Our society expects us women to follow a certain path: go to school, get married, and take care of the kids. This life trajectory includes giving up our autonomy in order to lead predetermined lives. Everyone is equal under the law, but that does not mean we are equal in terms of relative autonomy. Female autonomy is bound by socio-cultural norms that have resulted from a male-dominated patriarchal political system that hinders women’s capacity for attaining independence by creating a disparity between the law as stated and what is actually practiced. Farida Shaheed contends that “The most efficient method of control[ling women] is perhaps through the laws an individual internalizes in the process of socialization. Because they require little recourse to overt external enforcement, these unwritten laws are often greater obstacles to women’s autonomy than formal legislation” (85).

Cultural practice has the power to diminish written law, and it happens everywhere. Clear examples are regulations regarding inheritance and divorce within shari’a law in Muslim countries, where the law differs from the actual culture practiced and enforced by men. That being said, this type of oppression is not confined to “third world” countries. It is hard for women in the United States to recognize disparities between the law and culture because women’s rights issues are usually seen as “in the past.” Women in Islam face similar issues with recognizing their own oppression because there are no alternatives to the status quo. It is essential for women in the West as well as in the East to acknowledge the unwritten laws within their own societies in order to create a substantial base on which to change them.

Changes cannot be made until women realize their autonomy is threatened on a daily basis. Women may be given opportunities that they do not seize upon because they feel they will suffer damaging social consequences. Naila Kabeer is a Bangladeshi-born social economist who focuses her energy on gender and social policy issues. She argues that where there are “striking gender inequalities in basic well-being achievements, the equation between power and choice would suggest quite plausibly that such inequalities signal the operation of power: either as an absence of choice on the part of women as a subordinate group or as active discrimination by men as the dominant group” (440). Women cannot exercise agency when they are unaware of all their possi-

Assessing Women’s Autonomy
by Aurianna Oricchio-Gilley

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Benazir Bhutto speaking to the press at Andrews Air Force Base in May of 1988. Later that year, Bhutto would become the Prime Minister of Pakistan.
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able courses of action. On the surface it may not seem as though women are afforded equal choice to that of men, but this is because “it is far more difficult to accommodate forms of gender inequality when these appear to have been chosen by women themselves,” and participation “dilutes the impression otherwise created that men are seeking to deny rights to women” (Meyer 127). No one with political power would publicly reveal they find women inferior to men, but this truth is revealed through the type of policies in place. Policies that do not offer women viable alternatives to the current system are as ruinous to women’s rights because if women do not see potential benefits accruing from structural change, they will continue to reinforce their current situation. It is not only written policies that injure women’s progress but communal standards put in place over time that hamper female liberation.

Liberation can be tricky in places where there are strict cultural rules that may not exist within the law. In Muslim countries women’s autonomy has partially regressed because of cultural rules, which are especially common on the subject of whether or not women choose to accept inheritance. Haifaa Jawad, a senior lecturer on Islam and Middle Eastern studies, covers the chapter in the Quran that firmly establishes women’s legal right to inheritance. Jawad claims that “the Divine instructions concerning women’s rights to inheritance are violated and overlooked by Muslim societies” because “[v]ery often, strong social pressure is applied on women to renounce their shares for the benefit of the immediate male members of the family” (68). If a woman does choose to accept her share of inheritance, she is “accused of being selfish, greedy, inconsiderate, and irresponsible” (Ibid.). I contend that the societal pressure against women accepting their share of inheritance emanates from the implications of the patrilineal standard that has the power to cross religious boundaries.

We see a trend of patriarchal dominance in a variety of related social areas. In Muslim countries women fear losing the security provided by their male relatives, especially brothers, since they have the obligation to care for women and to meet their financial needs (Jawad 67). This responsibility was given to men for a reason: to continuously exercise control over the female domain. If a woman never marries, or divorces, she is at the mercy of her male relatives, with no alternatives to fall back on. In this situation, if she were to take her share of inheritance, she would lose all of her relations, and she would be shamed by her entire community. Jawad gives a few cases in Muslim countries where women chose to relinquish their share of inheritance. For instance, a well-educated married couple, Ibrahim and Fatima, had three sons and one daughter. When they died, their inheritance was to be divided according to Islamic law. However, the daughter decided to sacrifice her share because “[s]he felt that if she had to claim her due she would lose the respect and love of her brothers, and the community would degrade her and look down upon her” (Jawad 69). This daughter’s behavior may exhibit contemporary notions of “choice,” but can it really be considered an active decision when there are so many adverse consequences for a woman who inherits? Naila Kabeer contends that in order to be considered a valid choice, there must be “the possibility of alternatives, the ability to have chosen otherwise” (437). Yes, technically women could choose to accept their inheritance, but there are no beneficial outcomes from that decision. Therefore, women will contribute to sustaining the present patriarchal system of inheritance.

