

Contemporary Matters Affecting Muslims Today

BARAZA!

A Sisters in Islam Bulletin



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Islam and Feminism: Growing the Seeds



Empowering Voices For Change
SIS FORUM (MALAYSIA) (266561 W)
MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK



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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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Editor's Introduction

Contemporary Islamic Feminism And The Challenges Confronting It In Muslim Societies

Norani Othman

In BARAZA 6 we presented introductory articles on 'Islamic Feminism: the Beginning' which explained what Islamic feminism is all about, with a basic info kit on Islamic feminism's central ideas, as well as mapping out the history, emergence and development of Islamic feminism throughout the Muslim world today.

In this issue of BARAZA 7 we look at contemporary Islamic feminism by (a) identifying and profiling some key Islamic feminist actors, scholars and activists around the world; (b) highlighting the role of, and challenges confronting, Islamic feminist movements in two large Muslim countries, Egypt and Indonesia; and (c) examining the terms preferred by a range of prominent academics in the field, and their reasons for choosing them.

Islamic feminism is currently at a crucial stage of having to face up to constant challenges from patriarchal political parties and movements as well as authoritarian and semi-democratic states both within and outside the Muslim world. Patriarchy remains strong in the family and society as it is often legitimised and used by religious authorities.

Ratna Osman, the Executive Director of SIS, describes her personal journey to becoming a Muslim woman committed to the belief in and advocacy for women's rights and gender equality.

Shahril Hamdan, in his short biography of Ziba Mir-Hosseini, describes the experience of a scholar-activist who is currently at the forefront of a global struggle to promote Islamic feminism and realise its potential to bring about gender justice using the frameworks of Islam and human rights.

Fuad Rahmat discusses the contributions of numerous Egyptian thinkers to early Muslim reformist thought, setting the scene for modern-day discussions of gender equality.

See also our centre spread by **Shanon Shah** on Contemporary Islamic Feminism: Key Thinkers and Activists Around the World to understand who they are and what they do to advocate women's rights.

Ala'i Nadjib in her article Feminism in Indonesia examines the socio-political contexts of women's movements and since the 1990s the significant influence of literature written by Muslim feminists such as Fatima Mernissi and Riffat Hassan among others. She argues that Indonesian women's movements began with a focus on empowerment issues in the areas of education, health care and economic development but finally expanded into an engagement with religious ideas and texts. Islamic feminism was partly borne out of the participation of women in Islamic women's mass organisations such as Fatayat of Nahdlatul Ulama and Aisyyiah of Muhammadiyah.

The essay Islamic Feminism: Reflections from Egypt, by **Mulki al-Sharmani**, goes on to describe how Islamic feminism has been defined, categorised and critiqued in scholarly or academic literature, especially by Muslim women working within Egypt or elsewhere, such as Margot Badran, Omaima Abou-Bakr, Asma Barlas and Ziba Mir-Hosseini. It also outlines a brief history of the emergence, trajectory, significance and challenges of Islamic feminism in Egypt.

Fatima Seedat in her article When Islam and Feminism Converge analysed the terminology of Islamic feminism as viewed by important key players such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Ziba Mir-Hosseini. She pointed out that while some academics choose to remain neutral towards the feminist label, they are optimistic about convergence with it to achieve social justice.

My Personal Journey to Sisters in Islam

Ratna Osman

I come from a modern middle-class family and, like most Malays, my religious identity is inextricably intertwined with the cultural traditions and rituals that were embedded in my daily life.

My siblings and I attended compulsory Qur'an-reading classes until we were 12. Growing up, I watched my father and my only brother receive special treatment at home in comparison to the girls.

For example, my mother would have to serve my father his glass of water while he sat reading the newspaper or watching TV, even if she herself was feeling tired after having cooked three meals a day and tending to six small children.

The significance of being a Muslim did not impact me until I attended an Islamic course in school at the age of 15. After the course, I longed to feel closer to God and therefore vowed to observe the five prayer times daily and unerringly.

I wanted to be the 'anak solehah', for I was taught that if I was not, then God would punish my parents for my sins. My teachers also made me believe that I had to put on the headscarf, and if I did not, my parents would be at the receiving end of God's wrath.

sought answers by turning to the lessons being advocated by various Muslim-based youth groups which were popular at the time of my youth.

I stumbled upon true knowledge only later when I studied law at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan. I learned about the rich diversity that exists within Islamic jurisprudence, and was pleasantly surprised to discover that differences of opinions between the ulama were celebrated — that these differing viewpoints were neither frowned upon nor were the proponents persecuted.

Still, I was bursting with so many questions. especially when it came to the issue of 'inheritance': why should a son get double the share of a daughter even if it was the daughter who had supported and looked after the parents during the couple's lifetime?

Many such questions were abruptly shot down by the lecturer on the premise that one is simply not permitted to question the Qur'an. Instead, I was told that there is hikmah (wisdom) within all God's revelations, and therefore the inheritance law would remain unchanged no matter how different the concept of reality today is from the time of the Prophet.

Although I felt a searing sense of injustice, I did not object further.

In addition, it was imparted to me that as a good Muslim girl, I should not assert myself — that speaking softly was a requirement so as not to draw too much attention to oneself. According to my educators, my voice, body and hair possessed the power to lead men astray ... and should this lead to their 'downfall', it would be my fault entirely.

Naturally, I exhibited a high level of piety after imbibing all those guilt-imposing lectures.

I so wanted to be identified as a good, pious Muslim girl that I obeyed my educators when they insisted that I give up all the activities that I used to love: in particular the sporting ones and becoming a member of the Scouts group. I was even told to minimise contact with close friends who were non-Muslims!

To fill the social gap, I immersed myself in books on religion, attended

courses which deepened my religious knowledge and sought solace through prayer. I idolised Muslim scholars and authors such as Maududi, Maryam Jameelah, Hassan al-Banna, Hassan Turabi, and Sayed Qutb ... and even

Eventually, the list of questions sans satisfactory responses — on issues of polygamy, the freedom to practise one's religion of choice, the financial maintenance of divorced wives — grew longer.

For me, Islam has always been a religion that is just and fair. Why then were the outcomes for women not so? Why were women shouldering the burden of delayed divorce processes? Why was it so difficult for women to obtain maintenance for themselves and their children from errant husbands? Why, when so many women were now breadwinners within their own families, were they receiving less inheritance than their male siblings?

Surely this was not the fate Allah had intended for Muslim women. To be told that women should endure these injustices only to reap the rewards of heaven later was simply too convenient — insufficient to cauterise the pain that some women and children perennially face. Even

more disconcerting is that Muslim men and Muslim society in general are complicit in perpetrating this injustice!

After I left the corporate world, I yearned to seek satisfactory answers

"TO BE TOLD THAT WOMEN SHOULD ENDURE THESE INJUSTICES ONLY TO REAP THE REWARDS OF HEAVEN LATER WAS SIMPLY TOO CONVENIENT — INSUFFICIENT TO CAUTERISE THE PAIN THAT SOME WOMEN AND CHILDREN PERENNIALY FACE"

to these inconsistencies. This led to my applying for a job at Sisters in Islam (SIS). What ensued was an unexpected but welcome surprise. It was within this organisation that I learnt of Islam as a religion which can actively address almost all social issues in modern society.

I had never thought this possible from my former stance, which was based on the strict, classical interpretations of the Qur'an. Through my work at SIS, I am now able to advocate for necessary amendments to the currently existing Islamic Family Laws of my country; I speak out for gender equality, and reject all forms of injustice.

At SIS I learned that it is important to take into consideration socio-historical context when reading the Qur'an; that both the explicit and implicit messages of the text should be taken into consideration if one wanted to understand and assimilate the holy verses and apply them to daily life. Moreover, not many people realise the difference between Shari'ah and fiqh — the former being God's divine message; the latter being the interpretation of that message by human beings who are not infallible.

This newfound knowledge gave me the freedom to question all the injustices within issues that had surfaced in my mind ever since I was studying in Islamabad. Finally, it became clear to me that it was never wrong to inquire, to ask why Muslim women were in the predicament that they were in at present.

I read the Qur'an now from a completely new perspective. To me, this Living Book, which was compiled over 1,400 years ago, is not just a holy manuscript that you wrap in a beautiful cloth and put on a high, special shelf in your home to be respected and revered — I refer to mine often, and it still never ceases to amaze me.

Thus I shall continue with my exhilarating journey at SIS, filled with a renewed sense of pride at being a Muslim woman and confident with the knowledge that I have found a place that best fits my spirit and identity.

Understanding Islamic Feminism

An interview with
Ziba Mir-Hosseini

A summary by Shahril Hamdan

Ziba Mir-Hosseini is a prominent scholar of Islamic feminism, whose books include Marriage on Trial: A Study of Family Law in Iran and Morocco (I.B.Tauris, 1993) and Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Islam (Princeton, 1999). Born in Iran, Ziba is based in London and is Professorial Research Associate at the Centre for Islamic and Middle Eastern Law at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

JOURNEY THROUGH ISLAMIC FEMINISM

In her 2010 article “Beyond ‘Islam’ vs. ‘Feminism’”, Ziba outlined her own journey towards feminism. Although she formed close friendships with feminists during her year of research in Morocco in the late eighties, she observed a “gap between their worlds and those of the women I was meeting in the family courts; they spoke two different languages, both literally and figuratively.” Her intellectual hero, Fatima Mernissi, was published in French “and her work did not reach ordinary Moroccan women.” Ziba’s subsequent book, *Marriage On Trial*, in which she attempted to maintain “scholarly objectivity”, was generally well received but she was nonetheless concerned about the dismissive responses by some ‘secular’ Iranian feminists.

A decade later, the success of her documentary film *Divorce Iranian Style* – the filming of which, she writes, enabled her to “cross the line between academia and activism” – and her book *Islam and Gender*



“completely transformed my status both in the academic field of Iranian studies and in the world of Iranian women activists and academics. My approach – in particular, my attempt to understand Islamic clerics without condemning them out of hand – was taken seriously by academics who had previously ignored or sought to dismiss my work, and I found that students and younger generation diaspora Iranians, in particular, found my work engaging and enlightening.”

