

TODAY'S ZAMAN

'I'm appalled there is still not freedom to wear headscarves in public service'

Marvine Howe, an experienced journalist and author who worked for years as a New York Times correspondent in different parts of the world including Ankara in the 1980s, is still actively pursuing her profession.



Marvine Howe

Working extensively on the role of Islam in a region from North Africa to Turkey, Howe believes that secularist fears over lifestyle in Turkey are about perceived intentions, expressing her disappointment over the headscarf ban in Turkey. Having known the late eighth President Turgut Özal, Howe believes that

had he lived, Turkey's problems would have been resolved less painfully. Howe, who is currently writing articles about the Kurdish and headscarf problems in Turkey, visited Gezi Park in June. During her stay, she also interviewed Turkish first lady Mrs. Gül. Howe talked to Sunday's Zaman on a range of issues from the role of women in journalism to different interpretations of Islam. Howe's work has appeared in World Policy Journal and Critical Muslim as well as The Christian Science Monitor, The Nation and The New Republic.

You have a very interesting and colorful life story. Although you are of a certain age, you are still working actively. What keeps you going?

Although I prefer to ignore birthdates as irrelevant, places are important. I was born in Shanghai and still vividly remember the Japanese occupation of my hometown. That's where I first felt it was important to struggle against injustice and foreign occupation, at age five. Later, I was drawn to the fight of African Americans for equality and dignity, before the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King. Like many other young liberal whites, my hero was the black American singer Paul Robeson. He was a precursor in the civil rights movement. What I learned as a young girl is that the struggle for human rights is everywhere. I suppose that's what keeps me going.

What made you become a journalist at a time when this profession was dominated by men?

My dream was to go back to China and write the real China Story, and so I decided to become a journalist -- with no idea that the profession was still largely a man's world. I learned that foreign reporting was out for American women in the 1950s... "too dangerous." Instead, I enrolled in Columbia University's School of Far Eastern Studies to brush up on my Mandarin -- hoping that if I were fluent in Chinese I could persuade a newspaper to send me back.

I had gone to Paris on holiday before delving into Far Eastern studies and fell in love with Europe. Having run out of funds but reluctant to go home, I went to the International Herald Tribune looking for a job as a newly graduated journalist. I was told in no uncertain terms to learn French. Thus I responded to a want ad in the Trib for an au pair in a French officer's family in Fez. As the only American reporter living in Morocco at the time, there were many openings. My first serious job was contributor to the BBC's Arabic program (I wrote in English), but I also wrote freelance pieces for The Christian Science Monitor, The Nation and The New Republic. Then I put it all together in my first book on Morocco's struggle for independence, "One Woman's Morocco," in 1956. This was my official entry into The New York Times -- and a shock. I learned they were still not sending women out as foreign correspondents but would be happy to hire me as a stringer, a local employee paid by the line, obviously with no pension or other benefits. I didn't care; I was being paid to travel and learn about the world. As a stringer, I covered the Algerian war, Biafra, the wars in ex-Portuguese Africa, South Africans' fight against apartheid, the Burundi massacre and a host of other stories in Africa and the Middle East.

Only in 1972, thanks to the women's movement at the Times and other organs, did the American press recognize women could hold their own overseas. I was named bureau chief in Rio de Janeiro, charged with covering the northern part of Latin America.

Can you tell me a bit more about your personal experience in Turkey?

My introduction to Turkey was late in 1979, as Ankara bureau chief, just in time for the left-right conflicts and of course the military coup of 1980. Those were difficult times -- cuts in heat and electric power, no Turkish coffee and other necessities, but I grew to love the country and people during my four-year stay. I'm ashamed I never learned to speak Turkish, although I was able to understand a good deal. There was no time to study grammar; I was always traveling: around Turkey but also in Greece, Cyprus and the Balkans. Of course, the most important event was the Sept. 12 military coup. Although there was strict censorship, I was able to provide a fairly clear picture of what was happening thanks to knowledgeable colleagues, like Mehmet Ali Kışlalı, a member of The New York Times local staff, but also journalists from Cumhuriyet, Hürriyet and Milliyet. Later I made extended visits to Turkey from 1995-2000 to prepare my book on the Islamic revival. And I returned briefly in 2012 on assignments from Washington Report on Middle East Affairs to report

on Turkish-Israeli relations.

As someone who worked and lived in Turkey, you accurately defined Turkey as a divided nation in your 2000 book. How was the Turkey you came to prior to the 1980s and how it is now?

It's interesting to note that the two stories I covered in Turkey this summer -- the Kurdish issue and headscarves -- were two important questions when I was writing my book. But I'm hopeful this time solutions will be found. I found more flexibility and patience on the headscarf issue, starting with the first lady and culminating in the Letter of 57 for freedom of headscarves. As for the Kurds, various Peace and Democracy Party [BDP] sources indicated what they want is equal rights as citizens of Turkey and recognition of cultural rights. Thirteen years ago, Kurdish activists were still talking about independence.

You have must have met important figures in Turkey during the writing of your book. Who was the most impressive one?

I thought President Turgut Özal was a great leader and believe if he had lived, Turkey's main problems, including minorities' rights, the Kurdish question, positive coexistence between the secularists and the devout, compromise between the environment and development, and the consolidation of civilian authority over the military establishment would have been resolved more rapidly and less painfully.

You study the role of Islam in geography from North Africa to Turkey. How does the interpretation of Islam in these societies differ?