A similar problem arises with divorce in Islamic countries. Shari’a law upholds the traditional patriarchal family unit, which subordinates the woman’s status since she is dependent on her husband. For this reason, “as in other patriarchal systems, the ‘balance’ in the rights of the spouses is sharply tilted in the husband’s favor” (Mayer 107). Therefore, laws concerning divorce may seem equal on paper, but are inherently imbalanced within the social sphere. The first problem
with divorce under shari'a law is that there are multiple kinds. For example, there is Talaq al-Tawfid, where at the time of marriage the husband agrees that the wife may dissolve the marriage at any point for whatever reason she sees fit. This type is the least common because it depends on the husband agreeing to the conditions. Then there is Talaq al-Bidah, which is the most widely used in the Muslim world, in which the man renounces the marriage three times whenever he wants. 

*Bidah* is irreversible unless his ex-wife marries another man, consummates the marriage, and is divorced twice (Jawad 80-81). *Bidah* allows three repudiations that are not constrained to certain time frames and may be done hastily. Divorce is seen as a last resort in Muslim countries, and based on the Quran, is supposed to be a long process in case the couple should decide to restore their marriage before the divorce is finalized. Therefore, *Bidah* is not supported by the Quran. Nevertheless, *Bidah* is the most widely used form not only because it is favorable to men, but also because most of the time women do not use their right to divorce in an unhappy marriage because of the social menace and terror surrounding divorce in Muslim societies” (Jawad 81). Because Muslim society devalues women who are divorced, they rarely seek possibilities in life that do not include a husband. Women’s reluctance to file for divorce has made it in practice solely a right reserved for men.

The social taboo of being divorced comes from those in power attempting to control the forces of female sexuality. If a woman is divorced, she might be considered autonomous, which is threatening to the status quo; while a woman who is married is under the control of her husband and is in her prescribed place. A divorced woman has a re-inscribed identity that is outside of her circumscribed social space. A woman who is not reliant on a man is not only making decisions reserved for women, but also decisions socially reserved for men. Over time this fact has become socially unacceptable by men due to its potentially jeopardizing nature. Kabeer contends that “the criterion of alternatives relates to the structural conditions under which choices are made while the criterion of consequences relates to the extent to which the choices made have the potential for transforming these structural conditions” (461). Women cannot be autonomous if they do not see possibilities other than relying on the men in their lives, especially when there are adverse consequences in choosing not to be subordinate. In regard to divorce, there are very few alternatives to a male provider because of the patriarchal structure in place, and because of this, choosing to stay in an unhappy marriage does not contribute to any kind of shift in the structural conditions present. This is one of many conditions in which “patriarchal biases in Muslim countries induce men to think it is natural for them to enjoy superior legal rights” (Mayer 120).

The fact that divorced women are socially unacceptable has had detrimental effects on their autonomy. There are very few support alternatives for women who are divorced or single parents other than a male provider. Iman Bibars contends that “social policies and the non-contributory welfare programs do indeed treat women as secondary and dependent,” and this “signals to these women that they are backward, unproductive dependents and helpless without a male protector” (159). Most of the time welfare programs only give aid to widows with children and not to divorcees with children (Bibars 160), which imposes male dominance over otherwise autonomous female sexuality.

Male domination is not always hidden behind laws, and is grimly present in Muslim countries with regard to political rape. It is common for men with political significance to rape each other’s wives as a way of achieving revenge, or to reinstate their power. Such rape not only dishonors the politician himself, but it is also a way to force women to “obey the rules of the male power structure, and to remain within certain culturally and religiously specified boundaries” (Haeri 170).
For example, Benazir Bhutto served as the prime minister of Pakistan, making her one of the only Muslim women in the world at that time with political power. Because Bhutto was a force to be reckoned with, three of her close supporters were raped as a way of besmirching Bhutto’s reputation. Those rapes tarnished her reputation because they forced Bhutto’s followers to question her ability to protect her friends from her enemies. Also, because she was a “raped leader,” she was “dishonored, symbolically and actually” since women are objectified to symbolize everyone’s honor (Haeri 171). The fact that women can become so negatively entangled in political revenge instills fear in their hearts and acts as a force field against women participating in politics. The possibility of rape has an enormous effect on women, and it is ultimately a denial of their autonomy. It is yet another mean of controlling women’s sexuality and maintaining male guardianship (Haeri 170).

