



B A R A Z A !
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MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK

Islam and Feminism: The Beginning

It has been 1,400 years since Islam was revealed and spread throughout the world. Yet Muslim women in most, if not all, Muslim countries are still caught up in extremely contentious or acrimonious struggles to claim their rights in the private and public domains of their respective societies.

A large part of the problem in claiming Muslim women's rights is due to the domination of prevailing male-oriented, oppressive or misogynistic readings of our religious texts. These readings promote practices, rulings, and laws that discriminate against women. Yet these regressive interpretations are also often claimed to be requirements of "authentic Islam".

Seeking and claiming interpretive rights over Islam's religious texts is currently a crucial feature of a number of Muslim women's activities, individually and also jointly in groups or in non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These women's struggles have emerged, grown and expanded, especially in the last three decades or so.

Many historians and writers have claimed that Islam is a religion that granted many rights to women of the sixth century Hejaz or Arabian societies, rights that were unheard of in other societies or parts of the "Western" world until the turn of the 19th or even early 20th centuries. Yet now in the third general millennium (and halfway through Islam's second), Muslim women are still suffering from discrimination, a variety of injustices and even outright violence in the name of religion. Discriminatory or unjust Islamic family laws, punitive and violent rulings, and acts and practices such as child marriages, whipping, stoning, and honour killings are some of the injustices against women – all done in the name of Islam.

This "degradation" in the status and situation of women in many Muslim societies is related in complex ways to the impact of local and global economic and political forces – mainly those of colonialism, modernity, globalisation and the rise of neo-conservative, fundamentalist or extremist Islamic movements. The history of feminism and feminist consciousness in Muslim Middle Eastern countries suggests that these injustices, and the dubious religious rationales that are routinely offered to justify or excuse them, may be the result of changing cultural constructs about gender roles and relations stemming from key socioeconomic or political changes. They may have been actively negotiated or advocated by women and some men in response to their experience of lived realities that had been decisively transformed by modernisation, in particular that resulting from colonial rule since the early 19th century.



Muslim women say yes to their rights. This was one of the exercises at the workshop with the Single Mother's Association.

These developments arising from economic change and from state policies introduced by an indigenous or a colonial bureaucracy – and the cultural and ideological development that followed from them – had a profound impact on the lives of both men and women. One development of particular significance to women was the emergence of women themselves as a central subject of national debate – as key participants in national life, in the framing of public policy and national "narratives" (Ahmed, 1992).

In Egypt, for example, feminist discourses were generated by both females (e.g. Nazira Zain al-Din, Huda Sha'rawi, Duriya Shafiq, Nabawiya Musa) and males (e.g. Qasim Amin, Murqus Fahmi, Tahir al-Haddad, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid), but they grew out of different concerns and perspectives. Men's pro-feminism or "feminist stands" arose out of their contact with European society and tended to be more visible. Male feminists argued that their Arab society was backward because women were backward, and women were backward because of a lack

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of education, the adverse effects of social constraints and such practices as veiling and seclusion. These, they affirmed, were not sanctioned by religion. Women's feminism – initially an upper-class phenomenon – grew out of expanded learning and observation of their own lives during times of great change. Muslim women argued that Islam guaranteed women rights of which they had been deprived because of “customs and traditions” imposed in the name of religion (see Badran and Cooke, 1990; Badran, 1993).

Feminism has been greatly misunderstood and misrepresented both in the Muslim world and in the West. Islamic feminism and Muslim feminists have been attacked as “a Western influence” or as “Western-oriented” ideas. On those grounds they have been accused of undermining the religious foundations of the family and society, and branded as elitist and therefore irrelevant to the majority of Muslims (Fernea, 1998).

This issue of BARAZA! begins with some basic questions: What is Islamic feminism? Is there such a thing as “Islamic feminism” in the Muslim world (see the two pieces by **Shanon Shah**) and if so, how did it come about? How can we trace its emergence and development in various parts of the Muslim world? (See our Centre Spread by **Layali Eshqaidef**.) Is Islamic feminism to be feared, especially by men?

Umran Kadir argues that Islamic feminism is mainly about promoting the concept of gender justice which can be derived from primary Islamic textual sources – the Quran and Hadith – through a critical rereading of their origins and intentions. Umran asserts that the interpretations of Muslims, whether they claim to be feminists or Islamists, must be understood in the context of the existing or predominant cultural biases and the related patriarchal and misogynistic social practices of their respective societies. Yet the spirit of formative Islam (i.e. Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad) was about moral and social egalitarianism, the eradication of oppression and injustices against women, children, orphans and widows or all those who are oppressed or wronged – the *mustadhfin* (as the Quran terms them).

Nur Rofiah critically analyses the embedded notions and meanings of the two words “Islam” and “feminism”. She attempts to unravel the various elements contained in the two words that make up the term “Islamic feminism”. She argues that in the religion of Islam just as in feminism (as an ideology and from an epistemological perspective), the main focus is on the removal of injustices to women and the need to treat women fairly, with dignity, and equally as fellow human beings. In both – “Islamic ideas or thought” (as derived from the Quran) and in “Islamic feminism” – interpretation is the key element. Hence there are different and even opposing views in the interpretation of what “Islam intended” and what “Muslim feminists” see as the most Islamic way of achieving “gender justice”.

For a majority of “ordinary Muslims”, Islamic feminism is seldom directly experienced or thought about. Yet Muslim

women are often very aware of the “women question” in their social or religious life. Hence, **Rafidah Abdullah** in the interview by Shanon says that she does not think of her work in TV programmes and movies as embodying Islamic feminism. However, she admits that she is a promoter of a feminist agenda within an Islamic system insofar as she is promoting equality for women and empowering them to challenge false notions of gender and gender roles. For her the project of “Islamic feminism” is to delve into history in order to discover and understand the legacy of patriarchal control over the interpretation and implementation of Islamic law over women. Islamic feminism also means giving women their rightful space and voice in the development of religion and eradicating the wrongs done to them in the name of Islam.

For **Susan Carland**, Islamic feminism is neither a Western import nor a modern phenomenon. A unified and organised feminist movement may have emerged only in the late 19th century or early 20th century. But individual women fighting for their rights under the banner of Islam have long existed as reported in the earliest hadith text. Islamic feminism came into its own since the 1990s with the groundbreaking work of Muslim women scholar-activists and the transnational worldwide spread of the women's advocacy movement, in many Muslim countries as well as in Muslim diaspora societies in the West.

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, a Muslim woman convert, found that the continuation of hierarchical gender arrangements from the period of Medieval Islam into the 21st century has been maintained by unchanging Muslim family laws. Since the Shariah (God's Will or Plan for humans) has been erroneously conflated with *fiqh* (human understanding of God's will), most Muslims believe that these laws represent God's Plan for gender roles and relations. Contemporary ulama have abetted in this misunderstanding by not making clear the distinction between the two. Thus a crucial Islamic feminist objective is to raise this awareness and help bring about an Islamic reformation – a renewal and deepening of our understanding of Quranic calls for justice and righteousness across sexual, racial, and religious lines, and of what serious attempts to actualise them must entail.

