Islamic Feminism: a new feminist movement or a strategy by women for acquiring rights?*

Amal Grami

a University of Manouba, Tunis, Tunisia

Published online: 15 Jan 2013.

To cite this article: Amal Grami (2013) Islamic Feminism: a new feminist movement or a strategy by women for acquiring rights?*, Contemporary Arab Affairs, 6:1, 102-113, DOI: 10.1080/17550912.2012.757851

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2012.757851
Islamic Feminism: a new feminist movement or a strategy by women for acquiring rights?*

Amal Grami**

University of Manouba, Tunis, Tunisia

This article focuses on the phenomenon of Islamic feminism. It provides a detailed summary of the defining theories and objectives of the movement and its role in contributing to raising awareness and as an agent for change as well. It highlights the expanding boundaries of the phenomenon and the implications this has had on its content, orientation, and role in a world where globalization and Islamophobia are affecting the process of developing Islamic feminism. The article traces the factors that contributed to the rise of Islamic feminism and explores how these interacted to produce the phenomenon in the changing contexts. It analyses the inherent problems in the movement and its argument from a critical point of view. The article concludes by asking a number of questions that help in understanding the nature and the limitations of Islamic feminism, its role, social, religious, political and academic implications.

Keywords: Islamic feminism; secular feminism; Arab feminism; modernity; problems of the feminist movement; Islam and women; women activism

Introduction

Every now and then, the current of anti-modernization issues new and questionable notions and terms, such as the ‘Islamic Declaration for Human Rights’, ‘Islamic Democracy’, ‘Islamic Socialism’, and so on. The creation of such new formulations is, however, not limited to this current; the Islamic world is at the receiving end of an onslaught of Islam-related concepts and terms, such as ‘Islamophobia’, ‘gender jihad’ and others. The most recent of these is ‘Islamic Feminism’, which is defined as a cross-border movement that brings together all Muslim women seeking to ‘redefine their identity in a more genuinely modern manner that befits their religion and culture’ (Yazbek Haddad and Esposito 2003, 13). The women involved insist on their rights and refuse to sacrifice them for the benefit of hardline fundamentalism.

The geographic area of Islamic Feminism has expanded to include North America, a number of Asian, African, Arab and European countries, in addition to individual women from various backgrounds and professions who decided to join the movement. Some of these women lived under colonial rule and witnessed national struggles, while others did not; some are veiled, others are not; some are Muslims from the heartland; others are from the Diaspora; some are Arab Muslims, some are non-Arab. The movement’s leaders see this variety as an asset, symbolizing a break in the psychological barrier that forms an obstacle between activists on women’s issues from different backgrounds, in light of the fact that secular feminists have often had difficulties dealing with Islamic activists, and vice versa. Moreover, the movement’s leaders believe

*Translated from Arabic.
**Email: amel_grami@yahoo.com
that, by virtue of its establishment in both Eastern and Western worlds, Islamic Feminism has succeeded in overcoming the East–West dichotomy.

Those who follow the writings and statements of the movement’s members realize that some openly declare their allegiance to it and believe in its objectives, while others accept its main principles but are embarrassed by its name and try to justify their position. However, despite their different fields of expertise and geographic and cultural backgrounds, these women are united by the fact that they belong to the generation that benefitted the most from education, and have therefore an awareness of their rights, albeit at varying levels.

**Coining the term and the problems it raises**

A number of factors, some political, others ideological or cultural, contributed to the movement’s rise, and the variations between those it encompasses are explained by the differences in their respective host countries. These variations include:

- The level of education, participation in the labour force and the general acumen, especially in religious knowledge, of the women in that country.
- The fact that feminism is limited to only a few countries because of problems with its implementation, plus the voices calling for a reconsideration of its principles and, indeed, for related activities to be curtailed.
- There are also problems arising from differences among feminist activists themselves, from their wide dispersal and their disparate ideological leanings, declared objectives and strategies.

