

Islamic Feminism Revisited

Haideh Moghissi

Over a year has passed since millions of Iranian people poured into the streets protesting the rigged presidential elections that reinstated Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in office for a second term. The powerful yet remarkably nonviolent protest movement, in particular the images of beautiful young women at the front rows of street demonstrations, their clearly secular appearances, their courageous encounters with police and plain-clothed thugs, and the killing of a young woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, whose murder was captured on camera, mesmerized the world. These images helped challenge the long-held perceptions about religion-steeped “Muslim” women and the political and emotional attachment of people to the Islamic state and its values and practices. The protests also helped silence, temporarily at least, the cultural relativist academics and commentators who since the mid-1990s had been beating the drums of secularism’s end in Iran and had tried to push Islamic feminism as the only homegrown, locally produced, and hence culturally suitable project for changing the lot of women in Iran and indeed in Muslim-majority countries.

The ebbing of the street protests under the brutal pressure of security forces and the pushing underground of all forms of opposition, however, seem to have resuscitated those who support Islam as the Middle Eastern version of *liberation theology*. For more than a decade the proponents of the idea, through their “field research,” documentaries, and reports and in total disregard for the loud voices of the overwhelming majority of urban women (and men) with or without faith inside Iran, wittingly or unwittingly lobbied on behalf of Islamists’ projects. Contrary evidence for what women wanted did not stand in the way of their theorization because it had a market in the West that perceives Middle Easterners as faceless, thoughtless crowds of Muslims, at the grips of a strange and unknowable religion. The stale debate over the potentials of Islamic feminism for Iranian women was reintroduced in a Persian-language BBC television program, *Pargar* (29 June 2010) demonstrating that these views still have a market. Perhaps this is the case more now that Iranians’ revolt against the clerical state has been aborted, to the delight of the foolish leftist analysts in the West, who, blinded by Ahmadinejad’s anti-West rhetoric, have branded the change-seeking revolt in Iran as the frustration of well-to-do middle-class youth against the hero of the Iranian proletariat.¹ Regardless of the intentions of the BBC program’s producers, and the value of one die-hard supporter’s arguments for the Islamic feminist project, a further elaboration of the key points in the Islamic feminism debate is warranted.

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1. For a critical analysis of the supporters of Ahmadinejad among the Left in the West, see Saeed Rahnema, “The Tragedy of the Left Discourse on Iran,” *Zed Net*, www.zcommunications.org/the-tragedy-of-the-lefts-discourse-on-iran-by-saeed-rahnema (July 2009).

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Islamic feminism, as a concept, found currency in the mid-1990s, when it was used to distinguish a brand of feminism or the activities of Muslim women seeking to reform, in women's favor, social practices and legal provisions that rule Muslim societies. Amid prevailing reports on extreme forms of restrictions imposed on women in Muslim societies, it was encouraging that the focus had shifted to speak of the spirit, the strength, the resilience, and the agency of Muslim women. The reality of women's resistance against rigid religious and cultural practices and their ingenuity in finding ways to cross the male-serving legal and social boundaries must be recognized, recorded, and discussed, for they give heart to others who struggle against different forms of domination and oppression.

What was and still is disturbing, however, is the lack of balance in most of the affirmative accounts of Muslim women's activism. Many proponents of Muslim women's agency and Islamic feminist projects avoid any discussion of oppressive gender practices and seem to disapprove of a critical analysis of the Sharia-based reforms that are central to the Islamic feminist agenda. My concern has been and continues to be that the uncritical acceptance of Islamic feminism as a new liberatory project in Islamic societies is not in the service of women's cause.² The push for promoting Islamic feminism, I fear, is not really opening new possibilities for feminists to hear different voices and to encourage, welcome, and learn about new ideas and divergent strategies in specific cultural and political contexts. It is not by engaging in a mutually respectful and constructive dialogue, promoting a climate of critical thinking within feminism, finding common ground, or strategizing to achieve specific goals that women are empowered and the struggle for gender justice is elevated. The euphoric emphasis on Islamic feminism reflects, rather, a romanticized notion of Islam and an Islamic frame as an alternative way of being and acting for change, to the detriment of all secular projects. It has an intimidating and silencing effect and discourages

serious dialogue about the possibilities and limitations of feminist projects of different sorts for Muslim societies.

