

## Letting Go of the Veil: Sites for Islamic Feminist Intervention in Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to highlight some of the most successful Islamic Feminist movements and organizations currently making progress in the META region (Middle East Northern African), in the hope of finding methodologies that could be effective in improving the lives of Muslim women in Saudi Arabia. By using Islamic feminism as a lens through which to view the oppression of women in Saudi Arabia, and other MENA countries, the reader's tendency toward an ethnocentric interpretation begins to diminish and a clearer picture of the trials and potential entrance points for empowerment begins to take shape. The goal of this research is to remove barriers of Western feminist ideologies in the effort to better understand the lives of Muslim women in Saudi Arabia.*

All too often in the Western discourse surrounding Muslim women, we hear arguments about liberating Islamic women from the "oppressive" restraints of the veil, but this is just one form, albeit one of the most visible forms, of the ways in which interpretations of the Qur'an impact the lives of Muslim women. My contention is that arguing over the hijab, burka, or other manifestations of the veil that hide Muslim women's bodies from the peering eyes of others, is likely the least impactful way to offer support and/or liberation to Muslim women, especially Muslim women that reside in the MENA (Middle East Northern African) region. If Western feminist activists truly want to provide support to these women, the way that we claim we do, I contend that we must look at the impact of Shari'a law on Islamic women's lives, and we need to do this from a standpoint that acknowledges and respects the deep religious and cultural traditions in these women's lives. Saudi Arabia is the country with perhaps the strictest implementation and interpretation of Shari'a law. Within the scope of this research, I am going to present examples from liberal Islamic feminist movements within the MENA region, with the hope of locating programs and approaches that could potentially be employed by women and feminists in Saudi Arabia in order to bring more opportunity and equality for Saudi women and girls. I will briefly outline the form of Shari'a law employed in Saudi Arabia and highlight some of its complex consequences for Saudi women. Then I will provide a discussion of different Islamic feminist<sup>1</sup> programs in the MENA region and suggest ways in which similar programs might positively impact the lives of Saudi women while respecting their cultural traditions and religiosity. I realize that if I want to resist my own biases and ethnocentrism (as a white Westerner), and avoid writing yet another critique of all things Muslim, I need to approach this paper through the lenses of Islamic feminist activism occurring in other Muslim countries. As my research progressed and I struggled with my own opinions, I was reminded of a lecture I once heard about productive community activism by Dr. Brian Stovall. Toward the end of the talk he said, "If you want to help, come in solidarity and not as a missionary." This sentiment has resonated within me as I have approached this area of research, and I have sought examples of Islamic feminism that work within the religious ideologies in place in Muslim majority countries, in order to leave my own ideologies out

1 According to IslamicFeminism.org, "Islamic feminism is a belief to provide the equality between male and female within the Islamic framework. Its goal is to offer equality without forcing women to choose between their religious ideology and their feminist ideals."

of it. Some of the organizations that I thought offered valuable insight into Islamic feminist activism were too new to have yet produced much scholarship, but I felt it necessary to include them because of the work they are doing in the MENA region. Every effort has been made to legitimize the research presented within this project and more scholarship must be done on some of the newer movements within Islamic feminist activism.

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy located in the Middle East that is founded with Shari'a law as its form of government. Shari'a law is a legal code based on interpretations of the Qur'an and other Islamic religious texts, which covers all areas of the legal system in many Islamic majority countries (criminal, civil, and family laws are not separated as they are in many other countries). Historically these governing ideologies have been used to justify cruel punishments like amputation and stoning, as well as unequal treatments of women regarding their form of dress, inheritance, legal support in domestic disputes, and independence (Mtango, Ahmandi, Baki, Kelly). In Saudi Arabia, one of the most fundamentally Islamic countries, women are forbidden to interact in mixed gender spaces, which restricts their ability move around freely at their will and seek the opportunities that men can take advantage of. In Saudi Arabia, gender segregation takes place by the time a child is around the age of 7; all public spaces are segregated as a matter of law (Mtango 55). Women are under the guardianship of their husbands or fathers and need their guardian's permission to take a bus, a plane, or to enroll in educational programs (Mtango, Baki, Deif, Al-Hariri). To insure that men cannot inadvertently see them unveiled, women are not permitted to drive. Women are allowed to vote by law, but in practice, voting is impossible because polling locations are spaces where men are present, so a woman cannot legally attend (Mtango). Women cannot attend the same universities as men, and as a complication of the lack of female academics to teach young women, and the lack of value placed on educating women, women's universities are not providing an equitable education as that of men's universities. As researcher Sifa Mtango notes, it is commonly believed that, "girls should ideally be educated in the Qur'an and in raising a family and housekeeping. University studies should not be necessary, since at this age a woman should be married – all other things that prevent a woman from realizing her responsibilities as a wife and mother should be considered forbidden" (56). Women's lack of literacy is problematic in Saudi Arabia, as many girls and young women are confined to the home during the time when many of their male counterparts are gaining an education. The above are just a small sampling of the oppressive forces in play as a result of Shari'a law's interpretation in Saudi Arabia. The scope of this project does not allow for a more exhaustive listing of the complexities of gender segregation and its numerous other consequences in the lives of Saudi women, but I believe the reader can understand the complexities at play.