Norani Othman and the Editorial Team

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BARAZA! is a resource primarily
for activists; policy makers;
academics and students of law,
Islamic and gender studies;
and SIS funders and supporters.

It provides:

- * a focus on contemporary matters affecting Muslims today, especially women's rights in Islam
- * resources for reference

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What is Islamic Feminism?

Nur Rofiah

Translated by Askiah Adam

Islamic feminism comprises two important words, each carrying a wide spectrum of meanings. Feminism can be understood as a critique of male domination that causes injustice to women. Islam, meanwhile, can be taken to mean a tauhidic religion that is critical of injustice in humanity in general.

Although both Islam and feminism are critical of injustice towards women, both are interpretations, and differences in perspectives towards injustice to women can arise. This can happen on three levels:

- (1) Within Islam. For example, its perception of polygamy: polygamy is just towards women in perpetuity; polygamy is just towards women only at the time of the Quranic revelation or during an ensuing war; and polygamy is just towards women only at the point when the Quran is revealed and not afterwards.
- (2) Within feminism. For example, its perception of marriage: marriage is an institution that perpetuates injustice towards women; marriage is not always a fertile bed of injustices against women.
- (3) Between Islam and feminism. For example, in the public space it is often understood that Islam seeks to prohibit female leadership, while in the feminist movement female leadership is necessary for justice towards women.

These possible differences demonstrate that although Islam criticises injustice towards women, the Muslim interpretation of Islam is itself prone to perpetuating that injustice, especially as the interpreters of the Quran (*mufasssirin*), the scholars of hadith (*muhaddisin*) and the legal experts (*fuqaha*) are often men, as has been the case for over 1,000 years.

The term "feminism" also did not originate from the Muslim community; thus the feminist debate has not been linked with (despite it not always being opposed to) Islamic theology or Muslim community values. From here, resistance from a section of the Muslim community towards the term "feminism" grew because it was perceived as representing the Western agenda, which contradicts Islam (read Muslim interests).

Bearing in mind the male-dominated interpretation of Islam and the birth of feminism in the West, feminism and Islam must necessarily be a part of one another such that combining the two terms not only results in "Islamic Feminism" but also "Feminist Islam". The term "Islamic Feminism" assumes that there exist Christian Feminism, Hindu Feminism and Secular Feminism. Consequently, Islamic Feminism means a feminist movement that is linked to the Islamic tradition. Feminist Islam, meanwhile, indicates that there exists an Islam that is not feminist or is not sensitive towards justice for women.

Islam, however, must be distinguished from the Islam as interpreted by Muslims. Islam originates from God. It contains elements of divinity, and it is absolute truth. Its interpretation, on the other hand, is human in origin, profane in character, and

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is relative. This difference makes the term “Feminist Islam” irrelevant because the term “Islam” is already infused with justice for women which is embodied in feminism. It is more appropriate to use the term “Feminist Muslims” because not all Muslims are aware of the need to see that justice in Islam takes the woman’s experience into consideration.

The term “Islamic feminism”, as referring to the need to link the feminist movement with an awareness of theology and traditional Islamic values, remains relevant because not all feminist movements acknowledge this need. The same can be said if Islamic Feminism is understood as a women’s liberation movement in the Islamic community because not all understandings of Islam in the Muslim community automatically contain the notion of women’s liberation from injustice. Nonetheless, the term “Islamic Feminism” becomes irrelevant when accompanied by the assumption that in Islam

So too, is the case with secular Feminists and Feminist Muslims. Feminist Muslims can learn from secular Feminists about articulating the forms of injustice in the family, society and the nation. The secular Feminists, meanwhile, can learn from the Feminist Muslims about articulating issues through religious idioms.

Synergy between Islam and feminism can be seen in the reproductive health debate. Feminist Muslims can learn from Muslim and secular Feminists about issues related to menstruation, sexual relations, pregnancy, birth and nursing. These themes already exist in the Islamic debate, but are still looked at from the legal perspective; the debate remains theoretical when, in fact, what is obligatory and forbidden is practised by the women whose experiences these are. The feminist perspective can sharpen the debate on what rights women have in undertaking the reproductive functions, and the

“Throughout the Quran men and women have been described as equally responsible for their deeds (*a'mal*) and will be given equal reward or punishment for whatever they do. If one needs any clarity on this let him carefully study the verse 33:35, besides several other verses in the Quran. If men and women are equally responsible for all their deeds both men and women will be equally responsible for their sexual conduct also and men would be equally source of *fitna*, not women alone as in our *fiqh* today.”

- Dr Asghar Ali Engineer,
an Islamic scholar, reformist-writer and activist

there has never been a women’s liberation movement prior to feminism, because at the point of Islam’s birth, the women’s liberation movement was already strong. This is how the women’s liberation from injustice movement was conducted by Muslims before the term “feminism” was introduced into the Muslim community, for example as manifested in the movement formed by Raden Ajeng Kartini in Indonesia.

Islam and feminism must be seen as synergistic, especially since both fight for the liberation of women from all forms of injustice. In a situation where Islam is used to restrain women, the feminist movement helps to differentiate between the Islam that has within it the spirit of women’s liberation from injustice, and that which does not. And in a situation where human existence is filled with all manner of injustice towards women, Islam provides a theological platform and the teachings for Muslim women to form a women’s liberation movement in the name of the religion.

A synergistic relationship is also possible where there is mutual criticism. The feminist debate can become the analytical instrument to critique the teachings or the usual interpretations of Islam by using the experience of women as the basis; for example, the use of women’s experience of polygamy to understand the verses on polygamy. Similarly, the Islamic debate can be used under specific conditions to critique feminist movements that have no strategic fit in Muslim communities.

Both Feminist Muslims and Muslim Feminists fight for justice for Muslim women. Feminist Muslims give more emphasis to Islam, while Muslim Feminists emphasise the feminist tradition. Both can learn from each other.

reproductive health perspective can sharpen such topics and link them to women’s experiential health.

If a section of the Islamic community is still allergic to feminism, then it becomes an informed action to consider the use of Islamised terms as a substitute for feminism. In Indonesia, some Muslim activists use the term *Fiqh an-Nisa* (Women’s Jurisprudence) as an entry point to liberate women based on the Islamic tradition. The result is very effective because there are *pesantrens* now that use justice from the women’s perspective in understanding Islam.

Feminist Muslims undertake the important function of linking two groups of women: the secular women and their conservative counterparts. From the secular women’s outlook the Feminist Muslims are seen as conservative, while from the viewpoint of the conservative women Feminist Muslims are seen as secular. Feminist Muslims are sometimes well received by both groups, and at other times rejected by both.

Islamic feminism can thus be understood as the effort which uses the traditions of Islam as an approach to liberating women from injustice. In the Islamic community context, Islamic feminism has found its niche because it is able to assist Muslim women in their claim that justice for women is justice that cannot be apart from Islam.

