

Is it possible for an “Islamic Feminism” to exist?

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Abstract

Unlike “Western feminism”, the term “Islamic feminism” arose only in the 1990s. This term has become quite a controversial topic both among Muslim and Western scholars. Consequently, the scholars were divided into two groups, those who believe that it is possible for Islamic feminism to exist (supporters), and those who claim that even though Islamic feminism may lead to some changes, it is still an inadequate tool for achieving gender equality (skeptics). Hence, my study takes over the timely question posed by Gashtili in a research published in 2013: “Is an ‘Islamic Feminism’ Possible? In my paper, I looked at Islamic feminism through including various elements as well as reviewed the arguments on both sides. Although most papers focus on one particular Muslim country, I decided to look at it in a broader sense. In the end, I came to the conclusion that even though the number of supporters increased hugely in recent years, they still have to go a long way to achieve the changes and whether these changes will lead to gender equality is under a big question.

Keywords: *Islamic feminism, feminism, Western feminism, hijab, religion.*

Islamic feminism: sources

Already in the 19th century, first waves of feminism have started in the West in favor of women’s suffrage. Actually, the rise of feminism in the West is not an accident because throughout history, western women demanded rights and citizenship. “In clear contrast with the East, ‘Western feminism’ was a product of the rise of capitalism, and its modernist culture and politics.” (Mojab, 2001, p.126). Unlike Western feminism, “Islamic feminism” captured the attention of scholars only recently. Interestingly, it arose not in Muslim countries, but in the West, which “subjugates women.” Supporters of Islamic feminism claim that only sacred texts can be a source for Muslim



activists. According to them, the Prophet Muhammad defended women, and the Quran almost one thousand three hundred years ago gave them all the rights that suffragists began to talk about only at the end of the 19th century. Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad declared the equal rights to marriage, divorce, education, and other social and political activities. Consequently, activists connect problems with women's rights in Islam with the era of the male interpretation of the Quran. “In the Middle East, they say, even before Islam, ideas of seclusion, spiritual purity, and modesty were popular - thus, for instance, women were forced to dress in private clothes there. With the advent of Islam, which, among other things, preached modesty, the requirement to cover their faces from strangers was justified by religion, although there are no such strict rules about clothes in Islam” (Dogadina, 2018). “The right to discuss, reflect, and approve norms belonged to one group that did not agree to the changes. By isolating a large number of people from knowledge, it got the opportunity to rely on important Islamic traditions and ignore what it did not agree with. One example is domestic violence. In Islam, it is forbidden, but now it can be justified by many Muslims because of ‘male power’ and ‘male superiority’ that prevail in Muslim societies. Muslim feminists argue that when women experience violence by a husband, father, or brother, there are big chances that this action will be justified because a Muslim woman is supposedly dependent and needs to be looked after” (Dogadina, 2018).

Supporters of islamic feminism

Nowadays, the number of women who cannot tolerate patriarchy in the Muslim world is increasing. One of the prominent apologists for Muslim feminism, who published a book entitled *Feminism in Islam* is Margot Badran. Margot Badran explains that Islamic feminism “derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence” (Badran, 2009).

Actually, Margot Badran is not the only defender of feminism in Islam since the list of modern Islamic feminists speaks for itself. Amina Wadud was born in an African-American family and became a Muslim at the age of 20. She is the world’s first woman who delivered a Friday Khutbah - a role traditionally taken by men - in a Cape Town’s mosque in 1994. “Amina Wadud is a specialist in gender issues and the study of the Quran and one of her arguments was that the impact of patriarchy on the interpretation of the Quran and the practices of Muslims has restricted realization of the Quranic message of equality and justice” (Maslaha, n.d.).

“Ani Sonnenveld is a musician and co-founder of the movement ‘Muslims for progressive values’, which actively supports ‘inclusive communities’, that is, in simple terms, people of different sexual orientations. She welcomes and supports marriages between different faiths, same-sex marriages, sexual minorities” (Mukhamedzhanov, 2015).

Moreover, Asra Nomani, a writer-activist, views the practice of men and women praying separately as sexist rules invented by people (Mukhamedzhanov, 2015). “She has faced Islamic extremism when her colleague Daniel Pearl, Wall Street Journal reporter, was murdered in Pakistan. In West Virginia, she saw warning signs at the local mosque such as exclusionism against women, intolerance toward non-believers, and suspicion of the West. Her march on the mosque in West Virginia, which insisted on the right for women to pray in the male-only hall, has attracted significant media attention, the support of Muslim scholars, as well as posed a question of whether it is acceptable for Muslim women to lead men in prayer” (Bano and Kalmbach, 2012).