After reading the above passage, it is tempting to collectively mount our Western high horses and slander the Qur'an, and its implications on Muslim women's lives, and try to come to their "rescue." But I turn to Lila Abu-Lughod as she discusses this issue in her article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving," as she argues that we must recognize and respect,

differences – precisely as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires. We may want justice for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision as best. We must consider that they might be called to personhood, so to speak, in a different language (786-87).

In an effort to follow Abu-Lughod's lead, one example of Islamic feminist activism in the MENA region that both respects Muslim ideologies and works for women's rights would be the critical reimagining of Qur'an by feminist theorists in Iran. In her article, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context" Fereshteh Ahmadi describes the recent movement

by Iranian women, "whether religiously observant or secular, rich or poor, or with little or extensive education have spared no effort to win back, inch by inch, the grounds which they lost through 're-islamization' policies in Iran"(33). One way in which Iranian feminists have done this work is by the Islamic processes of *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an). Women in Iran are still far from achieving full equality to their male counterparts, but through a critical analysis of the religious text of Islam, they are making strides to gain more footing toward full citizenship. Iran has seen a growing number of women's organizations and institutions over the past decade, including a women's journal called *Zanan*. *Zanan's* mission is to offer an Islamic feminist rethinking (often a radical rethinking) of the historically sexist interpretations within the Qur'an. Perhaps the area in which *Zanan's* work might be the most helpful for Saudi women to draw inspiration, is its ability to use the theoretical tools from Abdol Karim Soroush (a well renowned and respected Islamic theorist) to reinvestigate religious texts with a focus on gender. This theoretical analysis of the Qur'an insures that a reimagining of the religious tradition, "takes Islam, not the West, as its source of legitimacy"(38). Through this lens, Islamic feminists in Iran can argue "those verses of the Qur'an that clerics use to undermine women's rights and reflect some limited experiences of Mohammed's personal life were only valuable for a limited historical period and therefore are not applicable for our modern time"(42). Azam Taleqani, a former member of Islamic Republic's Parliament and director of the Islam's women's institute, contends "men always interpret the Qur'an to their own benefit," and stresses "the social context in which the Qur'anic laws came into being has completely changed, and thus a new interpretation of the Qur'an is necessary"(42). For some Iranian Islamic feminists, employing accepted methods of critical analysis of the Qur'an and Islamic traditions of interpretation as their foundational supports, they have found a way to start a conversation about gender inequality. This movement has inspired more Iranian women, and women from other MENA areas, to develop their own reimagining of the holy works that govern their lives and could positively impact the fundamental interpretation of the Qur'an and Shari'a law for women in Saudi Arabia. By working within a secular and Islamic framework, Islamic feminists are challenging the sexist status quo without pushing a Western agenda, which in all likelihood, would immediately undercut their mission toward equality.

Another movement that is pushing for a reimagining of Shari'a law is *Musawah* (which translates to 'equality' in Arabic). *Musawah* was founded six years ago by a diverse group of twelve Muslim women and is currently based in Malaysia. This group also pushes for a reinvestigation and reinterpretation of the Islamic texts. This global organization stands upon the belief that Islam "is not inherently biased toward men: patriarchy within Muslim countries is a result of they way male interpreters have read Islamic texts [and encourages] women to shape the interpretations, norms and laws that affect their lives, then push for legal reform in their respective communities"(Segran). Due to the lack of literacy among many Muslim women, women, as a result, have not been involved in the practice of interpreting the Qur'an, and the *Musawah* are challenging this tradition by inviting women into the Qur'an. The *Musawah* holds workshops and produces books to educate Islamic women about the ways in which the religious laws can be interpreted, and often are the first to point out to a woman that her oppression is not inherently justified by Islamic teachings. For example, many Muslim women fear that they may contract AIDS from their husbands, but fear that they will be guilty of *nushuz* (wifely disobedience) if they refuse to have intercourse or request that their husbands wear a condom. A reinterpretation of the Qur'an suggests *iddribuhunna* can mean "to go separate ways" (instead of the historical meaning "to beat"), which provides that a woman can leave her husband under exceptional circumstances (Seagan). Educating Muslim women on the Qur'an and encouraging them to participate in an analysis of the religious work, provides them with important tools to negotiate for their rights within marriage.

