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Abstract

The concept of Islamic feminism depicts the history of Muslim women seeking gender equality on the basis of religion. Through rooting gender equality in the texts and practices of the Qur'an, Muslim women demand acknowledgement in society based on Islamic teachings. A common theme persists in American society, which perpetuates the misconception that Muslim women lack agency. In reality, numerous Muslim women have actively worked to ensure their rightful place alongside men in society, which is evident in the cases of both Egypt and Iran.

Keywords

Muslim, Women, Feminism, Egypt, Iran

Disciplines

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Comments

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What All Americans Should Know About Islamic Feminism

Americans often misinterpret the role of gender in Islam, as they perceive Muslim women to be submissive to Muslim men. In believing this, it furthers the perception that Muslim women are incapable of making their own decisions, and have accepted the limits that have been placed on them through the confines of a patriarchal religion. This is not the truth for Muslim women, but negative connotations about Islam are furthered through the Western mass media and a common misunderstanding of the fundamentals of the religion. In fact, Islamic feminists have been working for years in the Middle East to promote the necessity of women's rights being equal to men's rights, despite the belief by Americans that Islam denies women the ability to have agency. It is imperative that Americans understand the development of the Islamic feminist movement, and the subsequent work towards gender equality in the religion.

Islamic feminism can be defined as “an intellectual and theological trend advocating women's advancement and gender equality within an Islamic discursive framework.”¹ This differs from Western feminism, in which women are seeking equality with men on the basis that they are both humans; this gender equality that is sought is not dependent on religious values, but is instead secular. It is not necessary for Muslim women's status to be determined based on their species, but instead they are advocating for their equality based solely on the Islamic religion and its texts.

¹ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2013, 179.

For Muslim women, the concept of feminism is not a new trend that has emerged recently from seeing the activities of women elsewhere in the world; feminism has been a topic of conversation in the Arab world, for example, since the 1800s. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Ottoman Empire's influence over the Middle East had begun to weaken, which led to the influx of modern ideals and the subsequent exclusion of certain groups of people.² Both secular and religious women had been excluded from "accessing the benefits of modernity as freely as their male counterparts" due to their gender, which was the initial catalyst for feminist discussion. These women were barred from the establishment of a new era in the region, and they turned their frustration into activism. In the late 1900s, the term "Islamic feminism" was established, as women were growing increasingly disenchanted with the Arab states that they lived in.³ Not only were these women not considered to be equal to men, but their governments were rationalizing the denial or the repeal of their rights for the establishment of Islam as law (Islamism).⁴ Over the course of the 20th century, Muslim women had grown increasingly concerned as Islamic readings were interpreted conservatively, they were treated as second-class citizens, and there was societal pressure for them to remain home rather than in the workforce.⁵ Americans should understand that, rather than conforming to society's expectations, some women ensured that their voices were heard.

Many Muslim women went against what was expected of them, in order to pave a path for the Islamic feminists that followed. Nazira Zeineddine was one of the first Islamic feminists, although this terminology had not yet been created. Zeineddine (1908-1976) was a Druze woman who resided in Lebanon, and was raised studying and analyzing the Islamic texts with

² Margot Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005): 7.

³ Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s," 8.

⁴ Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s," 8.

⁵ Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s," 9..

her father.⁶ During her lifetime, and due to her avid studying of the Qur'an, she published the book, *Unveiling and Veiling*, which encouraged women to veil and advocated for gender equality in Islam.⁷ Her voice in the early feminist movement may not have gathered crowds in activism, but it was an important piece of early literature on the importance of equality in Islamic texts. Huda Sha'arawi was a pioneer for Egyptian women in the feminist movement. After traveling to a feminist conference in Rome, she publicly unveiled in Egypt in 1923.⁸ This was not the first ever public unveiling, but, combined with her activism as leader of the Egyptian Feminist Movement (1923), her influence led to the creation of an organized group.⁹ Egyptian women began to advocate for gender equality through their right to vote, education, and citizenship status, among other things. Their influence led to social change but not to legal change, as they were constricted by the state. Zaynab al-Ghazali was a fellow Egyptian feminist and a member of the Egyptian Feminist Union, but was not pleased with their direction, and chose to leave to establish her own organization. The Jama'at al Sayyidat al-Muslimat, or the Muslim Women's Association, was active from 1936 to 1964 in aiding the poor, establishing a magazine, managing an orphanage, and providing mediation for familial problems.¹⁰ These women were pioneers in their work to bring influential feminist movements to the Middle East, and thus paved the way for the Islamic feminists that followed.