To many secular feminists in and from Islamic cultures, including myself, this tendency reflects an essentialized notion of women in Islamic cultures as an undifferentiated crowd, united by their faith, regardless of whether they are practicing Muslims. They are all "Muslim" because they live in Muslim societies and that explains it all. Obviously, if we consider women in Muslim societies as *different* and take that difference to be absolute and final, and see Islam as the only defining factor in their identity and their lives, we will not listen to or even hear the many voices that are raised against the authority of Islamic Sharia and its legal practices in defining people's social and moral actions. Such a frame of mind obscures the diversity of women's class status, ethnic origin, rural or urban location, and social and moral standards and the different aspirations and life choices that are granted to women everywhere else. This is the result of pure imagination. Indeed, "imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away," as Edward Said noted.³ Overlooking the many different factors that divide rather than unite women in Islamic cultures, the tendency sometimes appears as a push to force Islam on women and to treat the skeptics as outsiders to their own culture. One wonders whether the term *Christian women*, or for that matter *Christian feminism*, as a frame of reference for identifying all women and all feminists in Western Christian societies would be as acceptable and justified as the identifier *Muslim women* is in reference to women in the Middle East.

This totalizing tendency is not confined only to academic settings. After participating in a debate on CBC Radio about the *hijab* and women's legal rights in Islamic cultures, the moderator asked me if I wouldn't have more

2. I discuss this view in more detail in Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

3. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 55.

credibility if I stayed within the boundaries of “my culture” and used an Islamic conceptual framework to discuss women’s rights issues. Obviously, my critical views about gender politics and sexuality under Islamic rule irritated him since they did not fit his perceptions and expectations. This was not my first experience with individuals inside or outside the academy who feel uncomfortable, even resentful, of arguments that diverge sharply from accepted and internalized conceptions of “Muslim women.” They expect that people from Muslim societies represent their societies’ cultural values, the main ingredient of which is assumed to be their Islamic content. That is why they tend to take as authentic and representative of a community’s cultural values only the voices that reflect the dominant religious ideology. Only the voices that fit perceived ideas and expectations regarding Islam and women from Muslim societies are considered as the insiders’ voice and deserve to be heard. In other words, some people have the right to cultural representation and some don’t, depending on whether what they say confirms preexisting images and expectations about a society or a community. In the exchange mentioned above, I was seemingly out of line with my own culture. After all, as a woman from the Middle East, I was expected to remain true to my “culture”—and Islam is supposedly all that there is to my culture. Not only had I committed the mistake of drawing attention to differences among people from Muslim societies on Islam’s gender practices, but by speaking critically of those practices, I had transgressed the intellectual and conceptual line that protects critical thinking as the domain of Western scholars.

Feminism now includes many brands, both conservative and radical, religious and atheist, heterosexual and nonheterosexual, white and nonwhite, issue-oriented and holistic, individualistic and community-oriented, North and South. So it certainly has room for yet another brand of feminism that is self-identified or identified by others as “Islamic feminism.” I think that this point needs no further argument. The concern

is about the careless and totalizing use of the term *Muslim women*, which throughout Muslim societies encompasses distinct groups of women. The Islamic feminists’ agenda is not necessarily embraced by all of them. It is embraced even less by secular women who may or may not practice Islamic rituals in their daily life but do not see a need for the interference of religion in civic life. They do not believe in the applicability of Sharia in this time and age and have divergent views on the obstacles to the best strategy for achieving gender equality. For example, in elaborating the identifier, Islamic feminism in the context of gender politics in Iran, I have suggested that the term *Muslim women* is often used by some Iranian academics including different groups of politically active Muslim women who may or may not embrace feminism. I have argued that in their hands, the term *Muslim women* turns into precisely the sort of “one size fits all” concept that flattens the diverse material conditions and ideological configurations experienced by the Iranian female population.⁴ They include, for example, a group of Muslim female elite, torchbearers of the Islamists, with very rigid, traditional views on gender issues. They accept Islamic Sharia and its promises for women’s rights tout court. A few examples of women in this group are Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini’s daughter Farideh Mostafavi and her associates in the Society of Women of the Islamic Republic; Malakeh Yazdi, the daughter of former chief justice Ayatollah Muhammad Yazdi; and female members of Hezbollah, who have been used to attack other women in demonstrations and close down newspapers since Iran’s 1979 revolution. The “Muslim women” in the second group are also part of the established order, if only slightly more removed from the points of command. Educational opportunities and a newly acquired involvement in public life have brought them face-to-face with their male counterparts’ masculinist values and demeaning practices. I have argued that this group’s activities, regardless of political intentions, are a hopeful sign; they may help get the regime they support to