The commencement of Ziba’s work with Sisters in Islam, in 2002, was another turning point. “Trips to conferences and meetings in Malaysia and Indonesia opened a new world to me, where I was accepted without question. I did not have to explain my identities as a feminist and a Muslim. There were none of the tensions between religious and secular feminists that pervaded the circles in which I had been operating previously.” Outlining her position today, she observes, “Faced by an apparent choice between the devil of those who want to impose patriarchal interpretations of Islam’s sacred texts, and the deep blue sea of those who pursue a neo-colonialist hegemonic global project in the name of enlightenment and feminism, those of us committed to achieving justice for women and a just world have no other option than to bring Islamic and feminist perspectives together. Otherwise, Muslim women’s quest for equality will remain hostage to different political forces and tendencies”.

BROADENING A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

As with many movements with a progressive and reformist imperative, Islamic feminism suffers from a perceived elitism. Most Muslim women’s groups are led by women who come from middle- to upper-class backgrounds, seemingly lacking a popular base. Ziba acknowledges this problem but is optimistic for the future. She points out that much of the Islamic feminist movement – diverse as it is – relies on bringing classical fiqh and tafsir texts into the public space of discourse and in doing so broadens the movement’s audience and appeal.

She is heartened, for example, by “the emergence of a number of NGOs working with Muslim women who are using this discourse and relaying it further, using Islamic and human rights frameworks to stress the need for gender equality and justice in Muslim communities.” The so-called grassroots may yet be won over.

However, responding to Yoginder Sikand’s point that key articulators of Islamic feminist discourse tend to be non-Arab Muslims, Ziba is less celebratory. “Political conditions in the Arab world are simply not

conducive for such discourses to be publicly articulated. You could easily be branded as an apostate and killed.” It is a timely reminder that this broadening appeal, manifested across the globe, is not always by design. The trend, which sees work published in languages such as English, Persian and Bahasa Indonesia, may invite analyses of the potential of a decentred movement akin to a postmodern global condition, but it also contains darker and more tragic narratives about places where women speak out at the risk of death.

STRUGGLE ON MULTIPLE FRONTS

Islamic feminism can be a lonely position. Despised by patriarchal Islamists for whom gender is the primary lens through which a particular vision of society is constructed, NGOs working with and for Muslim women are often accused of being tools of the West, with more than an occasional reliance on Western funding. Ziba rejects this accusation, preferring to underline the practical dimension of any such reliance.

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“Anyone who works for gender justice, even if she doesn’t depend on foreign money, is quickly branded with the same label! So, what other option do they have? The fact of the matter is that many Muslim women live in undemocratic contexts ... this forces many NGOs working with Muslim women to fall back on Western funding agencies.”

There is more than a hint of exasperation at the hypocrisy that underscores the charge of being Western puppets simply by virtue of assistance from groups in the West. “The oil-rich Saudi Wahhabis are certainly not going to fund NGOs working for justice and equality for Muslim women.”

“Political conditions in the Arab world are simply not conducive for such discourses to be publicly articulated. You could easily be branded as an apostate and killed”

At the same time, support from the wider feminist world – some members of whom are also critics of Islam – is not always forthcoming. Ziba notes this ambivalent attitude towards the idea of Islamic feminism. “Many fellow feminists believe that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron and that, in fact, it will only strengthen the Islamists in the long run with its use of Islamic, instead of secular, human rights, arguments.”

It is in between these various discourses, at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, that Ziba locates Islamic feminism. She is careful not to label anyone an enemy, but it is clear she rejects both kinds of fundamentalisms that contain blind spots: the Western one that regards religion as inherently unjust and the ‘Islamic’ one that advocates a return to the patriarchal texts en route to realising what it calls the ‘Islamic state’. The consequence for the Islamic feminism discourse is explicit. “It is an apologetic or reactive discourse, directed against those who claim that Islam does not countenance gender justice and equality.”

SEPARATING THE SACRED AND THE LEGAL

To be sure, this discourse, even if reactionary, is not without authoritative imperatives. Ziba identifies one of them as resisting the conflation of fiqh and Shari’ah. “Very often both traditionalist Muslim scholars or ulema as well as Islamist ideologues take fiqh, a human product that by definition cannot be sacrosanct, to represent or to appear as synonymous with the Shari’ah (which is considered divine and unchangeable). Therein lies the major problem that Muslim women continue to be faced with in terms of a whole slew of regressive laws that,

deriving from the fiqh tradition, are wrongly presented as mandated by the Shari’ah.”

Her proposal is modest yet retains transformative potential. She asks that when discussing the issue of legal reforms, we speak about the ‘Muslim legal tradition’ rather than the Shari’ah, which remains a nebulous, furiously contested terrain. “There have been, and still are, so many fiqh schools which often proffer conflicting opinions on a vast range of issues, including those relating to women. Recognising this opens up the possibilities of substantial reform for it effectively highlights the separation between the sacred and the legal.”

“Many fellow feminists believe that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron and that, in fact, it will only strengthen the Islamists in the long run with its use of Islamic, instead of secular, human rights, arguments”



“We need to rethink old dogmas, both religious and feminist, and this is where we can learn from each other”

KNOWLEDGE

Ultimately, Ziba locates both problems and solutions in the contested sphere of knowledge. “Because there is now little or no contact between the ulema of the madrasas and ‘secular’ or ‘modern’ educated Muslims, who also include key Islamic feminists ... the vast majority of the ulema have no idea of contemporary sociology, economics, political science and so on.” This, Ziba says, along with the class dimensions of the madrasa environment, inhibits receptivity to more progressive ideas that Islamic feminists bring to the table.

Yet, despite the patriarchal overtones of the fiqh tradition, Islamic feminism, she stresses, must understand and participate in this and other spheres of knowledge. “Ignoring fiqh won’t make it disappear! Islamic feminist scholars and activists are not just articulating alternate fiqh prescriptions to counter blatantly patriarchal ones. Many of them are engaging with several paradigms at the same time — progressive fiqh and tafsir or Quranic interpretation, human rights arguments,

international instruments, laws and treaties, and, above all, the lived realities of Muslim women.”

By the end of the interview, this ability to straddle the multiple imperatives, tensions and possibilities emerges as the primary theme through which Ziba articulates the history and potential of Islamic feminism. This same theme dominates Ziba’s own fascinatingly manifold narrative. In a world-system where oppositional posturing gains most purchase, the nuances of her analyses and prescriptions may provide an exciting impetus for Islamic feminism, which is to play mediator of and across discourses even as it always acts as the unwavering emancipator of women the world over.

“We need to rethink old dogmas, both religious and feminist, and this is where we can learn from each other.”

With thanks to Yoginder Sikand whose MR Zine interview with Ziba Mir-Hosseini has been excerpted in this article (<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/sikand090210.html>).

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Feminism in Early Muslim Reformist Thought: A Glimpse

Ahmad Fuad Rahmat

The intellectual history of 19th and 20th century Egypt boasts a long list of icons who are often touted as the pioneering reformists of modern Islam. They include, among others, Muhammad Abduh, Qasim Amin, Hassan al-Banna and Sheikh Muhammad Shaltut, and together their works were read far and wide across the Muslim world. In fact, they continue to inspire figures and movements from other continents to more deeply engage with the question of human reason, autonomy and democracy. The debates, as anyone with the slightest familiarity with political Islam today can see, will go on for generations to come, and for this reason these canonical works will remain relevant for the conceivable future.

Less known, however, are the contributions of women in shaping the discourse of Islamic reformism and modernity, and nowhere was this more apparent than in early modern Egypt. It indeed was an exciting time, as questions regarding the relationship between faith and reason, tradition and modernity as well as democracy



were discussed by men and women. It was within this context that the first generation of Islamic feminists took shape, as questions of gender equality were also brought to the mainstream.

To better understand this, we must view the emergence of the discourse against the backdrop of the social circumstances of the time. The discourse developed when European capitalism became the dominant economic system, largely due to the encroachment of European colonial interests in the region. There was an

influx of not only Western products, but also values and educational systems.

This led to a complicated dual effect on the political discourse: on one hand, there was clearly a rise in anti-colonial sentiments, as the deeper entry of European geopolitical interests into the Middle Eastern context gradually challenged local customs and mores. On the other hand, this also advertently led to a widening of spaces for Muslim women for, however indirectly, colonialism also brought

along with it a consciousness of modern and secular values among the locals.

Understandably, it was the more secular-leaning feminists who first established the lead in promoting feminism. Huda Sha'rawi was one case in point. As a well-educated daughter of a member of the Egyptian elite, she had the resources and connections to pursue her activism. She remains best known for the brave act of removing her veil upon disembarking from a train following her trip to Europe. This remains a watershed moment in Egyptian history, as it represented the first public act of defiance by an Egyptian woman. It was reported that dozens of other Egyptian women also joined Sha'rawi in de-veiling themselves, effectively promoting the feminist agenda, however crudely and offensively it may have appeared to a largely traditional Egyptian society.

“
Understandably, it was the more secular-leaning feminists who first established the lead in promoting feminism
”

At the time, most women, save for a few elite, were still expected to be confined to the private sphere within the realm of the family. Harems were still widely maintained (Sha'rawi in fact was married at 13) and women lagged far behind in terms of employment and education. At any rate, Huda Sha'rawi eventually became the first president of the Egyptian Feminist Union, which remains the pioneer feminist organisation in the Middle East if not the Muslim world.

But the discourse that eventually developed was indeed rich and complex, as a diverse range of perspectives was represented in the ensuing debates on gender. Soon, disgruntlement began to grow around claims that the brand of feminism introduced by Sha'rawi was too secular and Eurocentric. Nowhere was this more evident than in the more conservative strand of feminism that was espoused by Zainab Al-Ghazali. As a close friend of Syed Qutb and ally of the Muslim Brotherhood, she called for the Islamisation of society, which she believed is needed if women are to achieve equality. Her commitment towards Islam as the worldview to ensure equality between men and women explains her emphasis on the importance of teaching the Qur'an and sunnah alongside the more worldly subjects of history and geography to ensure that Islam does not fall on the wayside with the rising appeal of modern values in Egypt.