The story of Alaa Murabit makes people feel uncomfortable. Once, Alaa Murabit, during her speech at a TED conference, asked the audience: “If we are all equal in the eyes of God, for what reason are we not equal in the eyes of men?” (Loutfi, 2015). At the age of fifteen, Murabit moved from Canada to Libya. “In Canada, she was an active, educated, and independent young girl, and all this, as it seemed to her, corresponded to the norms of Islam. In Libya, Islam has completely changed her status because from an independent intelligent woman she turned into a person who was unable to think without the control of men” (Dogadina, 2018). She saw how cultural norms were superimposed on religion, and the concepts of “Haram” (forbidden by religion) and “Aib” (something inappropriate, shameful, that is, disapproved in a particular society) changed places as if they were one and the same (Loutfi, 2015).

Murabit argued that when she was in her fifth year of medical education, the Libyan revolution broke up. Finally, she felt that male domination was about to change because it was the first time when people listened to women and put them at the negotiating table (Loutfi, 2015). However, when it was all over, strong women returned to household duties and received nothing from the revolution. She recalls that in support of their words, politicians who sent women home were using religious scriptures. Actually, the manipulation of religious scripture became a usual thing among leaders who are willing to dictate their norms about the role of women in society (Loutfi, 2015).

All these actions made feel Murabit revolted and she began using “her defense as offense” (Loutfi, 2015). According to her, “the only way to ensure the participation of women, globally, is by reclaiming religion.” (Loutfi, 2015). As a result, in response to these problems, Murabit founded “The Voice of Libyan Women”, a social networking program for women. In 2012-2013, the volunteers conducted an educational campaign in Libya: they went to homes, schools, universities, mosques and talked to fifty thousand people. When taboo issues, like domestic violence, were discussed, Alaa Murabi used hadith (a record of the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. - Ed.): “The best of you are those who treat their families best”; “Don't let one of you oppress the other.” According to her, for the first time Friday services, conducted by local imams, were entirely devoted to the protection of women's rights. Her campaign influenced the local religious leaders because they started to promote the rights of women.

All these women live in different countries, have different lives, but what unites them is the fact that all of them strive to achieve equal rights for Muslim women in order to turn them into independent individuals, who are able to financially sustain themselves, and for whom stereotypes and gender expectations would not be an obstacle to accomplish their own goals.

Hijab: assumed or imposed?

Another interesting aspect is that Western feminists are often accused due to perceiving religious women as an object of salvation. They argue that a believer who is in the power of patriarchal norms, cannot voluntarily decide on her or his religiosity and consciously adhere to practices.

Disputes between Western and Islamic feminists continue to be conducted mainly around appearance. The former are outraged by “hijab” an article of clothing of Muslim women, which closes their body from the rest of the world. Irina Kosterina, sociologist and coordinator of the Heinrich Böll Gender Democracy program, notes that there are times when women “willfully decide to wear a hijab.” She argues that some of her friends wear hijab because of their own will and regard it as a very important thing for them, that is, they do not want to impose anything on anyone or to promote it since for them hijab is more about their identity, principles, and values (Dogadina, 2018). Another example is contemporary Turkey, where according to Aynur Ilyasoglu, a writer-activist, Islamic women wear veiling because it represents the transition from the private to the public sphere (Heath, 2008). What Kosterina and Ilyasoglu claim may sound to some extent plausible, but at the same time another question arises: can a decision to wear religious clothing in

principle be conscious, or women do not notice how much stereotypes influence them? Danis Garayev argues that the conversation about someone's lack of awareness is discriminatory in itself: "The number of strategies that people have in terms of corporality is limited. In this situation, when a person is imposed to wear something, be it a scarf or short skirts, this is a completely different matter; both Islamic feminists and Westerners oppose this." (Dogadina, 2018).

Another example that shows sexual control through the enforced veil is the Algerian case. Since the 1980s, Algerian Islamists pursued women, discouraging Western clothes and fighting for more segregated public space. In 1991, the Islamic Salvation Front won local elections and planned to make laws based on religion, segregated workplaces as well as mandatory hijab for all female employees. Consequently, Islamic Salvation Front has gained great control, including harsh control over female sexuality. Instances like women being murdered for refusing to wear the hijab were not extraordinary. One of the most widely publicized cases is that of a sixteen-year-old Katya Bengana, who was shot dead by armed Islamists on the street on her way home from school. She has passed away just because she refused to wear the hijab (Heath, 2008).

Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Iranian women were becoming a part of the public sphere. However, after the revolution, some of the basic rights were taken away from them. One of them is considered to be the right to dress freely because the government has imposed rules such as compulsory hijab. According to Gashtili (2013), due to such policies, the sex-segregation has occurred in public places and men view public spaces as their original field. Consequently, more men are able to assault women in public spaces, and fewer women feel safe in that area.

Skeptics and optimists

In fact, some of the supporters of Islamic feminism claim that a situation has arisen in which a Muslim woman needs to abandon her faith to become a feminist. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, many feminists fled the country because they believed that the strict religious regulations imposed in Iran oppressed women, that is, it was incompatible with feminism. "Feminism is a secular concept, and Islam does not accept secular interpretations," historian Maxim Ilyin explains the position of Western feminism. According to him, this makes the Muslim woman, who calls herself a feminist in the Western sense, practically a traitor to her religion (Ilyin *cited in* Dogadina, 2018).

Moreover, in the article written by Gashtili (2013, p. 129), it is claimed that “Hammed Shahidian by repeating the words of Tibi, describes Islam as a ‘strict, uncompromising monotheism’. With this description, Shahidian recognizes the limit of any interpretation of Islam on woman-centered or feminist bases. He sees dismissals of historical narratives, reinterpretation of the Quran, or even independent reasoning (ijtihad), all working in the same direction, which is leaving women's rights contingent upon interpretations, and as a result, making women vulnerable.”

On the other hand, scholars such as Afsaneh Najmabadi are highly optimistic regarding Islamic feminists to reinterpret Islamic sources. If we take a case of Saudi Arabia, it can be seen that it has gone through some changes after the 1991 Gulf War. More workplaces have opened their doors for women, such as advertising, broadcasting, and journalism. Consequently, a question about the possibility of future government enforcement on sex-segregation has arisen. According to one of the Programs Department Director at the Institute of Public Administration the answer is negative because economic necessity will eventually break sex-segregation barriers (Doumato, 1999).

Moreover, while some Islamic feminists argue that after the revolution of Iran the situation of Iranian women has worsened, others believe that there are some improvements happened in favor of them. For instance, the number of women working in public spheres increased significantly and this is because activists have been advocating for changes as well as the regime’s ability to adjust (Gashtili, 2013).

In the North Caucasus, crippling practices, early marriages, domestic violence and honor killings, which are justified by religious traditions, flourish. Nevertheless, some researchers believe that Islam in the North Caucasus is becoming more modernized and with its help, a new generation rebels against tradition. For instance, while the elders pay attention on things like how far away from the woman to sit, how to play the wedding, whether the female is a virgin or not, the younger generation no longer always agrees with this.

As it was mentioned above, domestic violence is regarded as a huge problem in Muslim-majority countries because in most cases, women stay silent and do not report about domestic abuse to the local authorities. As a result, some activists in the North Caucasus started to take actions and regularly urge religious leaders to explain to the population that violence is not related to Islam. Muslim women's organizations in the region often do not identify themselves as feminists but still try to solve issues of this particular agenda such as to combat the problem of domestic violence.

In some cases, they directly claim that their mission is to form a more perfect society in which men and women have equal rights and opportunities. “Irina Kosterina argues that if domestic violence occurs in one family, then, in contrast to the unsuccessful parental model, young Muslim woman will probably marry later or even abandon the marriage if she understands that violence and control cannot be avoided and this is in a way an accessible form of protest against existing norms” (Dogadina, 2018).

Even though, the list of activists and supporters of Islamic feminism is increasing day by day, the effectiveness of their actions is still under a big question. According to Shahidian, the actions that are done by Islamic feminists may change the form of patriarchal domination, but it will not generate the gender equality (Shahidian *cited in* Gashtili, 2013).

Besides, according to Moghissi, while a number of people falsely come up to the conclusion that changes that have taken place in Muslim societies illustrate that Islam is compatible with gender equality, the correct conclusion would be that Islamic fundamentalism simply has had no other choice except for compromising its utopia (Moghissi *cited in* Gashtili, 2013).

Final considerations and conclusion

In this paper, I looked at different perspectives of Islamic feminism as well as discussed the views of supporters and skeptics. As can be seen, there are several problems that occur while talking about Islamic feminism. Consequently, I tend to agree with the group that is skeptical about Islamic feminism. In this case, I have several issues to discuss.