4. For more discussion of this subject, see Haideh Moghissi, “Émigré Iranian Feminism and the Construction of Muslim Woman,” in *Émigré Feminism: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Alena Heitlinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 189–207.

remove some gender-based educational and employment barriers. Former parliament deputies, such as Maryam Behroozi, Marzieh Dabbagh, Ateqeh Rajabi, Fatemeh Haghighatjou, and others in their circles, can be counted among this group. The women in the third group, while loyal to the Islamic regime and the values for which it stands, are critical of its treatment of women and try to soften its gender-oppressive policies. These women hope to reform Islamic Sharia in favor of women, and they are the ones who may be identified as *Muslim feminists*. That is, they are Muslim women who, while embracing Islamic ideology as liberating, are genuinely trying to promote women's rights within the confines of Islamic Sharia by proposing a more moderate and more female-centered interpretation of the Koran. Shahla Sherkat and her associates, the editors of now closed women's journals, such as *Zanan* and *Farzaneh*, and Zahra Rahnavard are examples of this group. I should add, however, that the term, as it is used, also includes many secular women who, for lack of any other allowed discourse, have had to use Islamic discourse to articulate women's demands. The feminist lawyer and human rights activist Mehrangiz Kar, who has now been forced to take residency in the United States, is a case in point. So, too, is the Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi, despite the fact that in her post-Nobel interviews for political expediency, she often feels compelled to stress her Muslim identity. In any case, my point is that women in all these different, diverse, and often opposing categories should not be identified as *Muslim women* because the term denotes specific relations and perceptions.

To cloud differences among these women and suggest that their activism on gender issues, regardless of its goal, makes them "feminist" activists is, at best, misleading. For the "agency" of some of them is positively damaging to feminists' struggles for gender equity, dignity, and basic human rights. This is not to deny the im-

portance of the specific historical and political contexts within which *agency* should be defined or to discard even the smallest gains beneficial to women, such as the increase in women's public presence in schools and the workforce achieved under rigid Islamic rule. But neither should *agency* be redefined in such a broad sense that it erodes the importance of conscious resistance against domination.

To elaborate this point further, the emphasis on agency, it is suggested, generally has been a rhetorical device in sociology to counter deterministic accounts of human activity. It has been a means to celebrate the independent power of individuals in relation "to whatever might be cited as a possible constraint upon [them]."⁵ Hence even when we simply follow rules or norms we manifest our agency. It is perhaps based on this understanding that Saba Mahmood proposes that agency should be taken not as "a synonym for resistance to relations of domination" but as "a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create."⁶ I propose a different account of agency, however, one that takes more seriously than Mahmood's definition the "individual powers to reason and to choose" and the ability "to behave as independent, autonomous human beings," notwithstanding the fact of "the susceptibility of individuals to social influences and pressures."⁷ That is, feminism represents a moral vision and a movement central to which are the struggles for personal and social transformation and activism on behalf of individual women and women as a group to change legal and cultural constraints and gender practices in favor of women. Agency can mean acting "otherwise," or not in conformity to the status quo.⁸ To put it simply, the element of conscious action against forces of domination has to be retained in our definition of agency. That is, agency is acting not only *by* but *for* women. Besides, the question of who benefits from women's agency should be of particular importance in the con-

5. Barry Barnes, *Understanding Agency: Social Theory and Responsible Action* (London: Sage, 2000), 48–49.

6. Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections of the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001): 202–36, cited in Therese Saliba, introduction to *Gen-*

der, Politics, and Islam, ed. Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4.

7. Barnes, *Understanding Agency*, 50.

8. Judith Kegan Gardiner, ed., introduction to *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 2.

text that agency is acting on behalf of women as a group. Otherwise, women's expression of agency is celebrated each time they leave the house to participate in religious practices or in demonstrations, or they follow orders or rules set by religious leaders or the state, or even when they function as auxiliaries or agents of patriarchal domination and control. As is well known, women can be used effectively in the production and exercise of the most undemocratic, misogynist values and policies and in the rise and consolidation of fascist-type movements and regimes. This agency, as such, does not deserve validation and blessing, except by those who benefit from it to consolidate their power and control over others. In other words, the intent and the content of the agency should matter. For women, having agency should include moving in the direction of identifying the forces that limit their capacity to have control over their lives and make informed choices within specific cultural and political contexts, to transform the conditions that reduce and weaken that capacity. Obviously, resistance against domination is central to this definition of *agency* regardless of the form and intensity of the resistance.