Bahithat Al-Badiya was another unique case in point: the pen name of Malak Hifni Nasif. She was an active proponent for a middle path for veiling, one between the more pre-modern design which practically enclosed the woman behind a huge

cape-like cloth, and another which is more practical and sensible, which does not immobilise the woman but nonetheless fulfils the criteria set in the Qur'an. This reflects her larger and distinct approach to feminist activism, which tries to strike a fair negotiation and interchange between Islamic and modern secular values.

We must be sure to note, however, that the discourse was not limited to abstract women's issues. For example, Zeinab Fawwaz called for universal education and employment for all graduates. This also explains the rise of organisations designed to aid women's progress, such as the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women in 1914, the Society of the New Woman in 1919 and the Society of the Renaissance of the Egyptian Women and the Society of Mothers of the Future, both established in 1921.

For more information on the fascinating history of early feminism, one can turn to Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, and Margot Badran's *Feminists, Islam and Nation and Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*.

Ahmad Fuad Rahmat is managing editor for the ProjekDialog.com collective. He lectures in cultural theory at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus and is co-host for Night School on BFM Radio. He was trained in political philosophy. See more at: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/opinion/ahmad-fuad-rahmat/article/hudud-passion-and-its-discontents#sthash.HTsW8EbL.dpuf>

Feminism in Indonesia

Ala'i Nadjib

PREFACE

Women have been involved in public life in Indonesia for centuries. Queen Safiatuddin Taj ul-Alam (1641-75), from the Kingdom of Samudera Pasai in Aceh, is one early example of a woman leader, known for her resilience and steadfastness and profiled in Fatima Mernissi's *Forgotten Queens of Islam*. The twentieth century served up figures such as RA Kartini, Dewi Sartika, and others, mainly known for their commitment to women's education. Nyai Siti Khadijah and her husband K.H. Khalil Bisri founded an Islamic boarding school for women in Jombang while Rahmah el-Yunusiah founded the Diniyah school for women. In addition to the educationists, independence fighters like Cut Nyak Dhien also did their part to fight inequality and colonisation.

Indeed, women have been actively involved in the struggle for independence and national development in pre-colonial to contemporary times. But what is their role now, in modern, independent Indonesia? And how have we come to this present-day position? The path of progress charted by women and the women's movement in Indonesia has been neither straight nor smooth, but full of obstacles. Religion has been one of the main obstacles, even as religious groups have included women as key agents. This paper traces the development of the women's movement in Indonesia, identifying four factors that have shaped its direction.

As an aside: the reader should note that the term 'feminist' has long been associated with the West and is only just beginning to gain currency among the larger mainstream of women's activists in Indonesia. This paper thus uses the term 'women's movement' to refer to both self-professed feminists and their allies who prefer to avoid use of the term.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDONESIA

The recorded history of Indonesia's women's movement was for some years lost to the public before the Suharto era, which saw the establishment of institutions such as Dharma Wanita and Pemberdayaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga (PKK), ostensibly to promote the interests of women and families. In reality though, the Suharto administration was not interested in empowering women as much as it was keen to have women support their husbands' work and duties. The first (male) minister in charge of women's status, L. Soetanto, was nominated to the Cabinet in 1978 and re-elected to the post in 1983. The ministry emphasised women's roles as wife and mother. Their tasks of cooking, cleaning, and keeping house were not to be neglected in the quest for personal emancipation. It also proved unwilling to address fundamental women's rights issues. Many women's rights activists decided to reject the ministry, seeing it as a vehicle through which the government legitimised its own position and programmes.

The women's movement also made few inroads among religious groups before the eighties. Several Islamic groups such as Muslimat, Muhammadiyah's Aisiyyah, and Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) Fatayat had specific departments focusing on women, but a real breakthrough would not come until the NU National Conference in 1997, which allowed women to become leaders and to participate in public life. While generally conservative, NU was then led by the modernist and fairly liberal future President Abdurrahman Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur.

FOUR CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO FEMINISM IN INDONESIA

The advancement of women in Indonesia, and especially of Muslim women, was in fact pioneered in the mid-twentieth century. Their efforts were redoubled following the fall of the Suharto regime. The respective phases of women's rights activism in the country can be traced to four main factors, which are summarised below.



INDIVIDUAL WOMEN'S QUEST FOR EMPOWERMENT

Indonesian women have, from their nation's founding, aspired to equality and freedom from subordination. One exemplary figure here is Kartini, who struggled to ensure educational opportunities for women and girls. Indeed, there are many figures who inspire, and this list includes Andi Rabbiah, the 'floating nurse' who would travel between remote islands to provide health care services to their inhabitants; Butet Manurung, who taught indigenous tribes in the forest area of Jambi; and Hilda Rolobessy, a peacemaker working to heal the conflict area of Ambon. These women point to both the need and the promise of women's empowerment.

The country has since seen a woman elected to the highest political office in the nation. However, many challenges remain, including widespread poverty and inequalities, illiberal laws and policies, human resource issues, the preponderance of patriarchal policies and a disproportionate representation of men among decision makers, etc.



LITERATURE ON FEMINIST HISTORY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

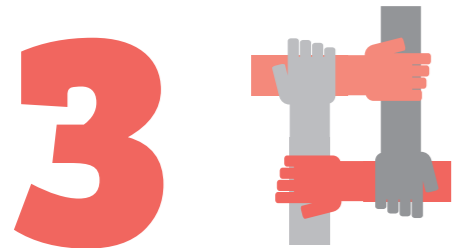
Written by Indonesia's first President, Sukarno, and named for the woman who brought him up, Sarinah details Sukarno's belief that women play an important part in nation building and the quest for independence. The book was an inspiration for the local women's movement. Many books on and by women have since been published, further supplementing feminist texts from other countries and contributing to the development of a truly local feminist consciousness.

Besides Sukarno, another President who has paid attention to women's struggles in his writing is Gus Dur. His publications as Chair of the NU

Central Board include *Islamku Islam Anda Islam Kita* (My, Your, and Our Islam), a book hotly contested by many conservative religious scholars.

The association of feminism with analyses of sacred texts in the nineties served to encourage the production and consumption of literature on women's status and rights. This association began with the *Ulumul Qur'an's* (Journal of Islamic Thought) discussion of the topic 'Islam and Women' in its third edition (1994). The emergence of books on the women's movement and on women's position, books from both feminist and religious genres, would soon follow. Some of these critiqued feminism, for example Ratna Megawangi's *Membiarkan Berbeda*, which introduced the concept of ecofeminism, or the writings of Hidayah Nurwahid, who later became president of the Welfare and Justice Party (PKS) and Chair of the Assembly (2004-09). His writings, which include the book *Membincang Feminisme, Perspektif Gender dalam Islam* (Discussing Feminism and the Gender Perspective in Islam), are largely in response to criticisms of hadiths as misogynistic by Fatima Mernissi and others.

At the same time, writings on Islam and feminism by scholars around the world were coming to Indonesia through books in the original as well as in translation. Figures like Asghar Ali Engineer, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi, and Nawal El Saadawi became familiar figures in local discourse on the subject. Reading these scholars led Indonesian women to consider the similarities in contexts and challenges faced by women in other parts of the world. It brought home the extent and reach of male domination and female subordination.



AN INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF FEMINISTS AND INTELLECTUALS

Publications, as well as conferences, seminars, public discussions on women's issues, and visits by renowned feminists, helped create a solid women's rights network in the country. Encounters at home and abroad with intellectuals who wrote about women's position in Islam led to a more open, global discourse, referencing figures like Riffat Hassan, Asghar Ali, Fatima Mernissi, and Nawal El Saadawi. These references were shared with activists concerned with women and Islam in neighbouring Malaysia. Riffat Hassan was perhaps the first of these figures to visit and inspire local activists. Asghar Ali attempted to link human rights and women's issues with the teachings of Islam in his book *Rights of Women in Islam*, translated into *Pembebasan Perempuan*. While Riffat Hassan and Amina Wadud largely focus on Qur'anic verses, Fatima Mernissi critiques aspects of the hadiths and traditions. Nawal El Saadawi's novels are a clarion call for

the rise of women from oppression and powerlessness.

Indonesian feminists were not only inspired by these thinkers, but also stimulated into conducting research and comparative studies and writing about their own experiences and perspectives on the local women's movement. They drew upon their lived experiences and the experiences of activists in other parts of the world who share the struggle for justice and equality. If women have a common 'enemy' it is surely injustice. By encouraging activists to join hands and share experiences, these encounters form a crucial strategy to challenge and overcome patriarchal culture.

International institutions working to support human rights and women's rights, such as the Ford Foundation, help in mobilising and further developing these networks. The networks in turn enable women's rights activists to spread awareness around feminist issues and encourage action and movement building.



THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

Muslim organisations such as Muslimat, Fatayat, and Aisyiyah have undoubtedly contributed much to empowering a section of women and the women's movement in Indonesia. These organisations have established education programmes, provided health care services, and helped spread the practice of reinterpreting religious texts. Due to their branches or representative offices in almost every region, they have been able to sustain a wide range of activities and reach across the country. Through their programmes, they have facilitated the spread of feminist ideas and activities that empower women. These mass organisations can be a strategic partner to other civil society groups working to better the lot of women in the country. In fact, the National Commission for Women (Komnas Perempuan) recently facilitated a forum that brought together a combination of Muslim organisations and rights-based NGOs to push for reform of the family law ('Alimat).

Besides religious organisations, rights-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are another important driver in the empowerment as well as institutionalisation of women in Indonesia. NGOs flourished after the fall of Suharto and during the reform period. Among these are

Rifka Annisa in Yogyakarta, which provides shelters for survivors of domestic violence as well as a centre for human resource development around the issue of violence against women. LBH APIK in Jakarta conducts legal analysis and advocates for the rights of survivors both in and out of court. Solidaritas Perempuan and Migrant Care are two organisations that work with migrant women, and the former is also a larger community organisation focusing on gender equality.