As for the factors that led to the rise of Islamic Feminism, they include:

- The ever expanding Islamist movements and their success in attracting women as they gain dominance in the public arena and infiltrate all state institutions. There is a new generation of Islamist women known for their daring and confrontational style as regards the role and status of women in an Islamic state. Women activists insist that Islam is in harmony with the principle of human rights for women established by the United Nations, and cast doubts on the mainstream women’s liberation movement which they believe has failed to address these rights, or promote the status of women both within the family and in society at large.
- The feeling among Muslims that the ‘clash of civilizations’ is raging between the West and Islam, especially in those countries where Muslims form a minority.
- The desire by observant Muslim women to resist religious fundamentalism (especially in light of the Taliban regime’s treatment of women, and the spread of terrorism) via a global feminist movement that promotes a tolerant Islam; an Islam that honours women rather than humiliates them. There is a strong and growing sense among women across the world, and some fair-minded men, that there is stark injustice and discrimination against women in conventional historical social settings (Saleh 2002, 17).
- The diminishing number of supporters of secular feminism and the difficulties of recruiting new and younger members on account of the distortions associated with the term in Muslim societies. Feminism is deemed a foreign, Western concept intent on westernizing society and changing existing social, cultural
and political arrangements. It is seen as an excuse for Western feminists to interfere in Islamic societies through various United Nations and other organizations, a perception that has led to the isolation of feminists from the general public.

- Women’s non-governmental organizations are no longer an effective force in several countries; they remain elitist, and suffer from a shortage of funds and poor public support. They are accused of giving international agencies authoritative priority over religious sources. In addition they are subject to surveillance by the central authorities, which curtail their activities.
- The frustration felt by a number of feminist and leftist leaders accused of enmity towards their own religion and countries, and of collaboration with Western imperialism, forcing some women to gravitate towards other ideologies.³

It is difficult to define the term ‘Islamic Feminism’⁴ due to the lack of a specific, clear and agreed-upon definition of feminism per se. Researchers belonging to the Islamic movement have not given this problem due attention; the most one can say about it is that the term is derived from the root word ‘female’, and has a set of roles or purposes assigned to it. It is a mechanism with which to analyse society and history, and to use as a tool to rectify current injustices towards women. It is also a reformist strategy that aims at changing existing social structures.

The term ‘Islam’ is similarly unclear and ill-defined in this context, making it difficult for researchers to know what the feminists exactly mean by it. Is it the religious doctrine of Islam, the historical practice of the religion or the Islam imagined through the reading of texts?

Those who follow the discourse revolving around Islamic Feminism cannot but notice the differences among activists as to which Arabic term to use as a counterpart to Islamic Feminism. Amani Saleh identifies herself as belonging to Islamic Feminism based on ‘commitment to the doctrine before commitment to the feminine persona’ (Saleh 2004). A number of researchers use the term ‘Feminist Islam’, while others insist on crediting Islamic Feminism for their work.

Alternatively, objections to the term Islamic Feminism are manifest in secular feminists’ rejection of any link between feminism and Islam, on account of their very different historical records. Moreover, although some women researchers have tried to root the concept of feminism in Islamic culture, the process has only exposed the disparate authorities that inform each term, and the lack of compatibility between them. Islam is a religious doctrine, while feminism is an international, legal civil movement that rejects the incorporation of religion into movements of struggle. How can one reconcile a faith and a legal movement? Some believe that marrying these two opposites is inappropriate and irresponsible (see Moghadam 2000).

It is not only secular feminists who voice objections in this regard; a number of Islamicist activists reject the name given the movement on the grounds that Western feminism is incompatible with cultural and social conditions in Muslim societies. Even if we try to confer on feminism an Islamic character, it would still be inappropriate if only because the term Islamic Feminism was coined in the West then imposed on the Arab world (abu-al-Sibaa’ 2006). Heba Rauf Ezzat (2008) accepts the movement’s underlying theses and believes that women have not achieved the rights Islam has granted them, though she rejects the term Islamic Feminism because, as she sees it, feminism is in opposition with religion, and is an aspect of what the West represents in terms of domination, colonialism and hegemony. She suggests that the term Islamic
Feminism be replaced by ‘Islamic Women’s Movement’. Azizaal-Hibri’s position is not unlike that of Heba Rauf Ezzat, given her deliberate attempts to distinguish herself from American feminists by virtue of her belonging to an Islamic communal setup and expressing a woman’s point of view.