A major complaint of some who have entered the debate about Islamic feminism is that the secularist side (myself included) is dismissive of Muslim women's agency. Asma Barlas, for instance, writes angrily that in my book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* Muslim women "come across as wretched dupes . . . they have no agency or independence."⁹ She also writes that I find it hard to approach Islam with an open mind because I am an "Iranian" and my "standpoint epistemology" prevents me from being open-minded. Aside from this extraordinarily poor logic of dismissing an argument because of a person's national origin, it is simply an inaccurate reading of my argument, to say the least.

The charge that secularists "are disdainful of the agency of Muslim feminists" and "unappreciative of women's resistance" and that

they consider the efforts of Muslim feminist scholars futile is made by Valentine Moghadam, in her presentation of bits and pieces of the debates over the issue among Iranian feminists.¹⁰ I would argue that this is a rather careless, if not deliberate, misrepresentation by Moghadam of the range of views she identifies as anti-Islamic feminism. In fact, I was among the very few who, in the early 1990s, rejoiced at the voices of protest emerging from the ranks of Muslim women who had been essentially mobilized to present Islamic role models to the younger generation of the female population. I noted at the time: "The resistance of women from within the regime against the gender-based discrimination or even Islamization methods indicates a reawakening of women and their will to change their conditions." And I added that "women's resistance and protest, in any form, is reason to rejoice for all Iranian feminists."¹¹ A more evenhanded reference to my argument would have shown that even in criticizing the Islamization policies of the clerical regime in Iran, I was quick to stress women's resistance: "None of what has been said, however, is to suggest that women have been the passive victims of the Islamization policies in Iran. To be sure, women since the Revolution have been at the forefront of the struggle to secure democracy for Iran."¹²

In discussing the compelling social and economic realities of the country and *the resistance of women* as the drive behind demands for gender equity, I have used the metaphor that the Islamic government has not opened the gates to women, women have jumped over the fence.¹³ I speak of "women's resistance" as an indication of "women's reawakening and their will to change their conditions," acknowledging and validating women's activism in its many forms, as an outcome of their conscious, intelligent, and admirably well-thought-out strategy to push back Islamization policies. By contrast, Moghadam focuses on the "*agitation* by activist Islamic women" (my emphasis) as the reason

9. Asma Barlas, "The Antinomies of 'Feminism' and 'Islam': The Limits of a Marxist Analysis," *Middle East Women's Studies Review* 18, nos. 1–2 (2002): 5.

10. Valentine Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate," in Saliba et al., *Gender, Politics, and Islam*, 15–51.

11. Haideh Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggle in a Male-defined Revolutionary Movement* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 184–85.

12. Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, 118–19.

13. Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, 183.

for lifting certain restrictions on women in the fields of education and employment.¹⁴ Worse, in her account of women's activism, not a single word is said about the resistance of hundreds of thousands of secular women who in words and deeds have challenged and continue to challenge the legal and moral authority of the Islamic clerics. The continuous battle over the *hijab* that is still fought in the streets of Tehran and other major cities between Islamic morality police and young women, after thirty years of its imposition on women, is a case in point. The difference between the two positions is that Moghadam and other promoters of Islamic feminism in Iran placed fantastic hopes in the transformation of the Islamist regime, particularly in a handful of Muslim female elites like Faezeh Rafsanjani, the daughter of the former conservative Iranian president, as the embodiment of Islamic feminism in Iran. By contrast, the secularists stressed the resistance of ordinary women and the campaign of the activists, without using the identifier "Muslim feminism," in the context of the country's contradictory social and political system.