Some organisations focus mainly or exclusively on education and scholarship, such as Rahima Jakarta, which studies Islamic texts and women's rights and includes a cadre of local scholars. Puan Amal Hayati, led by the former First Lady, Sinta Nuriyah, works with Islamic boarding schools (Pesantren) to empower girls and women, while also reviewing classical texts ('Kitab Kuning'). The Fahmina Institute in Cirebon also focuses on textual analysis while advocating for the local community. This advocacy is not on women's issues alone but extends to spreading a friendly, tolerant, and peaceful Islam. There are Centres for Gender and Women's Studies in universities, and many other organisations are working to strengthen women's empowerment and feminist analysis in Indonesia.

The processes of institutionalisation described above have done much for women's position in Indonesia. However, despite the introduction of affirmative action policies and Presidential Instruction No. 9 (2000) on gender mainstreaming, many challenges remain. Women's representation in Parliament is still small, maternal mortality high, and religious conservatism growing.



CONCLUSION: WE HAVE COME A LONG WAY

Synergies between the factors detailed above have led to some progress vis-à-vis the state, religion, and family life. At the legislative level, women's rights activists succeeded in obtaining a domestic violence law (*Penghapusan Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga*) in September 2004. The Health Act, which covers women's rights and reproductive health, and laws protecting the rights of migrant workers were also subsequently passed. Not all legal reforms were uniformly welcomed however. The Anti-Pornography Law, passed in 2008 after an 11-year wait, proved to be a controversial piece of legislation, exposing differences in perspectives between women's rights activists.

At the religious level, women and men have been engaged in reinterpreting sacred texts and uncovering patriarchal sources. Male scholars have supported the efforts of their female counterparts, and they have reviewed prominent, contemporary thinkers such as Wahbah Zuhaili, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Al-Ashmawi, Hasan Hanafi, etc.

At the local level, worrying rates of maternal and child mortality as well as violence against women are motivating women to fight for their rights. The high illiteracy rates among women over the age of 40 have encouraged activism around eradicating illiteracy. While the National Commission for Women publishes some of these statistics annually, the rest was obtained through cooperation between various groups working together to eliminate discrimination against women.

More remains to be done to guarantee the security of women. Indonesia's Marriage Law in particular should be reviewed in light of changing dynamics of women and family life since this law was passed in 1974. And religious radicalism remains on the horizon, neglected by state officials busy tackling corruption and engaging in party politics. Nevertheless, Indonesia's women are today able to enjoy lives of greater security and lesser regulation. The path that led to this point involved long struggles, and here we hope that the journey ahead will prove less arduous.

Ala'i Nadjib is Lecturer of Islamic Studies at Sharif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta (UIN Jakarta).

Contemporary Islamic Feminism: Key Thinkers and Activists Around the World

Shanon Shah

USA

Azizah al-Hibri
(b. 1943)



CURRENTLY

— Founder and Chair of KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, a dynamic organisation dedicated to the empowerment of Muslim women by focusing on the Qur'anic principle of 'adalah and its egalitarian message of gender equity

— Professor Emerita of Law at the T.C. Williams School of Law, University of Richmond, Virginia, USA

PREVIOUSLY

Commissioner on the US Commission on International Religious Freedom

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Numerous articles on Islamic jurisprudence in American law journals, and chapters in books such as The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Muslim World (2009) and Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women? (1999)

Amina Wadud
(b. 1952)



CURRENTLY

— Actively involved in Musawah, the global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family initiated by Sisters in Islam

— Visiting Scholar at Starr King School for the Ministry, Berkeley, California, USA

PREVIOUSLY

— Visiting Professor at Gadjah Mada University's Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

— Taught at International Islamic University in Malaysia and Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

— Co-founder of SIS

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

Theological scholarship which not only critiques patriarchal and heterosexist readings of the Qur'an, but also gender, ethnic and religious dynamics among African-American Muslim communities

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective (1999) and Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam (2006)

SUDAN

Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im
(b. 1946)



BACKGROUND

Born in Sudan, where he was greatly influenced by the Islamic reform movement of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. Although a naturalised US citizen, An-Na'im retains Sudanese citizenship

CURRENTLY

— Charles Howard Candler Professor of Law at Emory University School of Law in Atlanta, Georgia, USA; Director of its Religion and Human Rights Program; and Senior Fellow of its Center for the Study of Law and Religion

— Member of the Advisory Board of the Institute for Migrant Rights

PREVIOUSLY

Executive Director of the African bureau of Human Rights Watch

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

Specialises in human rights in Islam and cross-cultural issues in human rights. Argues for a synergy and interdependence between human rights, religion and secularism, instead of a dichotomy and incompatibility between them.

MOROCCO

Fatema Mernissi
(b. 1940)



CURRENTLY

— Professor of Sociology at the Mohammed V University in Rabat

— Senior Researcher at the University Institute for Scientific Research in Rabat

NOTABLE FOR

Analysing the development of Islamic thought and history in relation to women, and in that sense viewing Islam (but not the Qur'an) as subordinating women

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Beyond the Veil (1985) and The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Islam (1991)

Asma Lamrabet
(b. 1963)



CURRENTLY

— Pathologist at Avicennes Hospital, Rabat, Morocco

— President and member of Board of Directors of GIERFI (International Group of Studies and Reflection on Women and Islam), Barcelona, Spain

PREVIOUSLY

— Volunteer doctor in public hospitals in Spain and Latin America

— Coordinator of a research and reflection group on Muslim women and intercultural dialogue in Rabat

— Director of Studies and Research Centre on Women's Issues in Islam, Rabata Mohammadia des Ulemas, Rabat

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

Women's issues in Islam, particularly rereading Holy Scriptures from a feminist perspective

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Many articles and numerous books, most recently Women and Men in the Qur'an: Which Equality? (2012), for which she won the Social Sciences Award 2013 from the Arab Women Organization.

GAMBIA

Isatou Touray
(b. 1955)



CURRENTLY

Executive Director of the Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP), a Gambian women's rights organisation that concentrates much of its effort to safeguard the wellbeing of girls by ending harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

The fight against FGM and promotion of gender justice

AWARDS

— One Hundred Heroines of the World on Human Rights by the Rochester Women's Health Project at Rutgers University

— Gambia Women's Bureau Award

— United States of America Woman of Courage Award 2008

— Gambia News and Report Woman of the Year 2008

EGYPT

Leila Ahmed
(b. 1940)



CURRENTLY

Professor of Divinity, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

— Women and Gender in Islam (1992), in which she proposed that practices that oppressed women in the Middle East were due to patriarchal interpretations of Islam rather than Islam itself

— A Quiet Revolution (2011), a comprehensive study of veiling among Muslim women in Egypt and the US, in which she explores multiple and complex reasons for the veil's increasing popularity among Muslim women, and simultaneously opposes colonialist and imperialist interpretations of the veil

SOUTH AFRICA

Shamima Shaikh
(1960 – 1998)



FIELD OF EXPERTISE

Anti-Apartheid, anti-Zionist, pro-Islam and feminist activism and journalism. She opposed discrimination in many different areas – in the media, elections, mosques, and so on – from an Islamic feminist position

ACHIEVEMENTS

Started a mosque congregation in 1994 which applied gender equality within an Islamic framework

Before she died of breast cancer in 1998, she asked a close woman friend to lead one of the funeral prayers.

IRAN

Ziba Mir-Hosseini
(b. 1952)

**CURRENTLY**

— Legal anthropologist, specialising in Islamic law, gender and development
— Professorial Research Associate at the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Law, University of London
— Founding member of Musawah

PREVIOUSLY

— Council member of Women Living Under Muslim Laws
— Member of New Directions in Islamic Thought Project, Oslo Coalition for Freedom of Religion and Belief
— Co-producer of two award-winning feature-length documentaries on gender and contemporary Islam in Iran: *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998) and *Runaway* (2001)

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

Gender, family relations, and law in Muslim societies, with a focus on Iran. Her work on the construction of gender in Islamic legal thought is a major resource for feminists engaging with Islam to deconstruct and reconstruct new understandings of Islamic law to uphold equality and justice for Muslim women.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran (1999), *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law in Iran and Morocco* (2002), and *Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law* (lead editor, 2013).

PAKISTAN

Riffat Hassan
(b. 1943)

**CURRENTLY**

Retired

PREVIOUSLY

Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at the University of Louisville, Kentucky, USA

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

One of the pioneers of Islamic feminist theology, her work focuses on Qur'anic interpretations. Her position is that the Qur'an guarantees equality and rights for all, and that gender inequality in contemporary Muslim societies is due to cultural influences. Her work in Pakistan focuses on stopping honour killings via the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan.

Asma Barlas
(b. 1950)

**CURRENTLY**

Professor of politics and director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity at Ithaca College, New York, USA.

PREVIOUSLY

Government official and journalist in her native Pakistan before becoming an academic.

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

Distinguishes between 'Muslim feminism' that dismisses Islamic tradition and believing Muslim women who uphold gender equality as Islamic. She calls the Qur'an an 'antipatriarchal text'.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an (2002).

Muhammad Khalid Masud
(b. 1939)

**CURRENTLY**

Independent researcher

PREVIOUSLY

— Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology in Pakistan
— Academic Director of the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World in Leiden, Netherlands
— Editor of the journal *Islamic Studies*

QUALIFICATIONS

PhD in Islamic Studies from McGill University, Montreal, Canada

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Shatibi's Philosophy of Law (rev. ed. 1995), *Iqbal's Reconstruction of Ijtihad* (1995), *Islamic Legal Interpretation: The Muftis and their Fatwas* (with B. Messick and D. Powers, 1996), and the edited volume *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jam'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (2000).

ACHIEVEMENTS

Has authored around 95 research articles and chapters published in journals, books and encyclopedias of international repute.