Thus, the term Islamic Feminism raises a number of theoretical problems, among which are the following:

- If Western feminism went through a number of historical stages, each with its own set of characteristics and theories, and then branched out into more specific movements such as Liberal Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Radical Feminism and Environmental Feminism, then which feminism are we talking about in the Arab world? Is Islamic Feminism a branch of Western feminism? If what is meant by Islamic Feminism is that which concerns Muslim women, then does its establishment signal a shift in the course of both Western and Arab feminism?

- If feminism was at the core a political movement with social objectives before becoming a social movement aiming to prove women’s independence, highlight their role in life and defend their rights, does conferring the depiction of ‘Islamic’ on ‘feminism’ signify a confinement of the movement’s activities, and attempts to limit the scope of its theoretical framework to suit visions prevailing in Muslim societies? Western and Islamic societies each have their own form of feminism that best suits their particular characteristics and current historical context, a context in which fundamentalism has become a fact of life.

- Islamic Feminism points to issues of understanding and misunderstanding, on the one hand welcoming and receiving Western terminology and, on the other hand, eliminating it from its own natural habitat, and recognizing the changes it underwent in the different environments that embraced it. Should the concept therefore be adapted to an Arab Cultural Habitat?

- If Muslim immigrant women who adhere to Islamic Feminism defend their rights of expression, thought and belief, and the gains they have acquired under systems that respect their full and equal citizenship, to what extent are they able to associate themselves with the Islamic discourse currently prevailing in Arab countries? Does that not raise the issue of the presence of several brands of Islam, and of differences between European and American Islam, on the one hand, and Arab Islam, on the other?

- If differences over the term have led to confusion and to a lack of clarity, particularly in the Arab world, do differences over terminology necessarily mean differences in visions and objectives based on existing disparities between society and women activists?

**Theories and declared objectives**

Women researchers disagree on whether the Qur’an should be the only source of legal and moral authority, or both the Qur’an and the sunna (rules of practice) together, added to the reliance on international human rights principles. The following are some of the bases on which the theoretical framework of Islamic Feminism rests; and this list does not necessarily imply consensus on or commensurability between the various factors.
• Rejection of the theoretical framework through which the issue of women’s liberation was addressed: Muslim women are capable of liberating themselves without identifying with the Western model of the ideal woman.

• The beliefs that patriarchal traditions inherited from the Jahiliya (the pre-Islamic period in Arab history) period, rather than from Islam, are to blame for the deterioration of women’s condition. Islam granted Muslim women rights that other religions have deprived them of, and this religion is fully capable of liberating women once it is correctly understood. The adjustment of women’s condition can be achieved from within Islam. It is within this context that the theory of Islamic feminism comes as a response to radical Western feminism and its modernizing model, a context that renders Muslim women’s demands entirely different from those of Western feminists.

• Rejection of the central role granted to men, and the belief that religion developed from a purely male perspective that needs to be unveiled to expose the discrimination lurking in its discourse, and in the public mindset. Not only should the self-interests of men be analysed and exposed, but also setups that allow them to dominate, and the various means used to subjugate women should be condemned. Discrimination against women is the outcome of a poor and literal understanding of religious texts, a skewed reading that favours the (im-) balance of power and social interests (Barlas 2002).

• Attempts by women to rediscover themselves and their abilities in view of forging their own identity: it is illogical for women to identify themselves with the male persona and see it as a model (Yavari-d’Hellencourt 1999, 105). Women’s increasing awareness of themselves and their growing confidence in their abilities will open the doors of religious scholarship to them. Criticism should be directed here at religious leaders who produced a fundamentalist Islamic discourse, and at Islamist women propagandists who see women’s liberation as a Western concept (Zainab al-Ghazali and Safinaz Kazem, among others), rather than independently interpreting religious texts relevant to women. Women belonging to the Islamic Feminist movement do not raise their voices only to protest and criticize: they call for the doors of independent interpretation to be open to women well versed in religious matters and in the laws to advance their cause, spread the culture of independent interpretation, and increase the number of female religious scholars and interpreters. Contemporary Muslim women researchers should focus on doctrinal analysis, undertake a comprehensive review of religious laws, revive the movement of religious independent interpretation and propose alternative doctrinal interpretations. Saleh (2004) believes that the issue of independent interpretation reflects a comprehensive cultural vision of life, and is ‘an inescapable issue imposed by the qualitative change in the status of women in society, and in their abilities and potential’. In addition, the changes in consciousness and awareness make symbols and meaning susceptible to time and place, a fact that compels the researcher to review all systems at the basis of religious laws, Islamic jurisprudence, analogy and consensus.