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Islamic Feminism for Dummies

Shanon Shah

Q. Isn't the term "Islamic feminism" redundant? Didn't Islam grant unprecedented rights to women?

A. The Quran not only granted rights to women, but also forced a paradigm shift in human society at the time of revelation. However, over the centuries, Islamic jurists, scholars and religious experts often interpreted – perhaps with the sincerest intentions – the central texts in such a way that women *were* treated as inferior.

Eventually, these readings entrenched themselves in the policies and institutions of majority Muslim states in the post-colonial era. It is this deviation between realities and ideals that Islamic feminists wish to address, by going back to the sacred sources of Islam.

Q. Be honest – Islamic feminism is a Western import, rooted in liberalism, and is intended to undermine Islam, isn't it?

A. This is a claim often used by status-quo Islamists. Whether or not we call it "Islamic feminism", an effort to reclaim Muslim women's rights and dignity has clearly emerged indigenously in Muslim societies all around the world, in response to very specific issues.

In South Asia, the movement addresses the inequities that arise out of misapplications of the Islamic marriage contract, or *nikahnama*. In South Africa, it was born out of the ideas of equality and social justice from the anti-apartheid movement. In Nigeria, it struggles against how Islamic criminal laws target women. In Iran, the movement coalesced after Muslim women realised that the new Islamic regime was more repressive towards women than the overthrown secular monarchy.

And in Malaysia, Muslim women struggle against the provisions in Islamic Family Law and other public policies that seem to contradict Quranic ideals of upholding equality, justice and dignity.

Q. But why do Islamic feminists go against things that are already mandated in Islam, such as the hijab? And don't you think asking women to lead Friday prayers is blatantly wrong?

A. Islamic feminists do not "go against" the hijab – they believe it is a personal choice that is not up to external authorities to regulate. Governments can neither force women to wear the hijab nor forbid them from wearing it.

As for the issue of women imams, it is admittedly controversial. Muslims at large do not have to accept women imams for mixed-gender prayers. But those who do accept women imams locate their logic within the sacred sources of Islam. Islamic feminists believe that the diversity of opinions within Islam is real and even beautiful.

Q. Islamic feminists can argue all they want, but aren't their concerns best left to Islamic religious experts to deal with? Why do Islamic feminists insist on reading Western views of equality into the Quran? Are they trying to change the Quran?

A. This accusation simplifies and caricatures what Islamic feminists aim to achieve. The point of Islamic feminism is not to usurp the ulama or pervert the Quran, but to hold Islamic religious experts accountable – when they make their pronouncements or interpret the Quran, are they affected by their human biases?

Admittedly, all individuals, including Islamic feminists, are imperfect. But if the interpretation and application of Islamic thought are transparent, accountable, and incorporate a more diverse array of men and women experts, surely this will only help uphold Islam's ideas.

Q. When Islamic feminists criticise Islamic family institutions – for example polygamy – women will only get discouraged about marrying. Isn't that encouraging moral decay?

A. This "moral decay" argument is used to dismiss not just Islamic but other feminists too, as if all feminists were motivated by a deep and illogical hatred of men.

Statistics tell a different story. Official figures in the US show that in 2003, 85% of domestic violence victims were women. This is only one of many indicators of how women are unfairly treated in the home and in societies, both "Islamic" and "secular".

In the context of Muslim societies, when Quranic verses are misread and misinterpreted to justify such violence, Islamic feminists don't speak up in pursuit of "moral decay" but to question how the universal wisdom of the Quran could possibly be used to defend such injustice.

Q. From a Western, secular point of view, "Islamic feminism" is dishonest, since Islam itself condones terrorism, violence and misogyny. Therefore, aren't Islamic feminists merely perpetuating backward religious teachings which undermine secularism? After all, isn't secularism the prerequisite for a democratic state?

A. Islamic feminists occupy a difficult position – in Muslim societies they are often seen as Western agents, and in the secular "West" they are often perceived as Islamic apologists. The "secular Western" dismissal of Islamic feminism derives from entrenched caricatures of Islam as a violent, misogynistic religion. This argument ignores the issue of intra-religious diversity, and also the difference between the religion and its interpretation, as well as between realities and ideals.

Going by the trajectory of their struggles, Islamic feminists may actually share a lot in common with their fellow Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist feminists. In fact, the notion of a serious dichotomy between secular and Islamic feminisms is more imagined than real. Ultimately, ideologically diverse feminisms provide valuable insights into how best we can build a just, egalitarian society.

Shanon Shah is the Columns and Comments Editor of The Nut Graph, a Malaysian online newspaper that makes sense of politics and popular culture. He is also an associate member of Sisters in Islam.

History of Feminism in Muslim Societies

Susan Carland

It would be wrong to assume that Islamic feminism is a modern phenomenon. In fact, while a unified, organised feminist movement wasn't recognised in parts of the Muslim world till the late 19th century or early 20th century, reports of individual Muslim women fighting for their rights under the banner of Islam exist in the earliest hadith sources.

Ibn Kathir narrates the story of the woman of the Quraysh tribe who successfully used the Quran to argue with 'Umar, who wanted to cap the *mahr*. Other reports exist about female *sahabah* initiating divorce, requesting education, and complaining about domestic violence. Sakina, the Prophet's (SAW) own great-granddaughter, included conditions in her marital contract that would scandalise a modern Muslim community, such as the right to *nushuz* and the condition that her husband Zayd never go against her will. And the life of A'isha, the wife of the Prophet (SAW), is one replete with examples of admirable and defiant feminism.

Even limited records from medieval times yield examples of Muslims who publicly advocated the rights and equality of women, such as Ibn Rushd who said in the 12th century that women were equal to men in all respects (Ahmad, 1984). Most reports of Muslim women from the medieval period are accounts of their large numbers in scholarship, trade and positions of influence – even slave women. But while these stories are significant and illustrative, they don't neatly fall into the category of "feminism."

Shari'ah. Huda realised that "with learning, women could be the equals of men, if not surpass them" (quoted in Badran, 1995, p. 35).

Women's journals also appeared in Egypt in the early 20th century, with Nabawiya Musa, a hafiza who decided to interpret the Quran for herself, publishing *The Magazine of Young Women* and several books focusing on the education and employment of females (Badran, 1995). It was the phenomenal achievements of Nabawiya that set the precedent for women to eventually achieve equal pay for equal work by the Egyptian government years later. In 1945 the Arab Feminist Union was established and based in Cairo with Huda again at the helm. (Critics, however, accused it of being nationalistic and elitist.) Others such as Doria Shafik and Fatma Reshad led movements to gain greater political participation for women in the 1950s. In the 1970s, the controversial text *Woman and Sex* by Nawal el Saadawi was published.

From Iran in the 19th century, theologian and public scholar Taherah Qurrat-ul 'Ayn objected to all forms of women's

“Do not equate ourselves with the prophet, Mr Ahmad Dhani. He was willing to marry an 80-year-old widow. But our men today mostly want to marry more than one wife because of sex.