My concern has been that overexcitement about Muslim women's agency and the push for the agenda of Islamic feminism, presenting it as *the* revolutionary and workable feminist strategy for the Middle East, reflects reduced expectations about what is achievable, or necessary, for women in Islamic cultures. This position is, in my view, defeatist. If Islam is seen as the only constituent ingredient in the culture of a region as diverse as the Middle East, then Islamic feminism seems not only workable but desirable as the only culturally viable alternative to West-initiated feminism. Hence only the voices that use Islam and an Islamic framework as their reference point are considered authentic and representative of women's agency in Muslim cultures. Identifying feminist secular projects as "Western," Homa Hoodfar places all her hope in Islamic feminists since, she argues, they "challenge and reform

the Islamic doctrine from within rather than advocating a Western model of gender relations."¹⁵ Worse, secularists' projects for women's liberation are condemned because, in Therese Saliba's words, they "treat religion in general and fundamentalism in particular as a problematic tool of oppression used against women, rather than as a viable form of feminist agency."¹⁶ Anouar Majid suggests that secularism and the idea of separation of state and church are Western phenomena, and a new form of Orientalism, which cannot be superimposed on Islamic cultures.¹⁷ Hence a "redefined Islam" is the viable alternative to the unrelenting process of Westernization and the sometimes extremist practices of fundamentalists.¹⁸ From this mind-set Islamic feminism would naturally seem to be "one of the best platforms from which to resist the effects of global capitalism."¹⁹ Majid's reference to Iran as the successful example of his proposed "redefined Islam" makes it clear what sort of Islam its redefined version will be. Margot Badran even advises that although Islamist movements are patriarchal and oppressive to women, women can find room to maneuver within the less extremist Islamist mainstream. To follow her suggestions, all we have to do is widen our definition of Islamism to see the "more liberal and progressive manifestations or radical (in a positive sense) potential of present political Islamic movements."²⁰

Obviously, we are dealing here with not only Islam but also Islamism, about which "open-mindedness" is urged. It should be clear why there is a concern that the rise of Islamic feminism and its academic celebration as a new liberatory ideology is not as innocent as it might appear. As Nadjé al-Ali argues, the portrayal of Islamists as the only alternative force to increasing Western encroachment, in the extreme manifestations of this tendency, means that these scholars "have been actively, if unwittingly, engaged in muting those groups and individuals who have opposed or reacted against Islamism."²¹

14. Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents," 20.

15. Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women," *Resources for Feminist Research* 22, nos. 3-4 (1993): 17.

16. Saliba, introduction to *Gender, Politics, and Islam*, 3.

17. Anouar Majid, "The Politics of Feminism in Islam," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23 (1998): 353.

18. *Ibid.*, 353.

19. *Ibid.*, 355.

20. Margot Badran, "Understanding Islam, Islamism, and Islamic Feminism," *Journal of Women's History* 13, no. 1 (2001): 48.

21. Nadjé al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender, and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

But no political development in the last two decades has convinced me that these concerns and the earlier probing into the nature of Islamic feminism as a transformative ideology and movement have been superfluous.²² We still need to analyze what kind of “Islam” and what sorts of relations with it are presumed. Do we mean “Islam” as a medium uniting women and the supposed cosmic power, in response to personal, gender-specific needs, or does the term instead entail a prescribed set of ideas, teachings, and texts as applied to women, indeed an entire preestablished moral and legal order? And how could religion, in this case Islam, which is based on gender hierarchy, be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women’s equality with men? If Islam and feminism are compatible, which one has to operate within the framework of the other?

These are pressing questions that need to be addressed in a serious dialogue about the limits and possibilities of alternative feminist projects in Islamic cultures. But Miriam Cooke, among others, seems to think that asking these questions is to conflate Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. Would that mean that we should avoid a critical engagement with Islamic feminism or with Islam, for that matter, lest we may sound critical of Islam itself for the stubborn survival of gender discrimination in Muslim societies? For as Leila Ahmed proposes, what matters is Islam’s ethical, egalitarian voice, not its legalistic voice.²³ But I would argue that in Muslim societies, particularly with the rise of Islamism, it is Islam’s legalistic voice that is heard, listened to, and obeyed, often by force of coercion, to the detriment of women. My concern has been that the scholars who harbor heady enthusiasm for Islamic feminism often neglect the crucial distinction between Islam as a legal and political system and Islam as spiritual and moral guidance. By focusing only on the latter, they unwittingly soften the sharp edges of the former.

