutiny; Carter does not claim to be a feminist, and he is not trying to shift the power balance between women and men. Instead he is trying to move male leaders to change their treatment of female dependents. For Carter, the underlying cause of women's problems is the unethical leadership of men who distort religious texts to maintain their power. The solution, therefore, is the moral leadership of other men, who are guided by the correct interpretation of the same texts. As he explains in *A call to action*, "The relegation of women to an inferior or circumscribed status by many religious leaders is one of the primary reasons for the promotion and perpetuation of sexual abuse. If potential male exploiters of women are led to believe that their victim is considered inferior or 'different' even by God, they can presume that it must be permissible to take advantage of their superior male status" (Carter, 2014, 19).

Thus Carter is not challenging the hierarchies of gender and religion that give religious leaders influence over women's lives, he is just trying to get them to use that power differently. The heroes of *A call to action* are neither women who have overcome their poor conditions nor leaders of collective movements for women's empowerment, but wise leaders who have made changes, and convinced others to do the same. For example, he ends the book with stories of a traditional chief in the Democratic Republic Congo who made sure a soldier accused of rape was arrested and the girl was not ostracized, and a young chief in Malawi who decreed that all women must have qualified care at delivery. "These two simple success stories illustrate how the suffering of women and girls can be alleviated by an individual's forceful action" (Carter, 2014, 195–96). Most of these leaders are men; the influential women in the book are either heads of Western NGOs or the wives of elected leaders, women closer to men in power than to women in need. The gendered power structure remains in place.

Conclusion

In the 1970s, Jimmy Carter's White House was criticized by feminist leaders for lack of action on women's rights; in the 2010s became an outspoken critic of the abuses of women around the globe. Although the two positions suggest a dramatic shift, his fundamental views on gender

and power have changed very little. He continues to hold a view of leadership that stresses the morality of individual leaders rather than the power of organized social groups, and as a result downplays or ignores the role of feminist groups and collective action in improving the lives of women. This was true of his approach to the US women's movement in the 1970s, and remains true in his approach to women in the global South today. What has changed, however, is Carter's position on conservative religious leaders. Carter was slow to grasp the significance of the Religious Right for both his presidency and women's rights in the US, but decades after leaving the White House he broke with the Southern Baptist Convention and began speaking out against the role of religious leaders in the abuse of women.

His new understanding of religion and gender has been influenced by the thinking of Islamic feminists like Zainah Anwar, and reproduces many of weaknesses of that approach. Secular Muslim feminists have been critical of religious Islamic feminism for its failure to challenge overall power relations and its role in maintaining the legitimacy of religion and the fundamental bearer of rights and identities. For example Shahrzad Mojab argues, "'Islamic feminism' and its various forms, ranging from fundamentalists to reformists, do not have the potential to be a serious challenge to patriarchy…Thus, far from being an alternative to secular, radical and socialist feminisms, 'Islamic feminism" justifies unequal gender relations" (Mojab, 2001, 131). This argument also applies to Carter's call to action. While valuable, his approach does not fundamentally challenge power relationships and maintains the legitimacy of religious authority. Nor does it acknowledge and support the work of women collectively making change on their own behalf. Like his approach to women's issues in the 1970s, Carter's call to action seeks women's rights without challenging gendered power.

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