MALDIVES

Abdullah Saeed
(b. 1964)

**CURRENTLY**

— Sultan of Oman Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Melbourne, Australia
— Fellow of Australian Academy of Humanities

PREVIOUSLY

Professor at Department of Asian Languages and Anthropology at University of Melbourne

QUALIFICATIONS

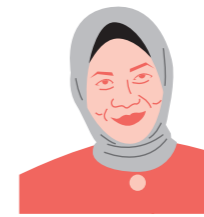
— BA in Arab/Islamic Studies from Islamic University, Saudi Arabia
— PhD in Islamic Studies from University of Melbourne

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

The negotiation of text and context, ijtihad and interpretation. Strong advocate of reform of Islamic thought. Publications cover Qur'anic hermeneutics, Islam and human rights, Islamic law reform, Muslim communities in Australia, and Islam and freedom of religion. Writes for both scholarly and general audiences.

INDONESIA

Siti Musdah Mulia
(b. 1958)

**CURRENTLY**

— Research professor at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI)
— Lecturer on Islamic Political Thought at the School of Graduate Studies of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta

PREVIOUSLY

Veteran of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the women's wing of Indonesia's largest grassroots Muslim organisation

NOTABLE FOR

Famously saying in 2008 that "Islam recognises homosexuality" and upholds the rights of sexual minorities. She has also defended the rights of religious minorities in Indonesia

KH Hussein Muhammad
(b. 1953)

**CURRENTLY**

Co-founder and Head of the Fahmina Institute, an inclusive and diverse religious-based non-profit aimed at strengthening civil society and communities

PREVIOUSLY

Veteran of NU

NOTABLE FOR

Being one of the rare male ulama (traditional Islamic scholars) actively supporting Islamic feminists and engaged in promoting a rights-based understanding of Islam. Known affectionately in some circles as Kiyai Gender (where 'kiyai' is a respectful term to address an Islamic teacher)

PUBLICATIONS

Several theological works on gender and Islam, including *Fiqh Perempuan: Refleksi Kiyai atas Wacana Agama dan Gender* (Women's Islamic Jurisprudence: A Religious Teacher's Reflection on Discourses on Religion and Gender, 2001)

MALAYSIA

Zainah Anwar
(b. 1954)

**CURRENTLY**

— Director of Musawah
— Regular columnist with popular English-language daily *The Star*

PREVIOUSLY

— Journalist
— Co-founder, Executive Director and Board Member of SIS
— Commissioner of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission

Zaitun (Toni) Mohamed Kasim



(1966 – 2008)

ACHIEVEMENTS

A SIS member and former manager, Zaitun (or Toni as she was affectionately called) developed the organisation's public education and community engagement efforts within an Islamic feminist framework

FIELD OF EXPERTISE

Toni worked closely with several other non-governmental organisations and collectives on a variety of other concerns, including refugees, HIV/AIDS, detention without trial, women's participation in politics, and sexual harassment. She died of cancer in 2008, months after she was scheduled to contest in the general elections as an independent candidate on a women's human rights platform.

Islamic Feminism: Reflections from Egypt

Mulki Al-Sharmani

Since the late 80s and early 90s of the last century, scholarship emerged that engages with Islamic religious sciences and is primarily driven by the question of gender justice. This scholarship consists of hermeneutical and historical studies of the Qur'an, Sunnah, and classical Islamic religious sciences in order to problematise dominant interpretations that are patriarchal and discriminatory against women, and to produce new interpretive religious knowledge that makes the case for gender equality and justice within an Islamic paradigm. These studies are being produced predominantly by Muslim female scholars (and some Muslim male scholars) from different disciplines and countries in the Global North and South. The new scholarship has been called Islamic feminism.

Some of the scholars who have been studying or engaging in Islamic feminism see a great epistemic and political value in it, not only for Muslim women but also for the reform of Islamic religious tradition (Abou-Bakr 2001, Barlas 2004, Badran 2005, Mir-Hosseini 2006). Other scholars have critiqued Islamic feminism as being an unsystematic and heterogeneous body of knowledge; having weak methodological links to classical Islamic religious sciences; and being politically insignificant or even counterproductive for women (Moghissi 1999, Moghadam 2002, Tohidi 2003).

In this article, I will share with the readers a few reflections on, firstly, how Islamic feminism has been defined, categorised, and critiqued in the literature; and secondly, the trajectory and significance of Islamic feminism in Egypt.

ISLAMIC FEMINISM: CONTESTATIONS

The Egyptian Omaila Abou-Bakr is among the first who attempted to conceptualise Islamic feminism (Abou-Bakr 2001). A professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cairo University, she is specialised in Sufi poetry and has researched and written about Muslim women's roles in the production of traditional religious sciences, as well as women's mysticism in Islam and Christianity. She has also been undertaking groundbreaking hermeneutical studies that deconstruct and reread traditional Islamic exegetical interpretations on gender roles and rights. According to Abou-Bakr, the label 'Islamic feminism' can be inhibiting when used by Western scholars to name the gender activism of Muslim women. In such cases, the label can become 'hegemonic' and concealing. But Abou-Bakr does not fully reject the term. For her, the significant part of the term is in the qualifier 'Islamic'. For her, the adjective 'Islamic' denotes and defines the framework and contexts in which these new knowledge projects are being grounded. Accordingly, the kind of Islamic feminism project that Abou-Bakr espouses is one that is grounded in the Islamic tradition and the Qur'anic objectives of justice as well as in the specificity of the cultural and historical contexts of the Muslim women undertaking such a project. Furthermore, Abou-Bakr reminds us of the importance of de-homogenising feminism, whether as a Western or non-Western intellectual tradition. She points out that there are different kinds of feminism and some of them are not only unopposed to religion but very much grounded in it. Abou-Bakr sees Islamic feminism as part of the latter kind of feminist tradition and as entailing "discussing and analysing discourses and methodologies from within our indigenous tradition, which can be employed or developed to articulate gender awareness,

"ACCORDING TO ABOU-BAKR, THE LABEL 'ISLAMIC FEMINISM' CAN BE INHIBITING WHEN USED BY WESTERN SCHOLARS TO NAME THE GENDER ACTIVISM OF MUSLIM WOMEN. IN SUCH CASES, THE LABEL CAN BECOME 'HEGEMONIC' AND CONCEALING"

as well as to apply the intelligent use of Islamic principles and fields of meaning for the acquisition of rights or for revisioning discourses that encourage subordinate gender consciousness" (Abou-Bakr 1999: 3). Furthermore, Abou-Bakr stresses that undertaking this task of engaged reading is her responsibility as "a Muslim, Egyptian Arab woman" (Abou-Bakr 1999: 4).

The Pakistani-American Asma Barlas, who has produced insightful hermeneutical scholarship seeking to 'un-read' patriarchy in the Qur'an, is uncomfortable with the term 'Islamic feminism' because she rejects 'feminism' as an intellectual tradition that is inescapably entangled with history of Western colonialism and the othering of non-Western Muslim women (Barlas 2008). Instead, Barlas sees her project of producing new gender-sensitive interpretive religious knowledge not as engaging in feminism but as fulfilling her obligation to God as a believing woman. The historian Margot Badran, however, finds the term to be a useful analytical tool to describe "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm." She sees this discourse as specifically grounded in the Qur'an and "seeking rights and justice for women and men in the totality of their existence" (Badran 2002: 1). Badran sees secular and Islamic feminism as two distinct discourses, but stresses that there are important linkages between the two. For example, Badran argues that secular feminism, particularly in Egypt, paved the way to Islamic feminism in that the former was always partly grounded in a reformist modernist Islamic framework. Badran sees Islamic feminism as more radical and powerful than secular feminism because of its quest of theologically

grounded gender equality and justice, and its growing global appeal to Muslims and non-Muslims alike who are concerned with gender justice (Badran 2005).

Also, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, the well-known legal anthropologist and one of the pioneer scholars who has written about Islamic feminism, defines it as "a new consciousness, new way of thinking, a gender discourse that was feminist in its aspiration and demands, yet Islamic in its language and source of legitimacy" (Mir-Hosseini 2006: 640). Aside from the contestations around the term, Mir-Hosseini, as well as Badran and Abou-Bakr, acknowledge that Islamic feminism has been used to refer to a wide range of diverse and heterogeneous discourses and practices. Can this heterogeneity be

a weakness? For instance, the social scientist Hoda Saleh divides Islamic feminism into three discourses: conservative, liberal, and radical (Saleh 2010). Yet, some of the scholars that Saleh cites as exemplifying these three kinds of Islamic feminism are so different in their approaches and the underlying premises of their works that it is difficult to see them all as being part of one and the same broader knowledge project called Islamic feminism. For instance, Saleh cites three Egyptian scholars — Soad Saleh, Heba Raouf Ezzat, and Nasr Hamed Abou Zeid — as representing the three kinds of Islamic feminism respectively. Soad Saleh, Professor of Islamic Jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University, produced some liberal religious interpretations such as sanctioning qualified female religious scholars' rights in issuing fatwas. Yet, she still espouses an Islamic perspective that condones unequal gender relations and rights in the family sphere. Heba Ezzat Raouf, a political scientist and an Islamist activist, is a critic of Western feminist tradition, and a skeptic of Muslim gender activism that focuses on gender-based legal reform without



tackling the larger question of political reform. But Ezzat has also written very insightful materials that critique both classical and contemporary religious scholars' interpretations that subordinate women to men. The late Abou Zeid was Professor of Islamic Studies at

the notion that this role in Islamic tradition is confined to religious scholars who meet very specific criteria in religious knowledge and interpretive skills. In addition, Moll sees that the methodologies used by contemporary Islamic feminists are modern and divorced from the methodological tradition of classical Islamic exegetes and jurists. She argues that contemporary Islamic feminist scholars make use of historical, literary and deconstructionist approaches that

"MOLL SEES THAT WHILE ISLAMIC FEMINISM DERIVES ITS LEGITIMACY FROM ISLAMIC TRADITION, IT TRANSFORMS THE VERY METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK THAT HAS LONG SHAPED WHAT ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE IS AND WHO PARTAKES IN PRODUCING THIS KNOWLEDGE"

Cairo University and moved to the Netherlands after an apostasy court case was filed against him on the grounds of his scholarship. Abou Zeid developed a new and bold theory of Qur'anic exegetical interpretation, which works from the premise that the Qur'an is a sacred discourse rather than a text and has multiple domains of meaning. The three scholars are so different not only in their methodologies but also in their goals and underlying premises that it is not clear how Hoda Saleh sees all of them as examples of Islamic feminism. So, in some cases, the heterogeneity of Islamic feminism may be meaningful. But in other cases, such as the above example, it arises from lack of clarity and consensus among researchers on how to define Islamic feminism and delineate its boundaries.