In order to conceptualize why Islamic feminism has become a prominent movement for Muslim women, Americans must understand the history behind this movement, and why women have chosen to advocate for their rights through religion. This evaluation and explanation will

⁶ Miriam Cooke, *Nazira Zeineddine: A Pioneer of Islamic Feminism* (New York: One World Publications, 2010), 18, 32.

⁷ Cooke, *Nazira Zeineddine*, 51.

⁸ Fadwa El Guindi, "Gendered Resistance, Feminist Veiling, Islamic Feminism," *Ahfad Journal* 22, no. 1 (2005): 65.

⁹ Gulsah Torunoglu, "Feminism in Egypt: New Alliances, Old Debates," *Origins* 9, no. 11 (2016).

¹⁰ El Guindi, "Gendered Resistance," 70.

be done through studying two states in the Middle East: Egypt and Iran. Both of these states have varied in their stance on women's rights, which will allow for a grasp of the importance of these movements. Although Americans may see the veil as the prominent form of oppression of women in the Middle East, there are many other ways in which women have had to struggle for their rights. The veil is important, as it can be used as a visible component of control, but it is often a choice and should not be the focus of all American discussions on Muslim women.

The feminist movement in Egypt began during the time when the Ottoman Empire was losing its grasp on the Middle East and reform and modernization movements were taking hold. Muhammad 'Abduh was one of the initial proponents for reform within Islam, arguing that Muslims should institute the practice of *ijtihad*, or "independent inquiry" of the religious texts.¹¹ Through these ideas, women became vocal about their own rights, and this is where feminist writings and discussion began. In addition to this, Qasim Amin, who would be known as the "father of Egyptian feminism," was inspired by the advocacy of 'Abduh and published his ideas on education for women in 1899 and 1900.¹² The first women who chose to support these ideas were members of the upper class, as many of them had some influence in the society through their roles as the wives of politicians.¹³ These women did not leave a permanent mark on the feminist movement in Egypt, but this was just the beginning.

During the early feminist movements, Gamal 'Abdel-Nasser was the president of Egypt from 1956 to 1970, and he seemingly heeded the newfound perception of gender and instituted these ideals into law. Many laws were founded during his administration that furthered women's rights: the electoral law in the 1956 constitution that granted women the right to vote,

¹¹ Torunoglu, "New Alliances."

¹² Torunoglu, "New Alliances."

¹³ Sarah Graham-Brown, "Feminism in Egypt: A Conversation with Nawal Sadawi," *Middle East Research and Information Project Reports Women and Work in the Middle East*, no. 95 (1981): 24.

employment benefits (maternity leave and state-sanctioned healthcare), and the 1962 Charter for National Action, which promoted equality and family planning.¹⁴ Although Nasser worked on behalf of women, there was a precedent set that these were the rights that women would be given, and no critical discussion should transpire from feminists about these laws. Women were given access to some rights, and, although these were not comparable to men's rights, women were expected to remain silent.

Everything changed when Anwar Sadat became the president in 1970: his Islamic reforms would reverse the previously mentioned advancements, as he was politically allied with religious groups. Article 11 of the 1971 Constitution stated that, "The State shall guarantee proper coordination between the duties of woman towards the family and her work in society ... without violation of the rules of Islamic jurisprudence."¹⁵ Enacting this article to the constitution removed fundamental equality and instituted equality that would further promote the values of conservative interpretations of Islamic law. In the late 1970s, Sadat allowed for women to gain some rights, but this was only done to please his Western counterparts and to maintain good foreign relations; his wife wanted to promote women's rights, but he did not share the same interest.¹⁶ Sadat was assassinated in 1979, and President Hosni Mubarak continued to further his oppressive state views on gender through the removal of gender reforms.

The continuous ideology shift from the Egyptian state was evidently a point of frustration for women in the 1970s, as they had understood how it felt to have increased agency in the public sector and how it felt to then be told that some of these rights were no longer granted based on gender. This shift necessitated a new kind of feminist movement: "The movement that emerged in the 1970s is different. . . . It is also grounded in culture and in Islam, and never had

¹⁴ Torungolu, "New Alliances."

¹⁵ Egyptian Constitution. Article 11. 1971.