• Underlining the importance of re-examining Islam in order to or in the interests of developing an Islamic women’s liberation theory. This is a project that can only be achieved through independent interpretation, a redefinition of textual bases and traditional values, and through a diligent re-examination of Islamic history (Chatty and Rabo [1997] 2001, 239). This is why adherents of Islamic Feminism
are hard at work rereading texts, and analysing the social and cultural bases at the core of the injustice to women. They are intent on coming up with a new religious discourse that addresses women’s issues according to the true commandments of Islam. It is not a secret that men are responsible for barring women from religious positions or practices, such as barring them from issuing fatwas (religious decrees) and from acting as ma’thoun (an authorized religious figure), to prevent them from revealing to the public the real foundation of religious laws. Justice will be done to women when human history is separated from foundational Islamic texts. As to feminists living abroad, like Amina Wadud and Rif’at Hassan, not only do they oppose male-based interpretations and focus on concepts relevant to the family and society, but also they devote their writing to advocating the separation of the Qur’an from the hadith. Rif’at Hassan says: ‘The Koran is fairer in matters of gender, yet most Islamic rulings unfair to women are drawn from the hadith’ (al-Khatib 2005; see also Wadud 1999).

- The need to distinguish between the sharia, a firm religious basis with its own unequivocal legal rulings, divinely decreed, and rulings based on interpretation, a human product sensitive to shifting social considerations.
- Calling for the reinstitution of women’s neglected and lost rights and their liberation from social pressures and obligations incompatible with the spirit of Islam. There should be justice for women, who should be allowed to enjoy God’s justice based on a universal Islamic system that gives women genuine rights. Beyond doubt, upholding gender equity the Islamic way, together with the notions of human (Badran 2006), moral and religious equality, would replace the call for full gender equality.
- The fact that some of the movement’s adherents see Islamic Feminism as a means of salvation from the conundrum in which Islamic thought finds itself. It is the ‘third way’, the ‘alternative discourse’, even a change in feminism itself and a shift in its authoritative sources made possible by the crystallization of a feminist religious discourse, based on Islamizing terminology borrowed from feminist thought. Talk would shift to Islamizing empowerment; gender and gender jihad … and Western Feminism would no longer be focused on itself, or on promoting its Orientalist discourse.

The movement has succeeded in activating the role of women in the religious domain and allowing them to propose reinterpretations for a number of verses (ayas) that specifically concern women, like diyya (payment of restitution money), shahadah (profession of faith) and mahr (dowry). It has also allowed them to submit different points of view on matters such as gawwamah (men’s authority over women) (Saleh 2002, 45–51; Yazbek Haddad and Esposito 2003, 107–108), ta’a (obedience), tafadol (granting the man double the woman’s inheritance), noshooz (the wife’s stubbornness and disobedience), wilaya (guardianship), taklif (religious obligations), khilafah (caliphate), ‘adl (justice) and darb (wife beating). They have been able to delve into the discourse woven around women’s issues and reconsider a number of inherited notions harmful to women, like al-ihtibas (men’s right to restrain women) and nikah (the marriage contract and its conditions). Women researchers in this field have also reviewed a number of concepts, and examined their interconnectedness and their linkages to the holistic values in the foundational text, using the concept of gender as guide. Delving thus into the study of Muslim religious heritage from a
female perspective (al-Hibri 1982, 2000) is similar to what Jewish and Christian women have done to come up with a feminist theology using new media outlets. Therefore, it is not strange to see an interaction between studies through publication on the web and social media such as Facebook and blogs.