First of all, it is important to look at the meaning of wearing a headscarf. A number of people argue that wearing hijab is a conscious decision made by women. However, this argument can be questioned because sometimes women can be forced. I do not claim that all women wear hijab because they were forced, but the enforcement element should not be excluded in some cases. For example, even though women in Iran, especially Islamic feminists, were able to transform the compulsory hijab into a fashionable style which is far from what the Islamic Republic regards as applicable, it is still imposed. Due to such policies, Iranian women, particularly young women, struggle on a daily basis. According to Gashtili (2013), there are hired people who stand at the entrance of public buildings such as universities and check whether women are dressed according to the government’s standards or not. In some places mobile vans can be found, playing the role

of women dress checker. If a woman does not wear hijab according to the government's standards, then, there are possibilities of her being treated as someone who has committed a crime. Thus, it can be seen that wearing hijab is not always a conscious decision made by women rather it can sometimes be considered as enforcement and, thus, as inequality between genders. I view it as inequality because even though Iranian women were able not to obey to the Islamic dress code supported by fundamentalists, they still cannot freely wear what they want. As Gashtili (2013) wrote, even though their basic rights were taken away, we still feel proud about the small accomplishments of these brave women, just because we do not view them just as women, but rather Muslim women, and that, unfortunately, makes us have lower our expectations.

Another evidence about which I would like to talk is a philosophical one and it is concerned with the possibilities of feminism to fit in Islam. As it was mentioned, supporters of Islamic feminism believe that the source for Muslim activism can only derive from sacred texts. One of the activists, Margot Badran, thinks that Islamic feminism originates its understanding from the Quran and seeks rights and justice for women and for men there (Badran, 2009).

But is it actually true? “**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.**” (Kathir, 2006). In other words, what is written in this Surah does not mean that a man is allowed to be a home tyrant, since his rights are limited by the requirements of religion, but at the same time he is the main one in the family. Consequently, it means that Allah granted men more natural leadership opportunities than women and children. It is written that men should guide and advise women, but there is no verse in the Quran that favors

women being as advisers of men. “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” (Mukhamedzhanov, 2015). As for material support, a woman is provided for by a father before marriage, and by a husband after marriage. There is no obligation to provide material support to the family. “This is not so much about the superiority of men over women, but rather, the distribution of responsibilities in the family. But in this verse, there is a hint that the family is a single whole, since Allah says: *بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ* (one has a degree (of advantage) over other), emphasizing that ‘one and the other’ are parts of a single whole, in spite of a certain hierarchy. Similarly, Umma, a Muslim society, although has a ruler (amir), considered as a single whole. In other words, it is hierarchical, and everyone performs the work to which she or he is most adapted” (Mukhamedzhanov, 2015). Thus, the hierarchy, against which the Islamic feminists so vehemently protests, is laid down in Islamic society by Allah himself: “... the men have a degree over them (in responsibility and authority). And Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise.” (Quran).

In this regard, while this Surah is about different responsibilities of men and women, it clearly demonstrates that there is an inequality between men and women. It is due to the fact that difference in responsibilities and skills leads to other disparities, resulting in fully separate sexes with distinctive functions in the family and society. “This fixed identity of women and men in Islam is in contrast to pluralism, which is the requirement of feminism” (Gashtili, 2013, p.136).

The last but not least point which I want to mention is from personal experience. Gashtili (2013) in his paper wrote: “I believe that as long as the Islamic regime is at work, there cannot be true and universal equality between men and women. Feminism must be pluralist in its approach and true pluralism requires a secular state.” However, to some extent, I cannot fully agree with the last part of the statement. I live in Azerbaijan, which is a secular state, but over 91 percent of people in Azerbaijan are Muslims. Consequently, most of society are still traditionalists and adhere to some rules and traditions. For instance, even though there are no compulsory hijab and dress code, it is still “aib” for women to go out in defiant clothes. Thus, I claim that it is not enough to have just a secular state, but it is also important to look at the religious identity as well as the mindset of

population. Mindset of the population is worth mentioning since a significant difference can be observed between older and younger generations. As it was mentioned previously, in the North Caucasus, Islam is gradually becoming modernized as new generations reject the traditions past down from older generations. I can see that the thinking of Azerbaijani youth is different from that of the older generation. Most young people, especially females, try to promote equal rights and fight against “patriarchy” that exists in our society.

All in all, I think that although Islamic feminists have reached some changes, these changes not enough to overcome patriarchy dominating in almost all Muslim countries. To achieve significant results more efforts should be put and it may take a long time. What Islamic feminists are doing now is simply insufficient for achieving greater changes. In this regard, I argue that Islamic activists should go much further and fight for their rights not on the basis that they are Muslim women, but because they are first of all human beings.

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