



Islamic Feminism and the Role of Women

Dunya Suleymanova*

Independent Researcher, Economics and Management, Humboldt University, Germany

***Corresponding Author:** Dunya Suleymanova, Independent Researcher, Economics and Management, Humboldt University, Germany.

DOI: 10.31080/ASWH.2022.04.0337

Received: December 29, 2021

Published: February 22, 2022

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Abstract

The term “Islamic feminism”, which has emerged more recently in comparison with “Western feminism”, has become the subject of heated debate both among scholars and among the general public. While Islamic feminism, like Western feminism, focuses on women’s rights, it is different in nature. Islamic feminists see the Quran as the source of the struggle for their rights. They argue that the oppression of Islamic women continues due to misinterpretations of the Quran by elite men. Nevertheless, some scholars, especially Western ones, argue that the reason for gender inequality lies not in interpretation, but in the Quran itself and specific verses. This article focuses on Islamic feminism by analyzing the arguments of both sides. In the end, I came to the conclusion that although the position of women has improved with the advent of Islam, there are points in the verses that make gender equality almost impossible in Muslim countries. Thus, this article argues that for meaningful change, Islamic feminists must change their approach on this issue.

Keywords: Islamic Feminism; Western Feminism, Q:ran; Women; Gender Equality; Patriarchy

Islamic feminism vs. Western feminism: A difference in nature

It is interesting to note that in the Western world, most specialists focus on Western feminism rather than Islamic feminism. Unlike Islamic feminism, which emerged only in the 1990s, the Western feminist movement emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and acquired cultural and political significance as early as the 20th century [4]. While the development of Western feminism has led to heated debate among its participants and the general public, the debate about Islamic feminism has become even more controversial among both Western and Muslim scholars. In fact, while Western feminism is partially or completely accepted in Western societies, Islamic feminism is causing outrage among professionals and the public. The reason for this difference is that, although both Islamic and Western feminist fight against gender discrimination, demand the expansion of the rights and role of women in society, fair and equal relations between the sexes, the idea of Islamic feminism is different in nature [4]. Like West-

ern feminism, Islamic feminism also focuses on achieving gender equality and social justice, but its understanding and implementation is considered the Quran [3]. In other words, supporters of Islamic feminism believe that only the Quran can be considered a source for Muslim activists.

The advent of Islam: Has the status of women improved?

According to Islamic feminists, the advent of Islam in the 7th century improved the position of women and gave them rights that Islamic feminists have only recently begun to talk about. For instance, before the advent of Islam, during the period of Jahiliya, the Arab peoples used to bury their newborn girls alive. They argued that there were no benefits from their daughters because they would not be able to work and help the family; thus, the parents did not want to shoulder the burden of their daughter and murdered them. The situation changed after the arrival of Islam, since the Quran prohibits this practice, and the Prophet Muhammad urged

to treat daughters with love, calling their birth a blessing [2]. In addition, the Prophet Muhammad forbade women to marry without their consent, divorce, and declared the equal rights to education, and other social and political activities [5]. Consequently, with the advent of Islam, the reforms in the field of women's rights began.

In fact, in the Middle Ages there were already those who advocated for the improvement of women's rights in the Islamic community. For example, the philosopher Ibn Arabi argued that, like a man, a woman can also achieve high spirituality. Moreover, in the 18th century, the daughter of the Islamic reformer Usman dan Fodio Nana Asmawi fought to raise the educational level of Muslim women [9]. At that time, according to tradition, girls from Muslim countries could not go to school with men, which means they did not have the opportunity to study. Consequently, Asmawi tried to transfer her knowledge to other women so that they could teach Muslim women around the world [9].

Islamic activists and a distorted interpretation of the Quran

As a result, it is not surprising that Muslim activists claim that their belief in Allah is the reason for their motivation to fight for women's rights [3]. In fact, they argue that most people question the achievement of equality in Muslim countries not because of the Quran, but because of classical and post-classical interpretations of the Quran based on male experience and oriented towards patriarchal societies [3]. One of the first to speak about the distorted interpretation of the Quran was the Iranian poet Tahira. She is also considered one of the earliest Muslim activists, as she spoke out against polygamy, the wearing of the veil and other restrictions for women [9]. Tahira is a very strong woman because she was not afraid to receive threats from Muslims because of her activities and performances. She once told: "You can kill me whenever you want. But you cannot stop the release of women" [9].

One of the biggest problems for Islamic feminists is that women do not pray with men, since 2/3 of mosques have a separate place for them. Consequently, Muslim activists such as Asra Nomani protested against the mosque's rule. Asra Nomani disagrees that the mosque, which she regularly visits, has a special door and balcony through which women can enter and pray. She argued her protest as follows: "The Prophet Muhammad did not tell women to pray behind screens. These barriers are sexist inventions of men" [8].

It is important to note that different feminist schools in Muslim countries interpret the Quran differently. For example, the first apologetic approach claims that Islam gave freedom to women, and in fact, Islamic women should have had more rights than Western women [3]. Because of the conservatism of men in Muslim countries, Muslim women have not been able to achieve this. Moreover, another feminist movement is trying to independently interpret Islamic texts not from a male point of view, as it is now, but from a women's point of view.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini, one of the most famous Iranian feminists, says: "Feminism has a lot to offer in understanding religion and justice — this is true for Islam and other religious movements alike. Muslim feminists argue that, although the principles of Sharia can be interpreted in different ways, the elite, consisting of men, throughout history interpreted them for their own benefit at the expense of justice" [8].