¹⁶ Torungolu, "New Alliances."

any formal organization or membership. It erupted everywhere in the main urban centers of Egypt, ultimately spreading outward.”¹⁷ This movement allowed for women to advocate for their rights, as they desired for the state to acknowledge their equality with men under the law and through religion. This movement, and the work for women to ensure that they are not oppressed because of Islam, can be seen through the actions of Egypt’s Islamic feminists.

Islamic feminists chose employment as a prominent issue that they focused on. In the 1990s, Egyptian women lobbied for women to be recognized in high-prestige public employment opportunities previously dominated by men, such as the position of a judge. Due to the vocalization of Islamic feminists on behalf of women seeking equal employment opportunities, women were granted the ability to become judges in 2002, when a woman was named to the Supreme Constitutional Court.¹⁸ This was accomplished because feminists were able to show through Islamic law that a woman could be employed as a judge.

Another way in which Islamic feminists have tried to bring about change is through family law. With the moves by Sadat and Mubarak to negate the reforms of Nasser, women did not have the ability to speak with authority or provide input in their familial relations and they were only able to request a divorce under extreme circumstances. For many decades, these women urged the state to reconsider this law and allow for women to ask for a divorce. In 2004, women were granted the ability to *khull*, or request a divorce in court.¹⁹ This was only made possible for women because since the rescinding of women’s family law rights, Islamic feminists actively pursued the reestablishment of their religious equality in marriage.

¹⁷ El Guindi, “Gendered Resistance,” 71.

¹⁸ Margot Badran, “Feminist Activism and Reform of Muslim Personal Status Laws: A Look At Egypt and Morocco.” 2008, accessed December 9, 2017.

¹⁹ Badran, “Feminist Activism.”

The media and the perception of women in what Americans would consider to be pop culture was another way in which Islamic feminists actively working to prove the equality of men and women through Islam. In Egypt, this was done through the story of Queen Sheba and the Pharaoh: “The major Qur’anic (favourable) narrative of Queen Sheba’s success, cited often by Islamic feminist interpreters to legitimize women’s political rule, can also be used in juxtaposition to the Pharaoh’s despotic rule to craft a model for an Islamic feminist stance that rejects this form of political autocracy - from a Qur’anic point of view - while validating women’s leadership.”²⁰ Here Islamic feminists are drawing both on the Qur’an and the popularity of a well-known figure to inspire young women to question why there is a lack of representation for themselves in the government. It is important for Americans to know of these actions by Islamic feminists in Egypt and understand that they have been working to oppose those who seek to oppress them.

Iran faced a similar situation, in that women were granted certain rights by the state and they were subsequently revoked in a move towards Islamism. In 1936, Reza Shah, the leader of Iran, made a declaration that all women must remove their veils.²¹ During this time, the veil was worn by rural women, who believed that the veil was a partition for gender roles and, by eliminating it, there would be a crisis for those who associated their identity with it.²² The state wanted women to abide by this new rule and would go as far as to arrest those who insisted on wearing the veil. In addition to the removal of the veil, every Iranian person was expected to conform to the dress code of Western Europe. These changes were part of the “modernization” plan carried out by the state and promoted the perception that women were able to express

²⁰ Omaila Abou-Bakr, “Islamic Feminism and the Equivocation of Political Engagement,” (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2015), 201.

²¹ Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 156.

²² Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 157.

themselves in a secular way. In addition to dress, the Shah allowed for the establishment of the Women's Organization of Iran in 1966, which improved the lives of women through outlets such as education and healthcare.²³ These rules on dress and activism were terminated with the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The Iranian Revolution was the turning point for women's rights, as some of their previous freedoms were revoked in order to conform to the traditional practices of Islamists. The leader following the revolution, Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, enforced strict rules that included obligatory veiling for women, educational reform to institute Islamism into teachings, and the segregation of schools.²⁴ In addition to this, the state worked to remove women from prominent positions in the government, such as judges, and they were banned from studying in the science and technology fields. Amendments to the Family Protection Act of 1976 granted men the right to practice polygamy, while stating that women were in no position able to request a divorce.²⁵ As if the blatant discreditation of women were not enough, the Islamic Civil Code of 1979 determined that two women were equal to one man as witnesses in a court of law.²⁶ This disrespect led to the emergence of Islamic feminism in Iran.

During the administration of the Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, from 1989 to 1997, Islamic feminism emerged in the state.²⁷ During this time, women wanted to institute change for those who lived in the Islamic Republic, as all of the decision-making and interpretational power was concentrated with the Islamic fundamentalists.²⁸ Islamic feminists

²³ Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 211.