It may be that Islamic feminism works “in ways emblematic of postcolonial women’s jockeying for space and power,” as Cooke suggests,

and that “the term Islamic feminist” might be an invitation to us “to consider what it means to have a difficult double commitment: on the one hand, to a faith position, and on the other hand, to women’s rights both inside the home and outside.”²⁴ But in my view, an analysis is needed of how these double commitments are going to express themselves in a noncontradictory and non-self-negating manner in a real-life situation. Presumably, Islamic feminism is not a philosophical concept to be debated only in an academic setting. It is a transformative ideology and a movement for addressing gender injustices in Muslim societies. Like any other revolutionary or transformative project, to be effective, it needs to have a clear and realistic assessment of its own weaknesses and strengths, identifying foreseeable obstacles and a well-thought-out strategy for how best to implement its agenda. An analysis of the complexities and contradictory aspects of the “double commitments” of Islamic feminism is crucial if it is to be the winning project in the political battle against the forces of oppression. My point is simply that jubilation over Islamic feminism would not allow impassionate analysis of the limitations and constraints of Islamic feminism as a “revolutionary project” for women’s liberation in the Middle East.

For example, it is perfectly legitimate to point out, as Qudisia Mirza does, that the idea of equality and its implications for the concept of sexual difference or sameness does not seem to inspire Islamic feminists to interrogate their own frame of reference. By refusing to incorporate the notion of difference into their own theorization and by presenting themselves as indigenous and authentic, untainted by Western concepts, Mirza rightly argues, Islamic feminists bypass the need for recognizing the heterogeneity of Muslim societies, inevitably considering irrelevant the concerns of women who are at the political margin of these societies.²⁵ Also entirely pertinent is the argument made by Shahrzad Mojab that “there is nothing sacred about veiling” and that it is completely

22. I analyze these points at length in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*.

23. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 238–39.

24. Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 57–59.

25. Qudisia Mirza, “Islamic Feminism, Possibilities and Limitations,” in *Law after Ground Zero*, ed. John Strawson (London: Glasshouse, 2002), 113.

proper to criticize the veil as a symbol of male domination and state power in Islamic societies, “even if all Muslim women voluntarily used it.”²⁶ It is quite appropriate to extend our critique to the Koran itself for the situation of women. As Ghada Karmi proposes, even though the Koran is not a misogynist document, it confirms and legitimizes the existing patriarchal structures in Arab societies. Besides, Karmi suggests, the seemingly contradictory verses that send mixed messages must be viewed in social and historical contexts and not as eternally applicable and unchanging.²⁷

Seen in this context, no legal tradition or cultural practice should be protected against a feminist critique simply because it has persisted for many centuries in Muslim societies or because the majority of the population has accepted it as just and appropriate or as inevitable. After all, unequal gender relations and women’s inferior cognitive capacity and subordination in private and public domains were also viewed as normal, just, and appropriate in Western societies, before sweeping economic and political forces of change altered the situation consistently in the previous century. Moreover, given that the doubting and questioning of Islamic legal practices are life-threatening activities in almost all Islamic societies, and the critical individual can be persecuted for blasphemy (*kofr*), the responsibility for opening a dialogue on these issues falls on the shoulders of the Middle Eastern scholars, inside or outside the academy, who live in the West, free of such threats.

Overemphasis on the Islamic frame for women’s rights struggles in the Middle East assumes feminism in the region to be a unique, particular, and exceptional category within the global feminist movement. Legal and social equality for women everywhere has been linked to the transformation of socioeconomic structures, secularism, the legally protected toleration of difference, recognition of and respect for individual freedoms, and an acceptance of individuals’ moral agency and ability to make their own

choices. But to proponents of Islamic feminism, even in the absence of such developments, achieving women’s rights seems plausible, provided, of course, that we reduce our expectations to fit the limits defined and implemented by a handful of Muslim elite in Muslim-majority societies. In other words, it is only when a feminist agenda for the Middle East is concerned that complacency and a dutiful following of social rules and norms are recommended. Obviously these scholars know what is best for women in Islamic cultures, and what is best for women is based on what they think they know about women in Islamic cultures. Therefore female seclusion and the coercive imposition of sex-segregation and the Islamic veil should not be seen as symbols of male control over female sexuality and moral conduct, emblematic of the objectification of women. They should not be regarded as instruments to limit women’s activities or to punish women for their imagined, omnipresent, active sexuality. Instead, we are advised to see the Islamic veil, for example, as a tool of female empowerment, or a “creative alternative” developed by women to increase their participation in public spaces, or as an anticonsumerist claim for women’s right to modesty, which protects them against sexual harassment.²⁸ However, I think it quite reasonable to ask why is it, then, that after thirty years of imposing mandatory veiling on Iranian women, ceaseless resistance against the Islamic veil has continued and its observance has to be monitored by police force and various legal and paralegal measures? Is it not that millions of young women who defy the veil code despite all threats and violent punishments do not see the Islamic veil as the tool of women’s empowerment?

