



Islamic Feminisms: a Challenge to Patriarchy and Traditional Religious Authority

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20 September 2016

Throughout the Muslim world, Islamic Feminism is taking shape. It presents alternative discourses on gender and Islam and aims to advance women's rights within larger issues of social justice and minority rights.

Throughout the Muslim world a counter discourse to western, mostly secular, feminism and Islamic fundamentalism is taking shape in the form of Islamic Feminism. While this is not a new phenomenon, having started primarily in Egypt in the 1950s, Islamic Feminism is increasingly gaining ground. The North African kingdom of Morocco and Malaysia form the bookends of this discourse that proposes to embed the advancement of women's rights within larger issues of social justice and minority rights. It explores new readings of sacred scriptures that challenge historic patriarchy within Muslim tradition. At the forefront of this approach is *Musawah* (Equality in Arabic), an international network of scholars, activists, and lawyers. *Musawah* grew out of the groups Sisters in Islam and *Karama* (Dignity), both of which promote understandings of Islam that foster justice, equality, freedom, and dignity, especially for women. Founded in 2009 in Malaysia, *Musawah's* headquarters moved to Morocco in 2015.

The Moroccan King and Women's Rights

Islam is one of the pillars of Moroccan identity, and King Mohamed VI is a strong advocate of an "open, moderate Islam" based on the Maliki School of Islamic jurisprudence and Sunni Sufism. Since 2013, the Moroccan government has actively sought to train imam students from Tunisia and Libya

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as well as several West African countries, thus exporting Morocco's Islam as a counterpoint to more radical or fundamentalist versions. In his dual capacity as Head of State and Commander of the Faithful (*amir al mu'minin*), the king is in the unique position of shaping religious discourse concerning women without resorting to authoritarian state-imposed feminism, as was the case in pre-revolution Tunisia. There, the government under dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali repressed religious discourse on women's rights, a course that was reversed when, in the first free and democratic post-uprising elections in 2011, the religiously based Ennahda party was elected to government, allowing for a religiously inspired discourse on gender equality.

Meanwhile in Morocco, under the auspices of the Moroccan King, a Center of Feminine Studies in Islam within the *Rabita mohammadia des Oulémas* (Royal Council of Religious Scholars) was established. Asma Lambrabet, a medical doctor and vocal proponent of Islamic Feminism, was the appointed director of this Center.

Islam as a dynamic religion

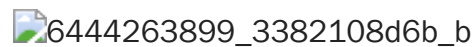


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Islamic feminism is based on the idea that Islam is a dynamic religion, the eternal message of which needs to be adapted to changing historical circumstances. This interpretive process, called *ijtihad* (independent reasoning of the sources of Islamic law) involves the sacred texts of the Qur'an, *sunnah* (sayings and doings of the Prophet) and *hadith* (saying attributed to the Prophet). Islamic feminist ideas challenge predominant

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androcentric, absolutist theological concepts of authority. In so doing, women are appropriating religious authority, historically a domain controlled by men.

The Moroccan Asma Lamrabet's and U.S. scholar Amina Wadud's writings enjoy wide popularity, especially among young Muslims who want to find answers to the question what it means to be a Muslim in the modern world. Faced with increasingly conservative and radical interpretations of sacred texts, these two scholars offer a religious perspective on modern identity formation that is not primarily western or secular. They exemplify how Muslim women can appropriate sacred texts, a fundamental strategy of their empowerment and personal development.

Who holds religious authority?

Lamrabet and Wadud address head-on an age-old question: Who has the authority to interpret the sacred texts? Each scholar in her own way is appropriating authority over textual analysis and, in doing so, is creating a new voice, a new way of approaching gender and women's rights within an Islamic context. Together, their work exists within the larger context of challenges to conventional religious authorities in contemporary Muslim societies. Just as the role of the traditional *ulama* (Islamic scholars) has been challenged by the rise of alternative sources of religious authority – such as Internet fatwas and satellite TV imams – that claim equal legitimacy, Islamic feminists demand this right for themselves. If men with limited scholarly theological training can exert influence—uncontested by conservative scholars—why would alternative interpretations by women not fit into this colorful landscape of religious authorities?

One of the earliest and most important pioneers of Muslim feminist scholarship is Morocco's Fatema Mernissi (1945-2015). She was among the first to turn to the Qur'an to advance a reformist interpretation of the sacred texts with a view to supporting gender equality. In addition, Mernissi placed women's rights within a larger context of social and economic justice. Today, Mernissi is Morocco's most widely translated and internationally read author. Ironically, it was only after her death a year ago that she became widely known in her home country and finally gained publicly acknowledgement for her contributions.

Islamic feminist hermeneutics considers the Qur'an as a historical text, revealed at a particular time and place. Over time, then, certain interpretations need to be reconsidered or refuted in accordance with the principles and egalitarian spirit of the texts. As Mernissi has repeatedly argued, sacred texts have been used as a political weapon to uphold laws that treat women as legal minors. This action is possible because traditional Islamic theological scholarship lacks fundamental historic contextualization, fails to acknowledge that knowledge production always occurs within a given historical context, and downplays the possibility of human fallibility in any hermeneutics. Recognizing such limitations is an important element of Islamic Feminist thought. Inasmuch as Mernissi critiqued the gender inegalitarian reality, she also was critical of promoting women's rights without simultaneously advocating for social and economic justice.

Pioneers of Islamic Feminism

Thus, Mernissi, Lamrabet, and Wadud represent important alternative voices in scholarly discourses on gender and Islam. There certainly are other, important proponents of Islamic feminism. Margot Badran has written about Islamic Feminism for more than a decade, mostly focusing on Egypt. One of the

founders of *Musawah*, the Malaysian Zainah Anwar, Iranian born scholar Ziba Mir-Hosseini and South African Farid Esack have also emerged as important advocates and scholars in re-interpreting concepts that traditionally have undergirded male superiority such as *quiwamah* (male authority), *wialya*(guardianship), mixed marriages and one of the cornerstones of inequality: inheritance laws.

Thus, Islamic Feminism aims to liberate Muslim women from archaic and limited roles with negative social and economic consequences. Islamic Feminism argues for pluralistic interpretations of sacred scriptures, as a means by which global feminists can establish a dialogue based on the deconstruction of traditional knowledge that is masculine and patriarchal. It allows the reconciliation of Islam and modernity and goes beyond the false dichotomies of Muslim and secular, modernist and traditionalist, East and West.

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