Islamic feminism has also been accused of having no or weak methodological and epistemological links to classical Islamic religious sciences. Moll (2009), for instance, contends that Islamic feminist scholars such as Omaira Abou-Bakr and Asma Barlas emphasise the importance of applying *ijtihad* (independent thinking) but reject

had no place in Islamic religious sciences. In other words, Moll sees that while Islamic feminism derives its legitimacy from Islamic tradition, it transforms the very methodological framework that has long shaped what Islamic religious knowledge is and who partakes in producing this knowledge. But the problem with Moll's critique is that it lacks historical interrogation of classical Islamic religious tradition and its methodologies. To question, build on, or propose shifts in Islamic interpretive tradition and its methodologies is seen by Moll as a weakness. Yet, this is precisely one of the important contributions of Islamic feminism knowledge projects.

Other critics of Islamic feminism see it as politically insignificant and even counterproductive. Valentine Moghadam (2002), for example, says that the struggle for gender rights cannot be won through theological arguments but rather by staying focused on socioeconomic and political realities. But Moghadam fails to see the connections between multiple systems that regulate and impact gender relations and rights in Muslim societies (e.g. codified laws, cultural norms and

prevalent religious discourses, as well as socioeconomic policies and conditions). Others reject Islamic feminism because it is grounded in a religious framework that rests on foundational and absolute principles of religious truth and doctrines (Moghissi 1999, Tohidi 2003). However, such critics assume that the goal of interpretive feminist projects that are grounded in religion is the search for the authentic interpretation and the uniform religious truth. But actually Islamic feminism emphasises the importance of the connection between text and context, and the multidimensionality of the interpretive process, notions that were also implicitly present in Islamic religious sciences and are reflected through the diversity in classical exegetical and juristic interpretations.

ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN EGYPT: TRAJECTORIES AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

Egypt's first feminist movement can be traced to 1923 with the establishment of the Egyptian Feminist Union under the leadership of Huda Sha'rawi. The early Egyptian feminist movement was grounded in the nationalist project of building an independent Egyptian sovereign state. In the post-independent era, Egyptian women were among the first in the Middle East region to obtain the right to mass education, suffrage, and paid labour. But gender equality still eludes women, and much legal and cultural discrimination against them remains in place. In their struggle for gender equality, early Egyptian feminists, whether as part of an organised movement or as individuals, drew on Islam as a framework for mobilising for rights. Badran (2005) points out that the Egyptian feminist movement



drew on Islamic modernist discourse and some of the liberal interpretations of Islamic scholars of the 19th century, such as Muhammad Abduh, to advocate for reform in family laws.

Individual Egyptian female writers such as Aisha Al Taymouria of the late 19th century questioned Islamic juristic interpretations that sanctioned a husband's guardianship over his wife on the grounds of assumed inherent male superiority to the female (Hatem 2011). And there were Egyptian female figures such as Zeinab al-Ghazali who in the 20th century led a life of very public activism by establishing an Islamist women's association that recruited many members. Interestingly, al-Ghazali was a member of the Egyptian Feminist Union, but left it because of its overall secular framework and founded

the Muslim Women's Association in order to reform society through an Islamic path. Al-Ghazali collaborated with the Muslim Brotherhood but opted for her association to be a separate autonomous entity from the Brotherhood. She was a strong, independent woman who left her first husband because he hindered her activism. Yet despite this empowerment on an individual level, al-Ghazali adopted a patriarchal notion of gender rights, which asserted that a Muslim woman's primary role was to be a wife and a mother.

So were these active and publicly engaged Egyptian women Islamic feminists or partaking in projects that can be labelled as Islamic feminism? In an article that sets out to distinguish between different strands of Egyptian feminists, the

anthropologist Fadwa El Guindi labels Sha'rawi feminism as 'Western-influenced' and distinguishes it from the feminist views of Malak Hifni Nasif, another female Egyptian pioneer who established the Egyptian feminist movement. El Guindi calls Nasif's strand of feminism 'authentically Egyptian' because Nasif's advocacy focused on inclusion of women in all educational fields and particularly in the field of Islamic religious knowledge, as well as enabling women to have greater access to mosques. Moreover, Nasif, according to El Guindi, articulated her feminist agendas in Arabic and drew strongly from her Islamic knowledge. But it is al-Ghazali's activism that El Guindi calls Islamic feminism. Furthermore, El Guindi sees that al-Ghazali's Islamically-based activism paved the way for what she calls the "grass root Islamic feminism" of the 1970s when thousands of Egyptian women began wearing the veil and asserted their right to live by what they believed to be the doctrines of their religion while at the same time engaging actively in the public sphere. El Guindi sees this Egyptian form of Islamic feminism as populist, and grounded in culture and Islam. She describes it as follows: "it is feminist because it seeks to liberate womanhood; it is Islamic because its premises are embedded in Islamic principles and values" (El Guindi 2005: 71). She sees both Western-influenced feminism and Islamic feminism as sharing the common goal of liberating women. But El Guindi points out that in the Egyptian Islamic feminism of the 70s, the sought-after liberation was from "imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviors, and an increasingly materialist culture" (El Guindi 2005: 71). Most of all, El Guindi stresses that the main goal of this local Islamic

"IN THE POST-INDEPENDENT ERA, EGYPTIAN WOMEN WERE AMONG THE FIRST IN THE MIDDLE EAST REGION TO OBTAIN THE RIGHT TO MASS EDUCATION, SUFFRAGE, AND PAID LABOUR"

feminism was to include women in the field of Islamic studies, as bearers and producers of religious knowledge.

If a Muslim woman derives empowerment from her religious beliefs, then this can be correctly construed as fulfilling and liberating on the level of that individual. However, to end existing gender inequalities in Muslim societies resulting from discriminatory normative systems, what is needed is transformative change in public discourses, laws, policies, and individual perspectives and behaviours. An essential, if not *the* most effective, pathway to this change is the production and dissemination of new religious knowledge that solidly and convincingly grounds egalitarian gender relations and rights in the core principles and doctrines of Islam. I believe it is this kind of Islamic feminism — a transformative knowledge project — that counts. And these knowledge projects are effective when they are systematic, coherent, ongoing, and linked to advocacy work. In contemporary Egypt, I see several examples of such kinds of Islamic feminism. One example is illustrated through the work of the scholars of the Women and Memory Forum (WMF).

WMF is an Egyptian non-governmental organisation that was established in 1995 by a group of women scholars from different disciplines. WMF scholars produce a wide range of Arabic studies that aim at rereading Islamic and Arabic intellectual traditions and producing alternative readings that underscore gender equality and unearth women's unknown roles in the establishment and development of these traditions. Also, the organisation collaborates with local NGOs working on reform of family laws. WMF seeks to produce scholarship that will lead to change and social transformation. Therefore, the organisation disseminates its knowledge not only through dense theological and historical publications

but also to the general public through illustrated and linguistically accessible readers. In addition, many WMF scholars are well-informed and connected with the transnational projects of Islamic feminism, and some of them engage in such projects by writing in English and targeting English-speaking academic audiences. They also organise workshops on Islamic feminism with scholars from different parts of the world and translate English-language literature, not only about

"ABOU-BAKR DEMONSTRATES VERY PERSUASIVELY THAT THE EXEGETES' CONSTRUCTION OF QIWAMAH, WHICH SUBSEQUENTLY BECAME THE BASIS FOR MARITAL ROLES AND RIGHTS IN ISLAMIC JURISPRUDENCE AS WELL AS MODERN-DAY MUSLIM FAMILY LAWS, DEPARTS SUBSTANTIALLY FROM THE QUR'AN"

Islamic feminism but also feminist theological studies in Christianity and Judaism, so that this scholarship may be available to Arabic-speaking readers. Omaira Abou-Bakr, one of the founding members of WMF, undertakes hermeneutical studies that problematise gendered interpretations in the exegetical tradition as well as historical studies that unearth the role of women in production of Islamic religious sciences. One of Abou-Bakr's recent works (2011), for instance, maps out the genealogy of the dominant interpretations on husbands' qiwamah (i.e. guardianship/protection and authority) over their wives over a period of seven centuries in this tradition. Abou-Bakr uses a hermeneutical approach that pays close attention to the arguments used by exegetes in different eras to justify their interpretations; their

context-based assumptions and understandings about male and female nature and capabilities; and the linkages that were made between different interpretations on qiwamah in the exegetical literature over the centuries. Abou-Bakr demonstrates very persuasively that the exegetes' construction of qiwamah, which subsequently became the basis for marital roles and rights in Islamic jurisprudence as well as modern-day Muslim family laws, departs substantially from the Qur'an. She shows that exegetes and jurists constructed qiwamah as a divinely given right of man to have absolute authority over his wife on the grounds of assumed male superiority (intellectual, moral, religious, and physical). But the Qur'anic verse in which the term occurs (4:34), however, suggests a reading that sees it more as a way of organising marital roles and protecting women's right to be financially supported in a historical context in which men had access to resources and unchecked control over women.

In my view, the significance of the work of WMF is threefold. It produces insightful scholarship that enables Arabic-speaking Muslims of all genders to reread their religious epistemic tradition in a new light. Secondly, it makes this scholarship extremely accessible. And thirdly, WMF organises workshops for students at national universities in which they are taught the new knowledge and trained to, as Abou-Bakr calls it, "understand gender from a Muslim perspective" (Abou-Bakr 1999: 3).