Reactions to Islamic Feminism from both within and without the Muslim world have varied. Attitudes towards it seem to have fallen into one of the following categories.

First, from the very beginning, some have entirely rejected the currency of the term in Arabic and severely criticized the movement, which conservative and fundamentalist Islamists perceive to be a symbol of Westernization. The West has already invaded the Muslim nation culturally through secular feminism, they believe, and here it is today doing the same through Islamic Feminism (Badran 2006; Moghadam 2000). It is a movement that does a disservice to the nation because its cause centres round feminine identity, encourages individuality and is belligerent towards men. The conservatives criticize feminist researchers for lacking the expertise necessary to study religion and accurately interpret religious texts, especially since some of them do not even know Arabic, the language of the Qur’an. Many men oppose Islamic Feminism because it threatens the privileges they enjoy in a patriarchal society, and some women oppose it because, by calling for a change in gender roles, it deprives them of the protection of men (Badran 2006).

Alternatively, and broadly in keeping with the conservative response, legal activists and leftists believe that Islamic Feminism exercises double standards; it takes advantage of the political and cultural vacuum left behind by the retreat of secular thought, the left and liberalism, to formulate a compromise religious discourse. This discourse vilifies Western feminism while using its mechanisms in its analyses and dresses it up in religious garb. Dalal al-Bizri says that ‘Islamic Feminism has inherited all the trappings of activist Western feminism, but turned its back on it and said it was Islam’. In turn, Mu’azz al-Khatib believes that Islamic Feminism wilfully ‘introduced the concept of gender feminism to Islamic history’ (al-Khatib 2005).

The second attitude is moderate and accepts the movement’s particularistic relevance and what it stands for, despite disagreeing with it on a number of issues. This response considers it wrong to pass hasty judgments on the movement before it is sufficiently analysed. While seeing no particular importance in the term Islamic Feminism, those in this category nonetheless do want to evaluate the service it renders to society.

The third broad response has been to welcome the movement’s creation, adopt its theories and help spread it further afield, since, according to this view, there is no harm in dealing with Western concepts. Arab civilization was built on an encounter between cultures (Greek, Byzantine, Roman, etc.) and Arab Feminism has, for example, always been linked to several discourses including the secular, the national and the popular. Most importantly, Islamic Feminism is rooted in true Islam and the Qur’an’s spirit of equality, and for women it represents a credible political voice (al-Malki n.d.). It will give a strong boost to women’s activism by conferring on it a religious character, and furthermore will bolster the efforts of enlightened Muslims who are trying hard to paint a different picture of Islam and Muslims. Islamic Feminism has succeeded in transforming the principles of gender equality and justice into tangible realities on the ground, and in changing the prevailing defeatist mentality. It has given a number of women the power to speak on their own behalf and to represent themselves expressing, similar to men, their own understanding of the religious matter.
It is evident that each of the above attitudes, whether rejectionist, conditional or welcoming, belongs to one of several cultural, political, social and ideological backgrounds.

**Conclusion**

An examination of the bases on which the Islamic Feminist movement was founded compels one to make the following remarks:

- A lack of interest by most researchers in offering a precise definition of the term, and the differences between them regarding its narrative, helped spawn a variety of terms that have been either ascribed to the movement or revolved in its orbit (Islamic Feminism, Feminist Islam, Muslim Feminism, Feminism and Islam, Religious Feminism, Feminist Muslim Women, etc.). Some see these terms as synonymous, while others see them as a sign of the confusion between terms such as feminist and feminine, Islamic and Islamist. This accounts for the slow pace of the dissemination of the movement in the Arab World.

- The large geographic area covered by Islamic Feminism revealed characteristics associated with individual movements in different countries. The history of Islamic Feminism in Iran, for example, is particular to the Iranian women’s experience in a political culture that makes it difficult for feminism to evolve (Yavari-d’Hellencourt 1999, 99–119). It is an activist feminism based on negotiations and linked to politics and religious scholarship. In North America, Islamic Feminism has its own characteristics drawn from the experience of a small minority, and the same could be said about other forms of feminism, such as Latin American Feminism, Jewish Feminism or African Feminism.