- Maria Ulfah,

the outspoken leader of PP Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama, responding to an Indonesian musician who said any Muslim woman who objects to polygamy is insulting Prophet Muhammad (SAW), who was a polygamist

The major shift occurred around the 19th century, when women moved from being the objects of cultural writing, to subjects:

Women have always struggled against the passive models of femininity but they were never as threatening as they are now, because women's dissent expresses itself through writing. Before, women's resistance to patriarchy was not recorded, it was oral, it confined itself to tales, proverbs, or acts." (*Agani* XVI, p.155 in Mernissi, 1996.)

When women started to write their own journals, form organisations with the explicit rubric of feminism, and record their own histories, a tangible and cohesive Islamic feminism emerged. Both individual *and* collective activism began to take place.

Scholars such as Margot Badran have highlighted that, far from being a Western import, feminism in Egypt was indigenous, and the written records of Egyptian feminists exist from the late 19th century. In 1909, Malak Hifni Nasif published *Al-Nisa' iyyat*, a compendium of works on women's rights, in Cairo. In 1923, the Egyptian Feminist Union was formed, headed by Huda

confinement and the distinction between male and female roles (Moghissi, 1999). She is most known for her very public unveiling in 1848, which stunned her community. Her notable feminist contemporaries were Bibi Khanum Astarabadi, who declared that "all the problems and chaos faced in Iran and by its women were men's doings" (Nateq, 1358/1980, in Moghissi, 1999), and Taj-ul Sultanah, who "criticized oppressive traditions and customs both for retarding Iran's development and for depriving women" (Moghissi, 1999, p.128). By 1930 more than 20 women's periodicals had been established. After the revolution, feminism in Iran was split into secular and Islamic camps, and while the two didn't always agree, they proved they could work together.

By the 1990s Islamic feminism was on the increase in the Muslim diaspora in the West. Amina Wadud's groundbreaking *Qur'an and Woman* was released and prompted a string of other reinterpretations of the Quran from female perspectives. Organisations such as the Women's Initiative for Spirituality and Equality (WISE) were launched, and Amina Wadud led the controversial mixed-gender prayer in New York. Islamic

feminist groups (such as Sisters in Islam in Malaysia) began to receive national and international attention for their work.

What this brief summary demonstrates is the indigenous nature of feminism in the Muslim world, a feminism that has its foundations in the soil of Mecca and Medina at the time of the Prophet (SAW), and has now spread through countless communities around the globe. From the beginning, Muslim feminists have disagreed with each other, and outsiders have criticised, and this will continue to happen. This isn't a sign of failure. After all, the same could be said about all forms of feminism. And all approaches to Islam.

Susan Carland lectures in Sociology and Gender Studies at Monash University in Australia, where she is also completing her PhD on the way Muslim women fight misogyny in their own traditions and communities. In 2009 she was named on the "500 Most Influential Muslims in the World List".

Endnotes

¹ For the sake of brevity, highly contestable terms such as "feminism/t" (and "Islamic feminism/t" and "Muslim feminism/t") will not be debated or defined in this article. I recommend readers view the other articles in this journal for full expositions of these terms.

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♪ Long stem roses are the way to your heart
But he needs to start with your head
Satin sheets are very romantic
What happens when you're not in bed
You deserve the best in life
So if the time isn't right then move on
Second best is never enough
You'll do much better baby on your own ♪

Express Yourself – Madonna



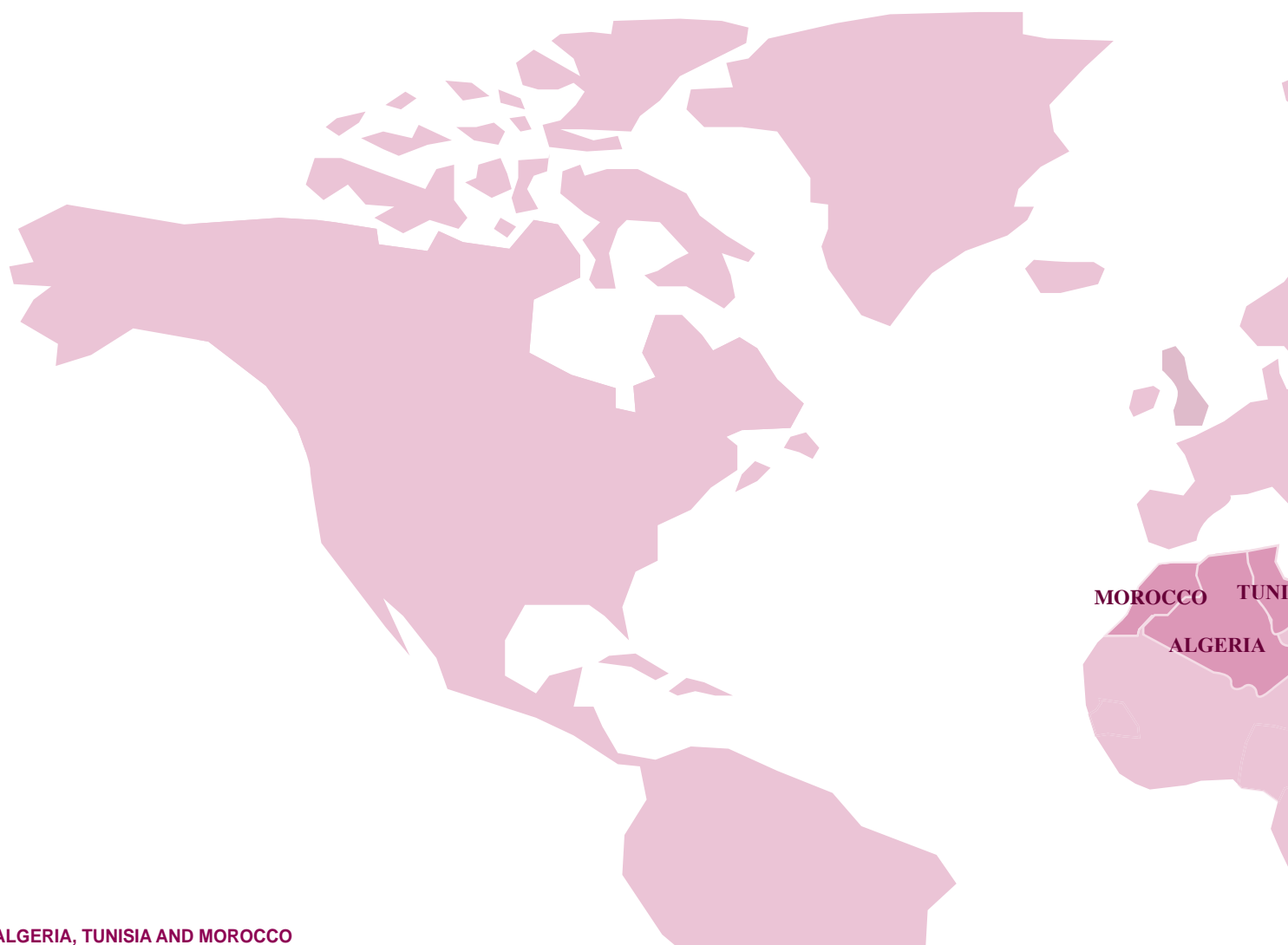
Achieving liberation requires serious deliberation.
Sketch by Shieko Reto.