A similar effort in production of a new kind of Islamic knowledge that makes the case for gender equality is also undertaken, albeit with a much smaller scale and scope, by the Association for Study of Women



in Civilisation (ASWIC). ASWIC was established by a group of Egyptian women academics in 1999. In addition to these group-based knowledge projects, there are individual Egyptian scholars who are undertaking similar kinds of interpretive projects, such as the two male Egyptian religious scholars Gamal El Banna and the late Abdel Moty El Bayoumy. Both have produced extensive scholarship that deconstructed many of the juristic doctrines on gender roles and rights in marriage, divorce, and parenthood.

I would not argue that all the abovementioned group- and individual-based knowledge projects are the same in their hermeneutical approaches, the perspectives of the scholars undertaking them regarding the notion of gender justice in Islam, the insightfulness of the knowledge produced by these scholars, or the impact of this knowledge on Egyptian society. Some of the scholars are bolder in their hermeneutical contributions than others. Some of the projects are small-scale and very much confined to a small circle of university students and academics, while others are multidimensional and target larger audiences. But

what these projects share is that they have involved earnest systematic engagement with Islamic religious sciences and religious discourses with the aim of demystifying the notion that hierarchical gender relations and rights are intrinsic to Islamic thought.

But what direct significance does this emerging Islamic feminism have on advocacy for gender rights in Egypt? I cite two quick examples to illustrate this significance. Some factions in Egyptian society opposed the khul divorce law when it was issued in 2000 because they argued that it contravened with the husband's right to qiwamah in Islamic law; the new law allowed women to have access to unilateral judicial divorce without the need for the husband's consent. And opposition to khul law has again resurfaced after the January 25 Revolution. Of course, some of the old and new opposition to the law is closely linked to a rejection of the top-down state-centered approach through which legal reforms have been introduced in the country in the past three decades. But a central part of the opposition is also related to two issues, namely the problem of conflating Islamic Shari'ah as a notion

of unchangeable divine law with Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) which consists of doctrines deduced by male Muslim jurists; and the politics of interpretation and legitimacy of traditional and new kinds of contemporary religious scholarship. To confront this opposition, women's rights organisations working for legal reform have been drawing on the scholarship of the abovementioned scholars of Islamic feminism. For example, the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance worked closely with Abdel Moty Bayoumy by organising joint workshops and supporting the publication of Bayoumy's recent studies, in which he debunks the notions of male guardianship over women as well as the religious arguments that were used by opponents of the khul law. Women's rights activists also draw on the scholarship of Gamal El Banna in their advocacy work, particularly his deconstruction of the unquestioned authority that is accorded to classical Islamic jurisprudence and its doctrines on marriage and divorce rights.

A final example of the significance of this new knowledge is that it provides a solution to many Muslims like myself, who believe in our religious faith and take our Islamic epistemological tradition seriously, but are still bothered by prevalent religious interpretations that sanction the marginalisation and subordination of Muslim women. We are bothered by them because they go against what our innermost religious and ethical sensibilities tell us about the essence of our religion. That is why, when I read the work of scholars such as Omaira Abou-Bakr, it speaks to me: not because I am a Muslim feminist, but because first and foremost I am a Muslim who believes that the essence of my religion is justice and equality of human beings.



When Islam and Feminism Converge

Fatima Seedat

Note: This is an abridged version of an essay which was originally published by The Muslim World, Harvard Seminary, in 2013. Fatima Seedat can be reached at fatima.seedat@mail.mcgill.ca

Critical readings of gender difference in Islam have mostly remained on the margins of normative Muslim literature where the normative view is that Islam corrected pre-Islamic gender bias with its arrival and is, therefore, necessarily a source of liberation for women. In this narrative Islam affirms women's spiritual equality with

ordained social roles, adherence to which is necessary to a properly Muslim life. The status of women in Muslim society is considered progressive vis-à-vis other religious or social systems and Muslim women would be better served by the norms of Islam than the radical freedoms of the West, especially those suggested by feminism. This approach

Beginning in the late eighties, Fatima Mernissi wrote about Muslim women and Islam in a manner that no longer lauded Islam's progressive perspective on women, but implicated the patriarchal norms of early Islamic society and contemporary Islamic practice in a continuum of declining Muslim women's status. Her critique of hadith separates "risalah Islam," envisioned as egalitarian and transformative, from "political Islam," considered misogynist and restrictive, and argues that the generations subsequent to the Prophet failed to maintain his spirit of gender equality. Mernissi was severely criticised within Muslim circles for taking a "feminist" stance. By contrast, an approach found mainly in Western academia constructed Muslim women's critical gender analysis of Islam as "Islamic feminism." Some rejected the label, and others adopted a feminist analysis, aligned it with critical readings on women in Islam, but did not classify their work as "Islamic feminism." Drawing on Afsaneh Najmabadi's work, I call this approach "taking Islam for granted."

men and therefore the Qur'an and Prophetic example hold the means to women's empowerment. Equality is envisioned as a complementarity of male and female roles; men and women are created in a manner that suits them ideally to their divinely

characteristically resists the convergence of Islam and feminism. The political subtext of the rejection being the imperial relationship between Islam and Europe (or, more broadly, the West), namely, the political and economic ascendancy of the West over the Islamic world.



Talking about Islam, Feminism and Islamic Feminism

Afsaneh Najmabadi

Najmabadi's early analysis derived in part from Iranian women's magazine Zanan. In 2000 she noted that:

... Zanan have referred to themselves as feminists but do not use the combination Islamic feminist. This is because they take their Islam for granted and do not see a need to mark their feminism as distinct from other feminisms. Their endeavour, at least for now, is to claim a space for women's rights activism as feminist; they need to distinguish themselves as feminist within a site whose Islam is taken for granted.

Najmabadi shows discomfort with ascribing a label to the work of women who either resist or avoid labelling their own work in this way. In her later analysis, she illustrates how the intersections of secularism, Islam and feminism allowed Iranian women to imagine new configurations for seemingly incompatible trajectories of thought.

Thinking of Islam as the antithesis of modernity and secularism forecloses the possibilities of recognising these emergences and working for these reconfigurations; it blocks off formation of alliances; it continues to reproduce Islam as exclusive of secularism, democracy and feminism, as a pollutant of these projects; and it continues the work of constituting each as the edge at which meaning would collapse for the other.

Her approach illustrates how the convergence of Islam and feminism may be addressed with tentativeness and care and in a manner that highlights nuances and multiple meanings.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini

In Mir-Hosseini's analysis, the new Iranian state, having come to power on anti-Pahlavi critiques of Western influences on women's social status, was forced to "dialogue with secular discourses on gender," the situation being exacerbated by women's increased economic participation during the prolonged war with Iraq. The "rise of the nation's gender consciousness" was an unpredicted outcome of the Islamic revolution. Mir-Hosseini is however uneasy:

There is no equivalent term for [feminism] in Persian although as a consciousness it has always existed. This consciousness in its indigenous form remains largely unexplored in the Muslim context. Studies of feminism in the Muslim world predominantly deal with its expression among the Westernised and educated elite and align it with its Western counterpart.

miriam cooke

Cooke proposes that Islamic feminism relies, firstly, on a direct approach to the Qur'an and Sunna that by-passes religious scholarship and authority and, secondly, on an appeal to religion as the origin of social-justice struggles in Muslim societies. These two points of analysis challenge the temporal nature of male centred readings and produce affirmative gender readings of the classical sources. Islamic feminism is a strategy of multiple-critique that produces a framework where parallel commitments to multiple ideological frameworks are possible, even when they appear to be contradictory.

"ISLAMIC FEMINISM IS A STRATEGY OF MULTIPLE-CRITIQUE THAT PRODUCES A FRAMEWORK WHERE PARALLEL COMMITMENTS TO MULTIPLE IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS ARE POSSIBLE, EVEN WHEN THEY APPEAR TO BE CONTRADICTORY"

"SHE ILLUSTRATES HOW THE INTERSECTIONS OF SECULARISM, ISLAM AND FEMINISM ALLOWED IRANIAN WOMEN TO IMAGINE NEW CONFIGURATIONS FOR SEEMINGLY INCOMPATIBLE TRAJECTORIES OF THOUGHT"



Margot Badran

In 1994 Margot Badran identifies “a kind of feminism or public activist mode without a name,” represented by Muslim women who decide for themselves how to conduct their lives in society. Because the women who do this work resist the term feminism, with its “Western associations”, she adopts the term “gender activism.” She shows that pro-feminist women avoid the feminist label for pragmatic reasons: the term is confining and potentially misleading. Further, Islamist women reject feminism as “superfluous or heretical”, and therefore also preclude the possibility of an “Islamic feminism.” Despite these

proscriptions upon feminism, Badran explains that this gender activism is a new and “unencumbered, analytic construct,” and its protagonists (including feminists, pro-feminists and Islamists) represent a convergence that “transcends ideological boundaries of politically articulated feminism and Islamism.” Accordingly, she speculates, Muslim women’s gender activism might “spawn an Islamic feminist activism in Egypt during the decade of the 1990’s.”

Later, in 1999, Badran speculates upon the future convergence of Islam and feminism as “Islamic feminism”. Muslim women, she says, “want to embrace feminism”; in fact they “need an Islamic feminism.” Further, she predicts

the new radical feminism in Muslim societies — and I include diaspora societies — as we begin the twenty first century will be “Islamic feminism”. The conceptual and political location of this “Islamic feminism” will occupy a middle space, or independent site, between secular feminism and masculinist Islamism.