Some Muslim men are more likely to respond to a religious call to change their behavior than a personal one. *Musawah's* mission includes persuading Muslims that "Shari'a laws are not divine but subject to discussion" (Segran). One of the founders of *Musawah* discussed this when she said, "We want to emphasize that everything we understand of Islam comes from human intervention with the word of God. Human engagement with the divine text produces laws that are fallible and open to change, given changing times and circumstances" (Segran). *Musawah* is helping to lead the charge for women and other Islamic feminists to reclaim their right to interpret the Qur'an with a focus toward more gender equality. As was mentioned earlier, literacy is a problematic issue for many women in Islam as it limits a woman's ability to read the Qur'an for herself and investigate her own interactions with the religion. I was unable to find much scholarship on the *Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL)*, but did locate an article discussing the impact their courses in basic health and education have in the lives of Afghan women. *AIL* focuses on a "neutral reading of the Qur'an" so that Afghan women can form their own interpretations, in the hopes that they are then more empowered to negotiate, and better able to advocate for themselves (Coleman). Saudi Arabian women could benefit from this sort of "neutral" reimagining of the Qur'an, as well as a higher standard of basic literacy, so that they may investigate religious texts for themselves.

The examples given thus far have highlighted movements to encourage Muslim women and feminist men to reinterpret the Qur'an and other Islamic religious texts within an Islamic framework, with the purpose of reimagining gendered meanings of the texts themselves. With powerful and personal interaction with the religious texts, Muslim women across the MENA region have begun to organize for political change. Examples of this activism include: Jordanian women demonstrating to protest a law that would allow for rape charges to be dropped if the rapist marries the survivor, thousands of Tunisian women marching to push for more gender equality in the new constitution, Sudanese women uniting in a silent human wall to protest the detention of women imprisoned for anti-government activism, and Saudi women demonstrating publically for new domestic abuse legislation and a change to the laws that ban them from driving (Segran). One of the most progressive examples of the success of an Islamic feminist reimagining of the Qur'an can be found in the 2014 implementation of new family law codes passed in Morocco. Researchers Valentine Moghadam and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi outline the impact of Morocco's legal reform in their article, "Reforming Family Laws to Promote Progress in the Middle East and North Africa." The combination of both an increase of women elected to parliament and a king committed to women's rights, Morocco was able to pass reform that offered much more protection and equity for women and children. The "New Family Law" in Morocco offers the following (paraphrased from translation of the Family Law):

husband and wife share joint responsibility for the family, wife is no longer obligated to obey the husband, an adult woman can have 'self-guardianship', the right to divorce for either husband or wife, divorce by mutual consent, a wife must agree to marry and can negotiate a marriage contract (which can prohibit the husband from taking other wives), wife can retain custody of children in divorce, minimum age of marriage for both men and women is 18, (Moghadam and Roudi-Fahimi).

This legislation sets Morocco apart from other implementations of Shari'a law where women are positioned as the legal dependent of their husbands, fathers, or brothers, and this legal dependency within the home is being used to justify her "second-class citizenship" outside of the home as well. Scholars of Morocco's new legislation acknowledge its success is due to the fact that feminist coalitions and lobbyists used Islamic traditions and frameworks to defend their cause and conditions. While Morocco has the advantage of supportive leadership in parliament and the crown, an environment not present in many other MENA countries, the

methods employed in Morocco can be tailored in other places to fight for equality.

Throughout this glance into the various Islamic feminist movements occurring across the MENA region, we can find instances of success and hope for the advancement of equality for women living under strict Shari'a legal systems. For women in Saudi Arabia, and for the feminist activists interested in advancing the progress toward equality in Saudi Arabia, respect must be paid to the sociocultural traditions valuable to the lives of Muslim women. By locating progressive feminist movements in other Islamic states, women in Saudi Arabia might find ways to educate themselves with the Qur'an and other religious texts with the hope that they may agitate for more equity within the framework of their belief systems. They may also draw inspirations from other Islamic feminists about the best methods for analyzing and arguing for a less sexist interpretation of these religious works as they impact Shari'a law and the enforcement of Islamic law inside their homes. As with most feminist research, Islamic feminist activism finds women's lack of access to education situated at the root of their oppression, but it also suggests the ways in which women can educate each other and take steps toward empowerment, inch by powerful inch.

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