Illustration used with permission from Jacky Fleming, a UK-based cartoonist who is well-known for her special tact in communicating feminist values.

Mapping the History and Development of Islam and Feminism

Layali Eshqaidef



ALGERIA, TUNISIA AND MOROCCO

1. Women's movements in both Tunisia and Algeria have been invariably secular. In Tunisia, equality and women's rights have been instituted in the legal system. Algeria is at the forefront of gender-based legal reforms despite its turbulent, repressive recent history.

2. The Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité, a coalition of women's and civil society organisations in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco headed by the Moroccan Women's Democratic Association (ADFM), launched a campaign for gender equality in North Africa in the 1990s. Guided by research, the campaign was uniquely positioned to simultaneously address biased interpretations of Islamic texts and universal human rights treaties. Their successful approach was documented in their book, *Guide to Equality in the Family in the Maghreb*.

3. Leading up to the landmark reform of the Family Code (Moudawana) in Morocco in 2004, women's organisations and individual feminists joined forces, collecting one million signatures in support of reform. The campaign employed a unique approach based on multiple arguments including Islam's spirit of social justice and reinterpretation of religious texts.

SAUDI ARABIA

1. In what is considered to be the most closed and conservative society among all Muslim and Arab countries, "feminism" and "feminist movements" are shunned by the vast majority of the population as "Western" imports.

2. Wajeha al Huwaidar is one of very few Saudi Arabian feminists. A writer and journalist, she publicly criticises Saudi Arabia's male guardianship laws. She initiated "video protest campaigns", such as the 2008 video she posted on YouTube on International Women's Day featuring her driving and encouraging other Saudi women to claim their rights. In 2009 she published an article in the *Washington Post* entitled "Saudi Women Can Drive, Just Let Them."

3. In 2009, King Abdullah appointed Nora al-Fayez as the Kingdom's first female Deputy Minister of Education and opened the first co-ed university.

IRAN

1. A great number of middle-class women joined the Islamic Revolution, which began in 1978 and instituted a theocratic republic. The Islamic Revolution is believed to have reversed the multiple advancements in women's rights and equality that had been gained in the 1960s and 1970s.

2. Iranian feminist scholars and activists such as Afsaneh Najmabadeh and Ziba Mir-Hosseini were the first to coin the term "Islamic Feminism" in the early 1990s and used it in the women's magazine *Zanan*.

3. In 2006, a group of women activists established the "Stop Stoning Forever" campaign to reform the Islamic Penal Code.

4. In 2006, a group of grassroots activists started the "One Million Signatures" campaign, also known as "Change for Equality", in support of changing discriminatory laws against women. Campaign activists succeeded in overturning a regressive proposed law in 2008 that promoted polygamy.



EGYPT

1. Malak Hifni Nasif (1886 – 1918), known by her pen name Bahithat al-Badiya ("Seeker in the Desert"), was a university lecturer and columnist at the national newspaper *al-Garida*. Her writing addressed social and cultural issues in relation to women and challenged conservatives who opposed women's education.

2. In 1909, Nabawiya Musa was the first female to sit for and successfully pass the state secondary school examination. She later became the first female school principal. She wrote articles and poems in newspapers and published books.

3. In 1919, Huda Shaarawi, leader of the women's committee in the Wafd nationalist party, helped organise the largest women's anti-British demonstration. In 1923 she established the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) and took her veil off publicly. Her famous lectures called for the abolition of polygamy, among other things.

4. Zainab El-Ghazali joined the EFU in 1935 and then left it to establish the Muslim Women's Society, the first organisation to call for women's and national liberation within an Islamic framework.

5. Duriya Shafiq was the first Egyptian woman to receive a *doctorat d'état* and was among the most militant suffragists. In 1948 she founded the women's group, "Daughters of the Nile".

INDONESIA

1. Early in the 20th century, the women's cause was embedded first in the nationalist struggle, and then later in development and nation-building efforts.

2. Sinta Nuriyah Abdurrahman Wahid, who became the First Lady in 1999, had been a prominent social activist. In 1998, she set up a group of Islamic scholars and social activists to research and correct gender bias in dominant interpretations of Islamic texts.

3. Several women's organisations are fighting on multiple fronts against the growing Islamist movement in Indonesia and regression in women's rights and equality, such as in the case of growing support for polygamy.

Layali Eshqaidef was previously a women's and children's rights advocate at women's NGOs in Jordan and a former Programme Associate with Women's Learning Partnership (WLP). She is a part-time Communications Officer with Musawah. She has a Master's degree in Women's Studies.

MALAYSIA

1. In the multiracial, multireligious society of Malaysia, the wave of Islamisation of the 1970s and 1980s gave birth to Sisters in Islam (SIS) in 1987, initially as a study group of professional women who wanted to reread the Quran from a women's perspective and challenge discriminatory laws that were said to be based on the Shariah.

2. In the early 1990s, SIS publicly opposed polygamy and published a booklet explaining how violence against women is un-Islamic.

3. In 2005, SIS launched a successful campaign against the government's proposed amendments to the Islamic Family Laws, which were about to introduce further discrimination against women.

4. Today, SIS is a leading organisation on the global front in the area of Muslim women's rights and equality. In early 2009, SIS launched Musawah, a global movement for equality in the Muslim family.

TURKEY

1. Early feminism in Turkey started late in the 19th century with a few educated women who founded and wrote in women's journals.

2. Among the earliest feminists were Fatma Nesibe, Nimet Cemil and Fatma Aliye. In her writing, Aliye argued that it was social customs and traditions, not Islam, that relegated women to an inferior position.

3. Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish republic and its first President (1923 – 1938), introduced revolutionary secular, modernist legal reforms that gave women unprecedented rights and freedoms.

4. Researcher and activist Pinar Ilkcaracan co-founded Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) and the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies, an international network of NGOs and academics in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

“There is So Much Injustice...”

Rafidah Abdullah

Script and screenplay writer Rafidah Abdullah has been active in the fight for social change ever since she started out as one of the hosts of the young women's programme 3R in 2000. SHANON SHAH interviews her.

SS: Do you actively try to promote feminism through your work?

RA: Yes, I do. 3R is all about promoting equality for women, empowering them to be all that they can be and challenging false notions of gender and gender roles. This we do through the TV show as well as in workshops that we hold for young women all around the country.

I want to express an opinion, a viewpoint, and that would certainly be coloured by my feminism, which is a big part of me.

SS: Since you write the stories of Malay-Muslim women characters, would you consider your work to be Islamic feminist?