The nationalist movements in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, included an Islamic -- salafi -- component, but they were dominated by Western-educated secularists. The Islamic orders had generally cooperated with the colonial power and therefore were largely discredited. Today the societies are apparently much more religious than previously, even Algeria, which fought a long and bloody civil war against the Islamists. Regardless of the politics, Moroccans are generally more observant of Islamic practices than they used to be and than their neighbors today. There's a ban on serving Muslims alcohol in Morocco, which is more strictly applied nowadays but still leads to hypocritical situations.

Coming from Morocco, I suppose I'm more appreciative of Turkey's freedoms under its Islamic leadership than most Turks. I am impressed by the openness of Ramadan in İstanbul; many people observe it, and many don't openly. I was astonished to meet young Turks in Gezi Park who freely described themselves as atheists -- this does not happen in Morocco, let alone the stricter Arab nations like Saudi Arabia. And of course, it was remarkable to see the Gay Pride Parade in Istanbul -- again, this could not take place in most Muslim countries. As for press freedoms, I have heard the complaints by my Turkish colleagues, and they are right to stand up for their rights. I think it is not a fact to be proud of that Turkey has the highest number of journalists in jail and that

most are Kurds. It is shameful that journalists like Hasan Cemal, who had the courage to stand up against abuses under the military regime in the 1980s, should be forced from his job for writing about limits on press freedom. But I also think that Turkish democracy will survive as long as you have newspapers like Today's Zaman and the Hürriyet Daily News, where abuses can be reported and even the prime minister soundly criticized when he makes gaffes. It's when the leader hides behind a law of impunity that democracy is endangered.

You work extensively on the headscarf issue in Turkey. What is your conclusion on this issue as an outsider observer?

I know that the headscarf means different things to different people at different times. For example, King Mohammed V -- not to be confused with his grandson -- the father of Moroccan independence, was also the first champion of women's rights. He raised his daughters as modern, educated, Muslim women, without headscarves. When Morocco won its freedom in 1956, many girls threw off their headscarves and djellabas and donned Western skirts and sweaters, as a gesture of their new emancipation. But nearly half a century later, there was a revival of the hijab -- the veil or tight-fitting headscarf -- in Morocco, particularly with the younger generation. I heard various reasons: campaigns on Arab television and audiotapes presenting the model Muslim woman as one who affirms her faith and identity through the hijab. There were also commercial pressures from Middle Eastern catalogs and Internet sites showing attractive clothing for the veiled woman. But the main motive given by girls for wearing headscarves was to gain social respect or a husband because it was said that a covered woman was more likely to be a virgin. But at least Morocco enjoys freedom to choose.

Turkey, which has always been a leader in women's rights and known for its strong women, should accord this freedom to its female citizens. I'm appalled by the fact that after 11 years of Justice and Development Party [AKP] rule, there is still not freedom to wear headscarves in public service.

What is your projection of Turkey given the high polarization in the country over the role of Islam in daily life?

I don't understand what the secularists' concerns are about. When I ask friends how their lifestyle has changed under the 11 year AKP rule, no one gives me a specific answer. Their fears are all a matter of perceived intentions. It seems to me it would not be difficult for the prime minister -- it would have to be him -- to make public reassurances to the secular minority that he has no intention of infringing on their dress or lifestyle. Or even better, include an amendment in the new constitution reassuring public opinion that the state will not interfere with people's private lives as long as they do not affect anyone else.

Can you talk a bit about your current works?

My last book, "Al Andalus Rediscovered: Iberia's New Muslims," launched at Columbia University and Georgetown University at the end of last year, describes the new Muslim communities in Spain and Portugal. Of course I deal with the radical element, but by and large the Muslims are adjusting fairly well to Europe, despite the economic crisis.

Currently, I have an interview with Turkey's first lady on women's rights, against the background of the Gezi Park protest movement, coming out in Middle East Policy magazine in September. At the same time, Washington Report on Middle East Affairs will publish my piece on Turkey's Kurdish peace process, again in relationship to the Gezi protests.

As a female journalist, what is your impression of the current status of women in this profession?

I was pleased to see so many women in the newsroom and among the columnists of Today's Zaman, but I believe this is an exception. In the US, women have made great progress in the media, and are even obtaining positions in management. But they still haven't won equal pay for equal work.

What is the most interesting memory you have from your years as a journalist?

There are thousands of fascinating stories, which is the main reason I cannot sit down and write my memoirs. But let me tell you about one event that stirred a lot of reader response. It was in the mid-1970s during my first staff assignment for The New York Times in Brazil. I had journeyed deep into the Amazon to meet with a Roman Catholic mission working with local Indian tribes. When I arrived at the mission, the tribe -- I don't remember its name -- was celebrating the community's resurrection. Five years before, the tribe had decided life was no longer worth living because of the truckers and farmers invading Amazonia and bringing with them their diseases and alcohol, devastating tribal life. The tribe agreed on a collective suicide pact. All their women ate a secret plant they had found in the forest, and there were no more pregnancies in the tribe. But little by little, with the help of the mission the tribe learned that the outsiders were not all evil and that they could keep their ancient customs and identity. And so they decided they wanted to survive. The women stopped taking the secret plant and the first baby was born just before my arrival. I thought it was a beautiful, uplifting story, but the New York Times readers only wanted to know: What was the secret plant?

2013-08-11

Muhabir: SEVGİ AKARÇEŞME, İSTANBUL