Cultures that create inferiority for women in stereotyped gender roles are not limited to Muslim countries. It is a problem in the West as well, specifically in the United States. The source of male dominance in the United States stems from the idea that “Nature” intends men to be stronger and more capable than women. Anne Meyer contends that “[s]tereotypes can have the result of making familiar patterns of discrimination and inequality seem somehow natural” (120). Ascribing different personalities and actions to men and women is especially prevalent in the United States. Mernissi argues that societies “try to rationalize these prescriptions in terms of psychological differences between the sexes or their different roles in reproduction” (6). In the United States you are given an identity from the moment you are born based on your gender. Deviation from the prescribed role is socially unacceptable. For example, little girls who have masculine interests may be teased or discouraged from pursuing those interests, which leads to separate male and female domains, such as in politics. Since this intrinsic assignment is given at birth, it is seen as an “inalterable difference between men and women that is decreed by Mother Nature” (Mayer 125). This is one way in which “actual prescriptions are almost entirely determined by culture” rather than by law (Mernissi 6). The main reason inequalities caused by such prescriptions are not seen is because “the participation of women dilutes the impression otherwise created that men are seeking to deny rights to women” (Mayer 127). Women in the United States, like women in other countries, keep to their prescribed role for fear of the social consequences of mixing male and female domains.

Americans fail to recognize that misogyny is also a part of their own culture. A major problem in the United States is the consensus that the urgency of women’s rights is confined to Third World countries, and “Of course, the American officials offering these portrayals are most often men” (Mayer 122). The United States’ affectation with regards to women’s rights can be discredited when you look at its failure to enact CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimi-
nation Against Women). Women trust that they are receiving an optimal level of protection against discrimination based on gender, but in the Constitution the right to vote is the only explicit right given to women. In fact, rights afforded to women under the Constitution are far inferior than those given to women in Russia and South Africa under their new constitutions (Mayer 121). The United States’ reluctance to change the Constitution is homologous to the way Muslim countries refuse to change the structure of shari’a law, which in turn affects cultural norms. This fact taints the U.S.’s claim that American women are fully equal with men, unlike women in Third World countries. It combats the consensus that the battle against women’s rights has already been won. In order for women to be afforded the same rights as men, they must open their eyes to the inherent inequalities that exist.

In the United States there is an emphasis on familial harmony that places pressure on people to conform to their prescribed gender roles. Ka-beer contends that, “a powerful ideology of ‘togetherness’ binds the activities and resources of the family together under the control of the male head,” so “women do not actively seek the opportunity to set up separate units from men because autonomous units are neither socially acceptable nor individually desired” (460). In other words, the social pressure to have a “happy family” keeps women from working too much, or straying away from their prescribed roles as women.

The Western idea that injustice against females is confined to exotic countries is ironic because Western colonization may, in fact, be the root cause of the patriarchal system that leads to gender inequalities. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that “The identification of Muslim women as the bearers of ‘backwardness’ of their societies, initially by colonial administrators and later by Western-oriented reformers, is mirrored by a reactive local discourse which elevates the same practices into symbols of cultural authenticity and integrity” (21). Those in power in Muslim regions use this fact to their advantage. If women feel they are being attacked for their cultural practices, they will fight the hegemony with integrity. An example is the veil. Westerners’ obsession with the veil as a sign of oppression has led to Muslim women willfully wearing the veil in order to fight this stereotype, even if the veil does serve as an obstacle in their lives, but this does not challenge the patriarchal system in place: it reinforces it. Women are choosing to wear the veil, but in some cases only to fight the symbolic meaning it carries in other countries, and this is exactly what leaders in Muslim countries want. They want women to conceal their sexuality. Colonization has deemed Muslims as “the other,” which has led to unchanging cultural and political practices because men practice cultural war against the world outside to keep things stagnant inside to reduce any kind of social conflict. Mahnaz Afkhimi contends, “Women’s freedom is curtailed by a male-oriented hegemonic social structure at home and by their lack of access to the means of communication domestically and internationally” (5). Women in Muslim countries are either cut off from international communication, or given the wrong impression of what the world thinks. Those in power want to keep internal societal differences at bay in order to prevent social conflict. To do so, they position the outside world as the enemy, which leads to women fighting “the enemy” with internal cultural stagnation. At the same time, it is necessary for Westerners to have a fair view of Muslim women in order to help their cause. Once Westerners stop essentializing the plight of Muslim women in local communities as all the same, they will begin to trust women’s movements in the South and follow suit. This is where change will occur. Shaheed argues that “The emphasis on gender as a cornerstone of cultural identity is neither new nor limited to the Muslim world, where it can at least be traced back to experiences of colonization or dependency on the West” (82). The western patriar-
chal standard of assigning women certain roles not only shapes their lives, but also shapes the way they see themselves.

The central problem is that women themselves contribute to oppressive practices in order to be socially acceptable, and are separated from human rights discourses. Once women realize that self-identification need not be confined to socio-cultural norms, their self-awareness will combat the socially-fabricated bondage perpetuated by a male-dominated political system.

Works Cited