I've had members of the media ask me, why are my stories so pro-women and so anti-men? Do they go to other scriptwriters and filmmakers and ask them why their stories are so anti-women and so pro-men? Being anti-women is not seen as being anti-women, it's taken as simply normal. That, to me, is truly frightening.

SS: How did you come up with the main character for your latest hit movie *Pisau Cukur*?

RA: The two main characters in the story probably have their roots in the many former artistes and stewardesses who went on to become wives of Datuks. There is this perception that women take on certain jobs in order to hunt for rich men (not that there's anything wrong with wanting to marry rich!). [And] these women always

“The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, ‘It’s a girl.’”

African-American woman who was a candidate for the Democratic Presidential Nomination, 1972

- Shirley Chisholm,

RA: I've never thought of my work as being “Islamic feminist”. It's more about pushing a feminist agenda within an Islamic system (which also sounds strange to me because Islam itself had a very strong feminist agenda when it was revealed to the Prophet!).

I guess for me the term “Islamic feminism” means going back beyond the centuries of patriarchal control over the interpretation and implementation of Islamic law, and giving women the rightful space and voice that they have been denied in the development of the religion. In that sense, I guess I am supporting the work of Islamic feminists by showing through my work the multi-faceted realities of Malaysian Muslim women's lives.

SS: Do you find that the film and TV medium in Malaysia is being increasingly used for disempowering portrayals of women using Islam as a justification?

RA: I find that a lot of wrongs are being done in Malaysia using Islam as a justification, and yes, that includes disempowering portrayals of women. Many a time we come across characters on screen saying things like, “Laki-laki akalunya sembilan, nafsunya satu. Perempuan pulak akalunya satu, nafsunya sembilan.”

Then there are the many dramas and movies that supposedly try to give a “different perspective” on polygamy, but that perspective inevitably is one where the women learn to get along, share a useless husband whom they all love and obey despite his uselessness, and accept the “fact” that polygamy is not only sanctioned but encouraged in Islam.

deny the attraction of money, demurely claiming “Dah takdir/jodoh...” whenever they are asked why they are willing to be Datuk's wife no. 2/3/4! So I thought it would be interesting to turn that idea on its head and create characters who are out-and-out gold-diggers, but whose growth within the story ultimately makes them realise that they deserve better than to be mere rich men's wives.

SS: What's the response been like to her story?

RA: When the backing studio (the investors) first read the script, their concern was that it would potentially be insulting to women. That reaction floored me! For a while I really wondered if I had lost my feminist bearings!

After the movie was screened, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Zainah Anwar, who came for the premiere, absolutely loved it! How's that for Islamic feminist endorsement? I was a bit nervous about the reception from the straight male fraternity, and it was with trepidation that I took my futsal buddies to a screening. But they enjoyed it, and in fact we had a good discussion afterwards about gender relations and the whole notion of marrying for money. So overall I've had lots of positive feedback from both men and women. Of course, most gay men I know loved the movie to bits, and I'm really considering writing more stories that cater to the campy crowd...

Rafidah Abdullah is a script/screenplay writer, actress, columnist and TV host. She has previously written the screenplay for “Gol & Gincu”, a film that later spun off a TV series. Her latest film screenplay is “Pisau Cukur”.

Muslim Feminism and the Need For Gender Reform

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons

As a Muslim feminist civil and human rights activist for over three decades, I find unacceptable the status of Muslim women in many of our majority Muslim countries and in most Muslim communities in non-majority Muslim states. I am a convert to Islam and came into the religious tradition in 1971 as an adult African-American civil rights, antiwar and women's rights activist. I did not see a conflict with my beliefs when converting to Islam under my religious mentor and spiritual guide, Sheikh M.R. Bawa Muhaiyadeen.¹

However, upon leaving the warm and gender-equitable cocoon of my religious community, the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Fellowship, I was introduced to the harsh reality of the treatment of women in many Muslim countries and institutions in which I have lived, worked or visited since my conversion.

Islam is not monolithic, nor are the status and role of Muslim women homogenous, yet it is a reality that the social relations between the sexes in most Muslim societies and communities are deeply patriarchal and organised so that men may dominate and women must submit. The cause of the continuation of these hierarchical gender arrangements into the 21st century can be found in Muslim Family Law, seen as an integral part of the Shariah or Divine Law. The basis of these laws stems from medieval Muslim male lawmakers' understanding of gender roles, which they likened to those of a slave owner and his slave. The very structure of the marital arrangements – a man's required payment of a *mahr* (dower) to the woman which then gives him exclusive sexual access to her; his required maintenance of the wife in exchange for her obedience and sexual availability; and the right to divorce placed exclusively

in the man's hand – was patterned on the idea of purchase of property, ownership of said property (sexual access) and the ability to dispose of said property if it was no longer wanted. Since Muslim practice requires women to be obedient to the males in their families, women have been made to seem infantile and unable to regulate their own affairs, despite the Quran giving them the right to own property and to benefit from their own labour without male supervision.

Women in Muslim discourse have also been depicted as hypersexual beings to be controlled by the men in their families, lest *fitna* (chaos) overrun society. While there is an overall sense of sexual equality in the Quran, the small number of gender hierarchical verses in Islam's holy book coupled with numerous misogynist hadith and the debilitated status of women during the eighth, ninth and 10th centuries (when Islam's canon – theological and legal – was formed) were used by the jurists to create laws that were deeply sexist and hateful to women.

As the Shariah (God's Will or Plan for humans) has been erroneously conflated with *fiqh* (human understanding of God's Will), most Muslims believe that these laws represent God's Plan for gender roles and relations. The ulama (religious scholars) have abetted in this misunderstanding by not making a clear distinction between the two. This has caused Muslims to vigorously resist changes to these laws.

As numerous scholars have noted, the Quran does not define specific roles across cultures solely based on anatomy, nor is there a detailed prescription for how men and women are to relate to each other in the social realms. Asymmetrical gender



In advocating women's rights, SIS publishes pamphlets in Bahasa Malaysia as a tool to reach out to women at the grassroots.

systems in the Muslim world are human constructs, just as they are in all parts of the world. It was the feminist movements in these societies that changed these structures and gave women what freedoms they now experience. We Muslims must reform our tradition in light of the Quran's call for social justice, pluralism, and human rights for all.

Muslims must acknowledge that women are full human beings with inalienable and God-given rights to freedom of their persons; freedom of thought; freedom to be educated at all levels; freedom to work at any occupation for which they are qualified; and freedom not to marry or to marry someone of their choice. Additionally, women should have the religious freedom to participate in all aspects of religious life. This includes serving as imams, judges, and ulama. Nor should women be refused entry into mosques, or relegated to their dark and dank quarters. If men are unable to focus on their prayers in the company of women, they should undergo re-education training to overcome their weaknesses – no longer should women carry the burden of the chastity of the community.

Men are as responsible as women for upholding modesty in society, and must learn that modesty is a spiritual quality they must develop in order to become Muslims.

We are in need of an Islamic Reformation that will bring Muslim practice in line with the Quranic calls for justice and righteousness in our dealings with one another across sexual, racial and religious lines.

