Chapter 4

“Saving Amina”: Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Susan Moller Okin, whose work and friendship have been inspirational for me. Susan’s dedication to justice for all women was unfailing both in her theoretical writings and in her life commitments. Before her death, Susan read this paper and graciously addressed its challenges.

One of the innumerable electronic petitions flashing across the Internet in the early months of 2003 held special interest for feminists. Carrying the name and logo in Spanish of Amnesty International, the petition asked recipients to “sign” electronically an appeal against the sentence of stoning to death declared against Amina Lawal, a divorced Nigerian woman, who had had a baby outside marriage. In August 2002, an Islamic court in Katsina state in northern Nigeria had convicted Lawal of adultery under Sharia law. The “save Amina” petition collected many thousands of electronic signatures from around the world but in May 2003 it was followed by another e-communication with the subject line, “Please Stop the International Amina Lawal Protest Letter Campaigns.” The second e-

* This essay was initially written for a conference sponsored by the Carnegie Council on “Global Justice and Intercultural Dialogue,” held in Shanghai, January 2004, and a slightly different version of it will appear in Ethics & International Affairs. The quotation in my title is taken from an article appearing in Essence magazine, although the Essence article portrays Lawal’s Nigerian woman lawyer, Hauwa Ibrahim, rather than Western feminists, as “saving Amina” (Sansoni 2003). The present article develops arguments made in Jaggar 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, and 2004. I would like to thank Abigail Gosselin for her assistance in preparing the paper and participants in the “Global Justice and Intercultural Dialogue” conference, especially Thomas Pogge, for their helpful comments.
message was signed by Ayesha Iman and Sindi Medar-Gould, representing two Nigerian human rights organizations supporting Lawal. Iman and Medar-Gould asserted that the “save Amina” petition in fact endangered Lawal and made the task of her Nigerian supporters more difficult, in part because the petition contained a number of factual errors, including a false assertion that execution of the sentence was imminent. They also observed, “There is an unbecoming arrogance in assuming that international human rights organizations or others always know better than those directly involved, and therefore can take actions that fly in the face of their express wishes” (Iman and Medar-Gould 2003).

Electronic petitions have become a popular means by which Western feminists endeavor to “save” women in other countries. A 1998 e-petition on behalf of women in Afghanistan, begun by a student at Brandeis University, garnered so many responses that Brandeis was forced to close the student’s mailbox. The petitions often use sensational language to denounce some non-Western culture for its inhumane treatment of women and girls. Worries about non-Western cultural practices are not limited to those in the West who identify as feminists. The popular press regularly runs stories about non-Western practices it finds disturbing, especially when these concern women’s sexuality and/or are noticed occurring among immigrant groups. Recent news stories have raised the alarm about arranged marriage, “sexual slavery,” dowry murder (“bride-burning”), “honor” killings, genital cutting (“circumcision,” “mutilation”), sex-selective abortion, and female infanticide. Newspapers in the United States have also questioned whether female US soldiers, stationed in Saudi Arabia, should be required when off-base to conform to Saudi laws mandating covering their bodies and forbidding them to drive.

The perceived victimization of women by non-Western cultures has now also become a topic within Western philosophy. In this paper, I draw on the work of other feminist scholars to argue that conceiving injustice to poor women in poor countries primarily in terms of their oppression by “illiberal” cultures provides an understanding of the women’s situations that is crucially incomplete. This incomplete understanding distorts Western philosophers’ comprehension of our moral relationship to women elsewhere in the world and so of our philosophical task. It also impoverishes our assumptions about the intercultural dialogue necessary to promote global justice for women.1

1 A note on my terminology: In this paper, “we” refers to philosophers sympathetic to political feminism who work in North America or the European Union. I have in mind primarily citizens but also, to a lesser extent, permanent residents. In speaking of countries’ geo-political and geo-economic locations, feminist scholars have used a variety of terminologies — all problematic in some respects. From the 1970s through the mid-