- The movement is based on the principle of selectivity which allows it to take from Western feminism what it chooses, benefiting even from the criticism levelled at it and at post-modernism, and taking from Islam what suits its purpose. This brings up the question: Is resorting to Islam not a form of opportunism? Does the movement’s claim to a noble heritage, and the search for shining female models from within this, not place it in the shadow of reliance and dependency, i.e. does it not indicate that the movement, having failed to break its own chains and run free, relies instead on past achievements? Is resorting to feminism not itself a function of convenience? Is the tendency to compromise not tantamount to reneging on the call by the first generation of feminists, in several Islamic societies, to separate the religious from the temporal? Is this concocted and compromising course not a sign of a pervasive split personality, i.e. adopting certain aspects of modernity while rejecting others and attempting to create a homemade modernity not in line with the Western model?

- Accordingly, does this not reflect the state of disarray in which we currently find ourselves, a state in which we waver between the inside and the outside, wisdom and imitation, etc?

- Is pinning the blame for the situation of women on the interpreters, ignoring political, economic and historical considerations, and ignoring also the freedom of action women enjoyed before Islam, and searching for female models – is not all this simply dressing discrimination and unfairness in the garb of equality and is it not a ruse similar to the one used by old religious scholars to find a way around the dogma? Moreover, are protestations about shining models and
the return to the original understanding of the Qur’an guaranteed to address all women’s issues? What does one do when the religious text allows discrimination in line with patriarchal social structures?

- The movement’s leaders believe in the role the religious factor can play in strengthening the socio-cultural role of women and empowering them in the public sphere. The ensuing discourse therefore focuses on the need to activate the role of Muslim women, especially those engaged in independent interpretation. What is required is a new generation of Muslim female researchers well versed in religious matters. However, does this not lead to discrimination among women from the same society along religious lines? Are we not witnessing discrimination between secular Muslim researchers who are culturally Muslim, and practising Muslim researchers? Is the movement not elitist in its choices and objectives given its tilt towards ‘female religious scholars’ at the expense of others leading to its isolation from reality?

- Does focusing on the belief that there is no salvation for women except through the reliance on religion not reduce women’s entire existence to their religious identity, and place religion at the core of theoretical and practical concerns instead of making women the focus of attention? Is this attitude not a negation of the achievements of those women who had the courage of their convictions, and the ability to challenge others in defence of their rights and freedoms? Moreover, casting the cause of women in a purely religious framework goes along with the belief that ‘Islam is the solution’, and entrusts the responsibility of addressing women’s grievances to the religious establishment rather than the state and/or civil laws. Focusing on reinterpretation sidelines the social, economic and political factors as well as other gender-related issues.

- Is this recently concocted term, Feminist Islam or Islamic Feminism, especially in Arab countries, not defensive in nature – a response to the West where stereotypical images of Islam and of Muslim women abound – and a response to political Islam? Islamic feminist leaders allude to men’s fears at a time when combining feminism and Islam gives the impression that women have fears as well, compelling them to look for a way out. The fear of being accused of loyalty to the West and serving its interests has compelled them to dress their feminism in Islamic garb, to absolve themselves of guilt and find a firm stronghold. However, the spread of the term Feminist Islam also reveals Muslim women’s fear of hardline fundamentalism, a fear that compels them to distinguish their movement from others by expressing women’s demands from under the umbrella of enlightened Islam.

- Islamic Feminism brings up issues related to identity formation and the means of expressing it, especially as regards feminine identity and anti-Western discourse that perceive women as the symbol of cultural identity. Islamic Feminism may express a view in which religious identity predominates over all other forms.

- If the practice of feminism is a manifestation of modernity, then Islamic Feminism could signal the presence of a problematic relationship with modern thought, and a misunderstanding of the discourses woven around difference, otherness, democracy, pluralism, citizenship, equality, secularism, and so on.