No doubt the intention is to draw attention to Muslim women’s moral agency and challenge the colonial mentality that saw veiled women as nothing but victims of male aggression. But the point is that in the past the most extreme examples of Muslim women’s oppression were used to demonize Islam and Muslims in general, and at present the lives of Muslim female elites

26. Shahrzad Mojab, “‘Muslim’ Women and ‘Western’ Feminists: The Debate on Particulars and Universals,” *Monthly Review* 50, no. 7 (1998): 20, 26. See also Hammed Shahidian, *Women in Iran: Emerging Voices in the Women’s Movement* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), chap. 3.

27. Ghada Karmi, “Women, Islam, and Patriarchalism,” in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 69–83.

28. On the veil and modesty, see Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil, Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*. (Oxford, Berg 2000). On the veil and protection, see Lama Abu Odeh, “Post-colonial Feminism and the Veil: Thinking the Difference,” *New England Law Review* 26 (1992): 30–32.

and upper- and upper-middle-class women are being made an example of independent-minded, gender-conscious Muslim women who of their own free will choose the veil and do not face any barriers in social and political life. Behind such assertions is the notion that Middle Easterners are more religious than the rest of the world and that the rise of Islamist regimes and movements results from this religiosity and not social, economic, and political problems. If we go down this slope, then perhaps religion should also be considered an appropriate frame for women's movements in countries like the United States, where religious beliefs and the political influence of the Christian Right, such as the Moral Majority, are as noisy and energetic as the Islamic fundamentalist movements in Iran and Egypt. Evangelicals in the United States are estimated at 40–50 million, and more than two hundred Christian television stations and fifteen hundred Christian radio stations mobilize disenchanted Americans to support fundamentalist Christian values.²⁹ However, to my knowledge, no secular feminist scholar in the United States supports a religious program for improving women's rights in that country, although the discourse on the commercialization of women's bodies and their reproductive capacity and the sexual exploitation of women and increases in various forms of gender-based violence are not irrelevant to some feminist discourses. U.S. feminists do not forgive the Christian fundamentalists for their opposition to the equal rights amendment or their call for a constitutional restriction on abortion and legalization of prayers in public schools. It is curious that some of them find virtue in the Islamization policies in the Middle East. Why is a return to religion's bosom, with its clear-cut social and sexual division of labor and legally imposed gender roles, good only for women in the Middle East? This double standard explains why, apart from women who are devoted to Islam and Islamist projects, the most confident support for the suitability of Islam to women's rights comes from outside of Islamic societies, chiefly from secular women (and men), the West-

ern or Western-based scholars of Middle Eastern origin, who in any case do not live in Muslim societies.

The very simple point in the analysis of Islamic feminism from a secularist position is that women's resistance to patriarchal domination in Islamic cultures must be supported and assisted regardless of the form it takes. But as I have argued elsewhere, the best way to support the struggles of women in the Middle East is not to erase differences among them or play down the basic distinction between secular and Islamist visions. To privilege the voice of religion and celebrate "Islamic feminism" is to highlight only one of the many forms of identity available to Middle Eastern women, obscuring ways that identity is asserted or reclaimed, overshadowing forms of struggle outside religious practices, and silencing the secular voices that are raised against the region's stifling Islamization policies. Nor should the support preclude a critical engagement with the Islamic feminists' projects. For a critical engagement with Islamic feminist projects would demonstrate recognition and respect for Muslim women's political and moral agency and send a clear signal that Muslim feminists are considered competent partners in the debate over the limitations (or prospects) of a religious frame for woman's liberation. A paternalist silence and unconditional support for their agenda signals the opposite. S

29. For an elaborate discussion of Christian fundamentalism in the United States, see Davis S. New, *Holy War: The Rise of Militant Christian, Jewish, and Islamic Fundamentalism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002).