²⁴ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2013): 176.

²⁵ Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, 177.

²⁶ Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 277.

²⁷ Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, 179.

²⁸ Fereshteh Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (2006): 34.

advocated for the reinterpretation of family law, as they wanted to improve the status of women in the family. To do this, they criticized the civil code, which degraded women to be second-class citizens. For example, Azam Taleghani wrote a book that questioned the Iranian state's notion that men were better than women, as she discussed the interpretations of equality in the Qur'an.²⁹ After persistent advocacy for a reexamination of these laws, the state amended the divorce laws and other family laws in 1992, in order to provide benefits to working and stay-at-home mothers.³⁰ Islamic feminists did not settle for the alteration of these laws but continued to work to ensure that their beliefs were heard by the men in the patriarchal society.

The Iranian Council of Guardians has set the precedent that women are unable to run for president, due to a constitutional clause that has been interpreted by the men in power. In Article 15 of the Constitution, the qualifications for the president express that they must be a "*rajol*," which has been taken at face value in Arabic to mean a man.³¹ Despite this interpretation, Islamic feminists are demanding that a reinterpretation be done, as the word has also been translated as "mankind" in Persian. These arguments for women to have the opportunity and the right to run for president still continue today, but they are one of many examples of the decades of work that women have contributed towards the Islamic feminist crusade.

Similar to the Egyptian feminists, these Iranian Islamic feminists have worked to have gender equality represented in the media. In 1991, the Iranian feminist Shahla Sherkat created the magazine *Zanan*, in which women had a written platform to advocate for their desire to have equality.³² Because of this, Muslim women were able to analyze scripture for interpretation that supports gender equality, but due to their opposition to the state's perception of Islamic texts, the

²⁹ Valentine M. Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate," (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002): 36.

³⁰ Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism," 36.

³¹ Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran," 48.

³² Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 316.

Zanan was dissolved by the state in 2008.³³ Regardless of the state's intolerance for free thought and free speech, these ideas are part of a continuous movement for women to be equal through Islam in Iran. Another way in which this is being done is through the representation of women and mothers in films throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Iranian films have been created that portray women as strong mothers protecting their children from their fathers, war, and the government.³⁴ The films also address the common notion that marriage is the solution to life's problems, in the way that they criticize and refute this belief. For Muslim women and young girls who are looking for inspiration in the desolate, unequal state of Iran, it is important that there are Islamic feminists working on their behalf to speak out against the injustices that have occurred in the name of Islamism.

If the reader takes anything away from this paper, it should be this: Muslim women are by no means accepting of the ways in which the patriarchal interpretations of Islam have limited them; rather than accept oppression, these women have worked tirelessly for years to prove that they are not confined to gender roles. Muslim women in the Middle East have not been placated by the victories for Islamic feminism that have already occurred, but are continuing to work to prove that women are equal in the Qur'an to men. Of course, some women lack the ability or the interest to redefine their relationship with gender in Islam, but, although some Americans may not understand why Muslim women choose this life, they must seek to accept and to acknowledge that the struggles and the adversity exemplified by these women are valid. When the Western news outlets perpetuate the belief that all Muslim women acquiesce to Muslim men, think about the Islamic feminists who have spent years working and establishing themselves in states and governments that have consistently diminished their value through the law. Rather

³³ Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 318.

³⁴ Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 332.

than make assumptions about how these women feel or how they act, explore the Islamic feminist movement in the Middle East, as many other states in the region have their own Muslim women working towards the same goals. Americans often find it challenging to understand the beliefs and the values of others: why would women choose to find their equal rights through religion rather than through their humanity? The answer to this question may never be fully understood by Americans, but instead of being close-minded about Islam and women, it is necessary to work to learn about these Islamic feminists, which goes beyond maintaining stereotypical and often misinformed beliefs about this religion.

Islamic feminism is the desire to reinterpret Qur'anic texts, in order to show that Islam views Muslim men and women to be equal. This has been an ongoing struggle, as patriarchal states and the introduction of Islamism in the Middle East have challenged the notion of gender equality. Americans perceive Islam to stifle the Muslim woman, but in reality, many women seek to enact change through their work to reinterpret the Islamic texts. For many years, Muslim women have exemplified their desire for their rights to be defined by Qur'anic interpretations of gender equality, rather than by the patriarchal institution of political Islam - or by external, secular notions of women's rights. It is time for Americans to acknowledge that these Islamic feminists exist and to recognize their continued pursuit of gender equality.

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