Islamic Feminism claims to succeeded in attracting all Muslim women under the same umbrella, bringing them together behind a single project and building a network of solidarity. However, the language one hears reveals the presence of at
least two separate camps: Muslim women who write in English and those who write in
Arabic. To what extent do they coordinate their work, and how much do they read each
other’s work, exchange information and examine together the methodologies each has
adopted? The same question applies to issues currently under debate, for a difference is
found between the demands made by Muslim women in Islamic majority countries and
the issues posed by immigrant Muslim women (Pektas-Weber 2006; Helie 2006, 141–
154; Moghaddam 2002). The rise of Islamic Feminism and the globalization of its dis-
course indicate the presence of different ways of addressing women’s issues, at differ-
ent times and in the presence of several reformist social movements. Whether it is an
intellectual exercise, a generational fad or an intellectual adventure not yet fully
mature, Islamic Feminism is, in my opinion, a telling manifestation of post-modern
thought. We sense behind the Islamic Feminist movement how terminology travels
from one place to another, how it is coloured by the culture it comes in contact with
and based on the women’s experience, their social class and their readiness to resist
and fight for their rights. The most important among those is intellectual freedom,
and the freedoms of expression and religious belief. In light of the pervasiveness of
takfir in many countries, the close contact between secular and Islamic women
becomes a symbol of the violence aimed at both the activists (Yavari-d’Hellencourt
1999, 99–107) and the manner in which they confront political Islam and official or
state feminism.

The absence of Islamic Feminism in North Africa (except for the Western-most part
of the Maghreb) is perhaps a sign of the difficulty it has infiltrating certain societies,
especially Arab societies, due to various reasons and considerations. In Tunisia, for
example, we found that the family and personal status law’s interest in Tunisian
women’s issues has mitigated the need to join such movements. However, the rise of
an Islamic Feminist Movement in that country should not come as a surprise in light
of the apparent influences impacting the young generation, especially fundamentalist
ideology, not to mention the general historical–political atmosphere and the voices
calling for multiple and ‘urfi ( unofficial) marriages, voices that see no shame in
beating women. The question is to what extent can women interact with these changing
realities and negotiate over their fate? How many concessions can Muslim women
make? Are women tough enough and can they design strategies capable of confronting
the extreme fundamentalism threatening to thwart their achievements and relegate them
once again to the harem?

Acknowledgement

Contemporary Arab Affairs thanks I.B. Tauris for its permission to publish this paper ahead of
its inclusion in a collective volume entitled Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle

Notes

1. Among those who belong to this movement is the group of Iranian men and women inside
Iran who produce Zanan Magazine, founded in 1992. The group includes Shahla Sherkat,
Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Afsaneh Najmabadi and Val Moghadam, as well as a number of Iranian
women in the Diaspora such as Nayereh Tohidi. There is also Amina Wadud Mohsen,
Leila Ahmad, Aziza al-Hibri in the United States; Asma Barlas and Arifa Mazhar in Paki-
stan; Yesim Arat, Feride Acar and Nilüfer Gole in Turkey; Fatima Merinissi, Asma Lam-
rabet and Rachida Ait Himich in Morocco; Amani Saleh, Hind Mustafa and Omaima
Abou-Bakr in Egypt, and the ‘Sisters in Islam’ in Malaysia, in addition to a number of men who support the movement.

2. Among adherents to this movement are experts in Islamic and legal studies, political sciences and sociology.


4. Margot Badran used the term in 1999 (Badran 1999).

5. Fundamentalists see feminism as a call to uncover, get rid of the hijab, allow social relations between men and women, liberate women from having to abide by Muslim tenets and codes of behaviour, limit divorce, outlaw multiple marriages, demand an equal share of the inheritance, and a call to establish Western or irreligious secularism in Muslim countries, whereby religion would have no role to play in people’s private social lives (al-nabaa 2007).

6. For more information, see the Islamic Women’s Manifesto (Manifesto 2006, 75–77).

7. For more information, see Marie (2007).


9. Margot Badran believes that feminism has succeeded in gaining a number of concessions in Egypt, Morocco, South Africa and elsewhere (Badran 2000).

10. For the confusion between Islamic and Islamist, for example posts on www.Kabyles.net

11. The hijab’s removal has been considered a symbolic gesture for Iranian women since 1918; for Egyptian women returning from the Rome Conference in 1923; and for Tunisian women in 1924; as was the burning of the abayas in Kuwait in 1963.

References