"WHEREAS NAJMABADI THEORISES THE CONVERGENCE AS A PRODUCTIVE BREAKDOWN OF ANTITHETICAL EXCLUSIVITIES, BADRAN THEORISES IT AS A NECESSARY CORRECTIVE TO ISLAMIC THOUGHT ON WOMEN"

By the time of a later publication in 2002 Badran is convinced that Islamic feminism has emerged and is more radical than secular feminism. Five years later, by 2007, Badran writes of cyber networks where Islamic feminism is increasingly claimed and readily embraced as an identity. Having begun with some tentativeness and care for its contestations, Badran soon moved to predicting the emergence of Islamic feminism, then to declaring it 20 years old and finally to providing its definition thus:

a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an and seeks rights and justice within the framework of equality of women and men in the totality of their existence as part and parcel of the Qur'anic notion of equality of all human beings.

Whereas Najmabadi theorises the convergence as a productive breakdown of antithetical exclusivities, Badran theorises it as a necessary corrective to Islamic thought on women. Whereas Najmabadi’s theorising suggests that differences will endure even as barriers are broken down, Badran envisions a convergence that finally brings about sameness. The former approach holds the potential for growth, difference and what some scholars call translucence, the latter moves toward sameness and insists on transparency in a manner that negates difference instead of recognising it.

Deconstructing Islamic Feminism
Resisting a Convergence

In Zeenath Kausar’s analysis, Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive and her primary objection to feminism is its secularism and materialism. She argues accountability to God must be the basis of Muslim women’s empowerment, and advocates women’s empowerment through the Islamisation of knowledge. Kausar also distinguishes between the authentically Islamic approach to women in Islam and the “Muslim ethnocultural, traditionalist” approach, which relies on old ideas, customs and cultural traditions which are not necessarily Islamic.

In her view, those that espouse this second approach believe that in terms of family women ought to be submissive and passive and in society women should be inactive. They believe that for Muslim women to attain heaven it is sufficient to perform housework, protect their chastity and obey their husbands. The Islamic approach, in Kausar’s narrative, is not only opposed to feminism, but also to ethnocultural traditionalism. Feminism here is not uniquely opposed to authentic Islam: even Muslim practices may be oppositional to Islam.

"BY THE TIME OF A LATER PUBLICATION IN 2002 BADRAN IS CONVINCED THAT ISLAMIC FEMINISM HAS EMERGED AND IS MORE RADICAL THAN SECULAR FEMINISM"

Resisting the Label

Amina Wadud argues that the motivation for her gender affirmative analysis is faith and not feminism. Her resistance presumes a distinction between feminist thought and “reading from the female experience”. I speculate that Wadud might find it necessary to distance herself from feminist discourse as a way of maintaining the primacy of a Muslim identity, Muslim societies having borne the heavy burdens of colonial and empire-based feminism. Academic feminism is a historically Western frame of thought born from the intellectual traditions of Europe’s Enlightenment and has come to share in the burden of colonialism, hegemony and imperialism. Third world feminists have shown how non-Western women have been subject to the hegemonic discourses of Western feminisms with the effect of devaluing, prejudicing or simply denying other women’s experiences. Yet Wadud also recognises the multiplicity of feminisms and is willing to concede by calling her work pro-feminist.

Wadud outlines her dilemma and her compromise thus:

It is no longer possible to construct Third World and all other specified articulations and philosophical developments of feminism without due reference to the Western origins of feminism. That is why I still describe my position as pro-faith, pro-feminist. Despite how others may categorize me, my work is certainly feminist, but I still refuse to self designate as feminist, even with “Muslim” put in front of it, because my emphasis on faith and the sacred prioritize my motivations in feminist methodologies.

She explains the inevitability of the alignment between feminism and “western origins” and explains that her negotiation distances her from the political project of feminism, i.e. from feminist hegemonies, but not from feminist methodology.

Ayesha Imam suggests a “double claim and critique” strategy which allows activists to equally claim ownership of local culture and international human rights discourse, privilege neither and critique both, while cooke’s multiple-critique strategy allows for strategic flexibility in response to different subjective positions.

Similarly, Wadud’s disclaimer on feminist politics is not a denial of the politics of her work or an attempt to render it apolitical, but instead reveals an acute political consciousness in her work. She is comfortable performing a feminist analysis, but resists the feminist construction of herself by other feminists in terms which suit their political aims and transgress her own.

For Asma Barlas, the label feminist “denied something very real and specific” about her encounter with the Qur’an; she prefers to define herself as “a seeker of God’s grace, a supplicant for it.” She theorises her opposition by “provincializing” feminism which, in her view, works as a meta-narrative that subsumes and assimilates “all conversations about equality.” She found herself outraged: “How can people call me a feminist when I’m calling myself a believing woman? How can other people tell me what I am and what I’m doing?” She concluded that as long as feminism “functions as a universalizing political theory” it cannot accommodate what Dipesh Chakrabarty explains as the

diverse way of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle — perennially, precariously, but unavoidably — to ‘world the earth’ in order to live within our different sense of ontic belonging.

Working Toward a Convergence and Taking Islam for Granted

Though conscious of the risk of reinforcing the impression that Muslim society is characteristically oppressive toward women, Kecia Ali represents a further development in critical gender-based Islamic thought. Without asking about the place of feminism in

"THEY BELIEVE THAT FOR MUSLIM WOMEN TO ATTAIN HEAVEN IT IS SUFFICIENT TO PERFORM HOUSEWORK, PROTECT THEIR CHASTITY AND OBEY THEIR HUSBANDS"

"ALI EXPLAINS THAT MUSLIM FEMINISTS ARE NOW PART OF THE LANDSCAPE OF THE ISLAMIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION WHERE THEY PUSH AT ITS BOUNDARIES AND RESHAPE ITS CONTOURS"

Islam or how the two paradigms converge, Ali explains that Muslim feminists are now part of the landscape of the Islamic intellectual tradition where they “push at its boundaries and reshape its contours”. Similarly not oblivious that her work may re-inscribe the victim narrative associated with Muslim women, Mir-Hosseini is also open to the utility of feminist discourse and offers an unapologetically feminist analysis of Islamic law. These are “insider” feminist discourses emanating from Muslim women, through their lived experiences and in conscious engagement with the Islamic tradition. Here Islam is taken for granted as the substance of analysis and feminism as a method for analysis. Feminism and Islam come together without strong arguments either for convergence or differentiation of the two. This is much like the approach of earlier scholars viz. Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi. Mernissi explains:

the quest for dignity, democracy and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition.

CONCLUSION

Ali, Mir-Hosseini and Mernissi – and we may align Wadud and Barlas with them too – take Islam for granted in that they identify a historical gender consciousness much like the historical consciousness of social justice embedded in the tradition of Islam. Taking Islam for granted in equality work is different from the deliberate work to construct Islamic feminism by Badran and cooke. It is obviously different too from Kausar who argues for no possible convergence between Muslim and feminist intellectual paradigms. Further, it is an approach located in a faith commitment that subjects itself to the analytics of gender difference. It is a natural expansion of a social justice analysis to include justice for women in line with the Qur’anic imperative to “enjoin what is good and forbid what is not”.

Ayesha Hidayatullah and Sa’diyya Shaikh explain well the dynamics that must accompany this naming. Hidayatullah uses the “terminology of feminist theology” to describe the work of Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan and others. However, she is careful to explain that the terminology does not imply these are simply “Islamic versions” of feminist theology in other traditions. Instead, she recognises “the imprecision” of the phrasing, which precludes its imposition on scholars who refuse it. The terminology succeeds, she says, as far as it expresses the “connections and synergy between Muslim and non-Muslim efforts to reclaim our various religious traditions as expressions of the full human and moral dignity accorded to women by God.”

"WHETHER RESISTING THE LABEL FEMINIST, RESISTING A CONVERGENCE BETWEEN ISLAM AND FEMINISM OR DOING FEMINISM WHILE TAKING ISLAM FOR GRANTED, THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN ISLAM AND FEMINISM IS A POTENTIALLY PRODUCTIVE SPACE FROM WHICH TO THEORISE MODERN MUSLIM GENDERED WAYS OF BEING"

Sa’diyya Shaikh explains her commitment to a feminist analysis as a faith commitment to social justice. She enacts the convergence as a natural expression of her faith practice representing a progressive breakdown of traditionally antithetical exclusivities. She is careful to avoid the potential that feminism holds to erase difference and establish sameness between the struggles of Muslim women and other women. Rather than insisting upon a convergence called “Islamic feminism”, by remaining tentative and careful in articulating this convergence, as Barlas, Wadud, Mir-Hosseini, and Najmabadi also do, this final

"SHE IS CAREFUL TO AVOID THE POTENTIAL THAT FEMINISM HOLDS TO ERASE DIFFERENCE AND ESTABLISH SAMENESS BETWEEN THE STRUGGLES OF MUSLIM WOMEN AND OTHER WOMEN"

articulation holds the potential for growth and development, and promotes translucence over transparency. Whether resisting the label feminist, resisting a convergence between Islam and feminism or doing feminism while taking Islam for granted, the dynamic between Islam and feminism is a potentially productive space from which to theorise modern Muslim gendered ways of being. We are well placed in this dynamic when we avoid easy conflations or inflations of the space between these two paradigms but maintain a critical view of how and why they may or may not converge.

Recommended Reading On Islam And Feminism



Feminism In Turkey In The 1980's: An Interview With Ayse Duzkan

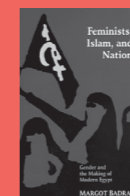
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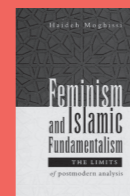
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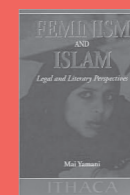
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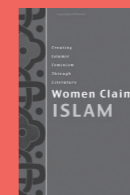
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New York: Routledge, US. 2001 ISBN-0415925541



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by Murata, Sachiko

New York: State University of New York Press, US. 1992 ISBN-0791409147



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London & New York: Routledge, GB & US. 1997 ISBN-0415917611



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by Abu-Lughod, Lila, ed.

New Jersey: Princeton University Press, US. 1998 ISBN-0691057923



Daughters Of Abraham: Feminist Thought In Judaism, Christianity And Islam

by Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck; Esposito, John L., eds.

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