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons is currently an Assistant Professor of Religion and affiliated faculty in the Women Studies Department at the University of Florida, USA. Simmons' primary academic focus in Islam is on the Shariah (Islamic Law) and its impact on Muslim women, contemporarily.

Endnotes

¹ He was a Sufi who taught his largely American Christian and Jewish audience about a gender-egalitarian Islam whose primary virtues include compassion, tolerance, justice for all, and most certainly the equal standing of all humanity in the eyes of God.

“[Years ago] I watched Michael Wolfe’s documentary about the life of the Prophet Mohammad. And I literally had tears in my eyes as I was watching that documentary, because I realised that, as a community, we’ve gotten so far away from the dream that the Prophet had in the seventh century–of having a community where all people would feel welcome and there would be civility.

So when I think of an inclusive community, I think of one where you don’t have to fear judgment when you walk through the doors of a place of worship. I know too many women who don’t bother going [to the mosque] because there’s going to be someone who tells them that their shirt isn’t long enough or they weren’t supposed to wear nail polish, and will literally stop them in prayer and throw overcoats to them to cover themselves up even more.

– Asra Nomani

on how she began her battle with her Morgantown, West Virginia mosque for women’s equality. She wonders when her dream for an inclusive Islam will be realised.

People call me
a feminist
every time
I refuse to
be a doormat



Illustration taken from “Laughing Matters” Bhasin, Kamla & Thapar, Bindia, March 2004, New Delhi: Jagori.

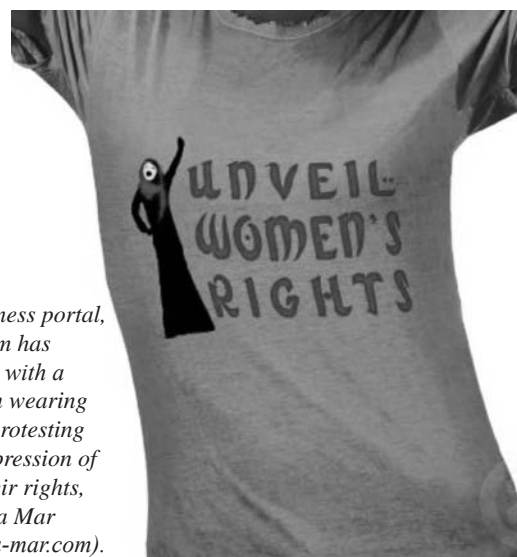
Is Islamic Feminism to be Feared?

Umran Kadir

Islamic feminism is a movement that is founded on the belief that the rights granted to women in many Muslim societies and communities today fall far short of what is provided for in Islam. Advocates of Islamic feminism seek to advance the rights of women and the concept of gender equality in both public and private life by grounding their arguments within the framework of Islam and the realities of modern life. Though Islamic feminism as an organised movement only began to appear in the latter half of the 20th century as a reaction to the rise of political Islam, there is ample evidence that the themes underpinning Islamic feminism have been articulated by influential Muslims since the earliest days of Islam. Indeed, when it was revealed, Islam was revolutionary in view of the many new rights that it accorded to women.

Amongst other things, women were suddenly no longer the property of their husbands and could initiate a divorce and even own property; such ideas would only take root in the West centuries later, putting to rest claims by some quarters that Islamic feminism is a Western import.

However, contrasting this enlightened history with the status of today's Muslim woman can only lead to confusion and despair. How does one begin to reconcile the notion that a faith which 1,400 years ago permitted women to operate businesses (as with the Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) wife, Khadija) today prohibits women from operating cars, let alone marrying men of their own choosing? And how is it that the hijab, a sign of wealth and status in medieval Arabia, has come to be associated in the modern age with the subjugation of women? Sadly, we find ourselves in a situation where Islam, which once liberated women, is today being used to justify the disenfranchisement of women. Against this backdrop, is it any wonder that there have been increasing



An online business portal, www.zazzle.com has printed t-shirts with a Muslim woman wearing the hijab and protesting against the oppression of women and their rights, designed by Ina Mar (<http://blog.ina-mar.com>).

“Women’s rights remain my key thrust because of something I learnt a long time ago. If women are empowered, the whole community eventually moves forward. It’s that simple because as the nucleus of a family and community, it makes no sense to sideline or ignore women.”

*- The late Zaitun (Toni) Mohamed Kassim,
a human rights activist*

calls for the role of women to be reassessed within the framework of the Quran, the Sunnah and historical precedent?

Such an approach appears entirely consistent with the spirit of Islam, yet why are those who promote such ideas often accused of insulting Islam and far worse? The reality is that for centuries Islam has been interpreted solely by men and this, together with the conflation of Islam with patriarchal and misogynist cultural practices and attitudes, has led to understandings of Islam that have diminished the status and role of women. Concurrently, conservative elements in Muslim societies have taken it upon themselves to speak in the name of God and have denounced attempts to critique existing interpretations of Islam as an attack on Islam itself.

The only way forward is for Muslims to approach the issue with compassion and honesty. There must be an acceptance that God created humans as inherently fallible creatures. This can then form a basis on which to re-examine past interpretations, attitudes and practices in light of the sources of Islam and within the context of

the age in which we live. Only then can Muslim women reclaim their rights as provided for in Islam.

So is Islamic feminism to be feared? Only by those who fear justice.

Umran Kadir is a Malaysian lawyer working in the Middle East who believes that the principles of Islam and human rights are compatible and complementary.

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Islamic Feminism: Information at Your Fingertips

Shanon Shah

Who's who?

Amina Wadud (1952 –) – US feminist Muslim scholar, focusing on Quranic exegesis. (See **The hows.**) She published the groundbreaking *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*, and co-founded Sisters in Islam. She introduced the idea of the reader's "prior text" – an individual's own perspectives, circumstances, and background – in reading texts, including interpreting sacred texts¹.

Muhammad Abduh (1849 – 1905) – Egyptian jurist, Islamic scholar and reformer. He produced some daring Quranic interpretations and fatwa. For example, on polygamy he said, "A nation that practices polygamy cannot be educated," and "Exceptions will always be possible – as in the case of the barren wife – but must be decided upon by a judge."²

Qasim Amin (1865 – 1908) – Egyptian judge and co-founder of Cairo University. In *Abudiat al-Mara (The Slavery of Women)*, he wrote, "There is no doubt that the man's decision to imprison his wife contradicts the freedom which is the woman's natural right."³

Shirin Ebadi (1947 –) – Iranian lawyer and human rights activist, and the first Iranian and Muslim woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. In her memoir *Iran Awakening*, she wrote, "[A]n interpretation of Islam that is in harmony with equality and democracy is an authentic expression of faith. It is not religion that binds women, but the selective dictates of those who wish them cloistered."⁴

What's what?