Thus, proponents of Islamic feminism draw on their own experiences when considering the relationship between the Quran and gender equality. Consequently, "feminist hermeneutics seeks confirmation of gender equality in the Quran and includes three approaches:

- Revising the verses of the Qur'an to refute popular false stories that establish male superiority;
- Citing verses that unambiguously affirm gender equality;
- Considering the verses that explain the difference between men and women and have traditionally been interpreted in favor of men" [3].

Moreover, the Musavat movement argues that Muslim women can fight for gender equality and justice without going beyond the confines of Islam. Musavat was headed by 12 women from Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan and other Muslim countries, and it took about two years to develop the basic principles of the movement [3]. The movement is a success as 250 activists, academics and lawyers have already attended the movement's first official meeting in 2009 in Kuala Lumpur. The goal of the movement is to raise the self-awareness of women and help them overcome the struggle for their rights [3]. Specifically, Musavat tries to convey to Muslim women its point of view on alternative interpretations of the Quran, information about basic human rights and supports activists from Muslim countries in their struggle for emancipation women [3].

Islamic feminism: Skeptics

In fact, some Islamic feminists claim that God has no gender, which means that everyone is equal before him: both men and women [1]. As a result, one gender cannot have more rights, which they use at their own discretion. According to Muslim activists, one of the main ideas of modern Islamic feminism is a return to the principles of religion that existed centuries ago. Nevertheless, opponents of Islamic feminism argue that if there were an alternative interpretation of the Quran, then why did people not focus on this point before? [1].

The reason for this is that Islamic feminism is more complex than the secular feminism that prevails in the West, and the two are often in conflict. Western feminists have stereotypes about Muslim women, and they think they are oppressed by the male tyranny that prevails in Islamic countries [1]. In fact, most scholars, especially Western scholars, believe that gender inequality is codified by Sharia law and that Islam itself perpetuates the oppressed position of women [8].

Another problem in Islamic feminism is related to violence, in particular domestic violence. Opponents of Islamic feminism very often refer to the controversial interpretation of the 34th verse of Surah An-Nisa (Women), which says that the husband supposedly has the right to “strike” his wife.

“Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband’s] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them [lightly]. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand” [7].

There is a controversy over the word “strike”, which has different translations in other sources, such as “to beat”, “to give parables” or “to give clear instruction” [2].

For instance, Imams Ragib Isfahani and Mahmud al-Zamakhshari did not agree with the inconsistency of the translation and interpreted the verse differently: “... And those women whose disobedience you fear, exhort, avoid on the matrimonial bed and give them a parable (or give a clear instruction)” [2].

Despite the fact that there are different translations of this verse, Western feminists still argue that women’s rights cannot be protected in Islamic countries, while even a “light strike” is welcomed by society and by the Quran itself.

Moreover, in Surah it is written: “Allah Almighty tells that the man is the caretaker, custodian, and guardian of the woman, who instructs her when she falls in mistake, depending upon the fact that man is excellent and better (in power, enduring and responsibility) than the woman. For this reason, the Prophethood was particular to men, and so should be the position of leadership and ruling... ‘P.B.U.H.’ said: ‘Not successful are a people whose ruler is a woman...’ ‘and because they support them from their means...’ In general, the man is superior to the woman, and thus it is fitting to him to be her guardian and protector as in Allah’s saying: ‘but men have a degree (of advantage) over them.’ ‘P.B.U.H.’ said: ‘The best woman is a wife, if you look at her, you will be pleased with her, and if you order her to do anything she will obey you, and if you are absent from her, she will keep you in herself and in your property.’ Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means” [5].

According to this Surah, the man is the head of the family, and Allah has given men more strength, natural leadership and ruling power than women. As a result, the man has to be there to guide and advise the woman, but there is no verse in the Quran that endorses the role of women as counselors for men [5].

“Allah, He is Great and Glorious, granted men superiority in some qualities, for instance, in physical strength, although at the same time, Allah, also by His will and wisdom, granted the woman the opportunity to give birth to children and thereby continue the human race, and men are deprived of such an opportunity. In addition, men earn a living for the family and support it, that is, ‘support them from their means’, providing women and children with everything necessary” [5]. It is clear that Allah has assigned different responsibilities to men and women, and there is complementarity between them, not equality; nevertheless, it is emphasized that a man should provide material support to a woman.

As a result, Western scholars are partially correct that the hierarchy against which Islamic feminists are so violently opposed is established in Islamic society by the Quran itself: “... the men have

a degree over them (in responsibility and authority). And Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise" [5].

Conclusion

As a result, although the position of women has indeed improved with the advent of Islam, the argument that it is the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran, and not the Quran itself, that leads to gender inequality is in doubt. As it could be seen, the Prophet Muhammad indeed protected women and proclaimed equal rights for both sexes. Nevertheless, looking at the verses themselves, one can agree that Allah has differently distributed responsibilities between men and women, which clearly demonstrates gender inequality, and not the domination of women by men.

Therefore, I think that what Islamic feminists are doing now is not enough to achieve gender equality. Thus, I believe that in order to overcome patriarchy and hierarchy in Muslim countries, Islamic feminists must defend their rights, not considering the Quran as the only source of their activities, but going much further and considering themselves, first of all, human-beings.

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