Hudud – In essence, Islamic criminal laws as prescribed by the

limits, or *hadd*, outlined in the Quran. In modern times, these laws have often appeared severe and unfairly targeted at women and minorities. For example, in 2002 the Nigerian Shariah Court sentenced Amina Lawal and Safiya Hussein to death for adultery, but the men in question were let off scot-free. However, the legal defence for the two women appealed with shariah-based arguments for why the sentence could not be upheld, and the religious courts eventually overturned the sentence.

Islamic Family Law – Left untouched by colonial powers, these laws were codified by independent Muslim governments in the post-colonial era, sometimes to the detriment of Muslim women's rights within the family. Some have been reformed to be more gender-just, for example Morocco's Moudawana in 2004. Others have been amended to strip away women's basic rights in marriage and divorce, for example the parliamentary amendments to Malaysia's Islamic family laws in 2005.

The hows

Tools of interpretation – including exegesis (or *tafsir*, the critical interpretation of religious texts) and hermeneutics (the study of the art of interpretation). Islamic feminists use these tools, which are often grounded within the Islamic tradition, to reread the central texts of Islam to uncover messages that uphold gender equality.

Quranic verses – Status-quo Islamists have read concepts of obedience and patriarchal protection into certain key Quranic verses. One that is often contested is from *Surah An-Nisa* (Quran, 4:34), which traditionalists say defines women's "obedience" and men's superiority. It is also oft-quoted to justify why husbands are allowed to beat "disobedient" wives. Islamic feminists have

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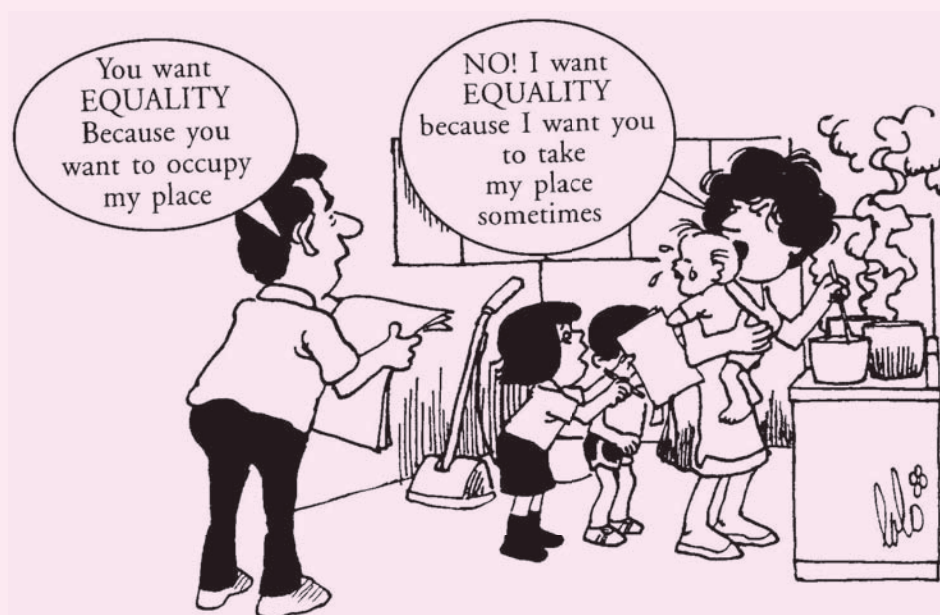


Illustration taken from "Laughing Matters" Bhasin, Kamla & Thapar, Bindia, March 2004, New Delhi: Jagori.

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argued that the male “superiority” here is not absolute and depends on the context, and that the license given to husbands to beat their wives has been misinterpreted.

Islamic feminists also question the selective focus on these verses, when there are other verses that celebrate diversity and equality between men and women, such as Quran 4:124 and 33:35 (see below).

Men are the support of women as God gives some more means than others, and because they spend of their wealth (to provide for them). So women who are virtuous are obedient to God and guard the hidden as God has guarded it. As for women you feel are averse, talk to them suavely; then leave them alone in bed (without molesting them) and go to bed with them (when they are willing). If they open out to you, do not seek an excuse for blaming them. Surely God is sublime and great. (4:34)*

But he who performs good deeds, whether man or a woman, and is a believer, will surely enter Paradise, and none shall be deprived even an iota of this reward. (4:124)*

Verily men and women who have come to submission, men and women who are believers, men and women who are devout, truthful men and truthful women, men and women with endurance, men and women who are modest, men and women who give alms, men and women who observe fasting, men and women who guard their private parts, and those men and women who remember God a great deal, for them God has forgiveness and a great reward. (33:35)*

* From the translation by Ahmed Ali.

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- ¹ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*. p.40.
- ² From Barbara Stowasser (1998). *Gender issues and contemporary Quran interpretation*. In Y. Y. Haddad and J. L. Esposito, eds, *Islam, gender, and social change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 34.
- ³ From http://www.mediterraneas.org/article.php?id_article=72, accessed 12 Feb 2010.
- ⁴ Shirin Ebadi with Azadeh Moaveni (2006). *Iran Awakening: A memoir of revolution and hope*. New York: Random House, p.204.

Calling on Friends of SIS

About Us

Sisters in Islam (SIS) is a civil society organisation which believes that Islam upholds equality, justice, freedom and dignity. We are made up of Muslim women and men who take a rights-based approach to Islam. We focus on women's rights within the frameworks of Islam and universal human rights. Our mission is to promote an understanding of Islam that recognises the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and dignity within a democratic nation-state.

Calling all friends

Throughout the years, people from all walks of life have voiced their support for SIS – loudly or silently, women or men, Muslim or those of other faiths. To them, SIS would like to extend an invitation to join Friends of Sisters in Islam, a membership category open to all supporters.

You can be a Friend of Sisters in Islam by contributing RM50. As a Friend, you will receive BARAZA! (SIS Bulletin), special discounts on SIS merchandise and the use of the SIS Resource Centre. Above all, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are part of a growing group of people who support the role SIS plays in Malaysia and at the international level in using a holistic framework of religion, rights and the realities of modern day life to change the way Islamic teachings are understood and translated into law and policy.

Yes count me in as a Friend of Sisters in Islam

Name

Address

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City Postcode

State Country

Contact details

Tel

Mobile

E-mail

Areas of Interest

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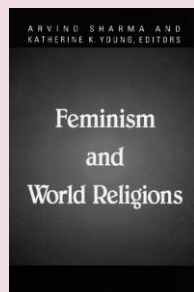
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Recommended Reading on Islam and Feminism

Islam and Feminism

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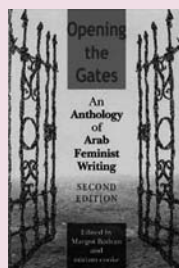
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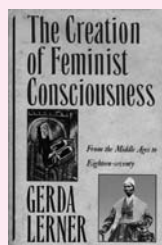
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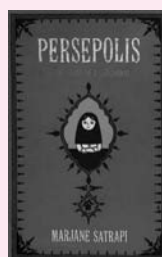
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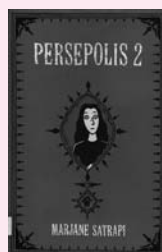
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