

## Islamic women's movements

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The study of Muslim women is one of the most challenging and contentious topics of inquiry in political and social movement studies. Muslim women have long been stereotyped as oppressed, passive recipients of patriarchy, religion, and politics, rather than as active figures in their own right. Motivated by the overwhelming absence of women as subjects in the literature, the last two decades have witnessed an upsurge in critical scholarship exploring women's roles as organizers of and participants in movement activity in various locales across the globe.

The term "Islamic women's movements" (IWMs) may incorporate a large spectrum of Muslim women's groups, including (but not limited to) *Islamist* women's movements (those who perceive Islam to be a total social, political, and economic system meant to inform all aspects of society), Muslim or Islamic feminist movements (those who view Islam as fully supportive of women's rights, and who prioritize gender in their movement goals), and secular Muslim women's movements (those whose members self-identify as Muslims but whose activities are not necessarily framed by religion). Analyses of women's collective action in both "formal" and "informal" contexts have raised issues of how political activity may be construed in "unusual places" (Peshkova 2009), and have seriously challenged underlying notions about politics being conceived as what only men do in formally recognized institutional settings. IWMs may organize through charitable societies, government-sponsored committees, religious study groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), human rights and development organizations, and women-only branches

or affiliates of male-run organizations. The issues that IWMs tackle include reforming personal status laws based on sharia, or Islamic law, which govern the terms of marriage, divorce, child custody, mediation, inheritance, and alimony. IWMs tend not to challenge the existence of sharia as a framework for law; rather, groups focus on reforming it to be "correct and more authentic" (Warrick 2009). IWMs also address political corruption, poverty alleviation, democratization, education, social services, women's access to mosques, violence, and many other topics. Women's dress has also become a focal point of protest, especially during periods of forced hair- and face-covering or uncovering by the state or Islamist groups.

Because Islam is readily used as an excuse for gender inequities in the status quo, IWMs of all kinds strategically locate their missions and activities within a religiously viable discourse and engage in Islamic interpretation, or *ijtihad*. Uncovering the contexts and meanings of the Koran and hadiths (narrations describing the words and deeds of the Prophet) are at the core of women's epistemological struggle to legitimize their desired sociopolitical reforms. This project involves critical examinations of the sources of religious knowledge and authority, and the manner in which texts have been used to bolster practices that women deem to be unjust, discriminatory, and contradictory to Islam. These new gender hermeneutics have resulted in a gendered historicization of Islam, a critique of hegemonic Islamic discourses, and their applications to law and culture. This does not necessarily involve a rejection of "tradition" outright, but rather a recognition that "new orthodoxies emerge through changing relations of power" (Moll 2009), and that – in the postmodernist vein – "tradition" is actually a series of *traditions* having different implications for women. Gendered readings of the Koran and hadiths also use the Prophet's wives

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and female descendants as examples of women leading in business, politics, and piousness. As some interpretations note, mothers have had a privileged status in the Koran, which has led some IWMs to emphasize the protection of mothers (and potential mothers) through improved education, health services, and rights as being originally intended by the faith. In this way, Islamic feminists directly challenge patriarchal frameworks and strategically use religious discourse to argue for reforms also in agreement with tenets of secular liberalism. In order to bolster their positions, IWMs assert that their interpretation of Islam – one that typically lends itself to an improvement in women's status – is the most authentic, valid, and indigenous manifestation of their religion.

IWMs have organized and created formal associations, organized public protests, and produced printed publications since the turn of the twentieth century. While popular movements occasionally arose in response to massive political crises, these associations were typically made up of urban, upper-class women tackling issues of social welfare, suffrage, and restrictions on elite women's dress. The relationship between IWM mobilization and nationalist struggles – referred to as the “honorable door” for women to engage in public activism and to “earn” emancipation (Fleischmann 1999) – has been complex. Nationalist movements throughout the formerly colonized world have always recruited women to their cause, relying on them as foot soldiers in liberation efforts. Both sides have recognized that women's status lies at the heart of defining what kind of nation theirs should become. Women's grievances about their treatment under colonialism and apartheid inspired many to form their own women-specific branches of the nationalist struggle. However, in most cases, male-dominated nationalist movements pressured women to address national liberation first, and to leave the issue of women's rights for after the revolution. Any acknowledgment by IWMs of existing patriarchy in nationalist

platforms resulted in accusations of betrayal. As in the case of Algeria, women have typically seen a swift reversal of their hard-won rights in postcolonial regimes. However, engagement in nationalist struggles (which, for some groups, continues at the time of this writing) has created numerous political opportunities for women to merge ideas of gender equality with the national project, and to demand, sometimes successfully, that women's status be addressed in nationalist charters.

Islamist women have also been prominent in supporting the activities of male-dominated Islamist organizations since the founding of these oppositional movements critical of nationalist, capitalist, and socialist projects. For example, during the World War II period, the Muslim Sisterhood and the Society of Muslim Women played a vital role in sustaining the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt during periods of state crackdown. IWMs engaged in resistance activities by relaying messages to imprisoned members, opening their homes to Islamist organizers, and spreading outlawed literature. Scholars have noted that when under threat, male Islamists have forsaken ideals of gender segregation and heavily relied on women to sustain their movements. Interestingly, the stated goals of women Islamist leaders themselves did not address gender liberation per se, but rather the preference that women lead in the home and family – the “private sphere” – instead of in public politics. In recent decades, postcolonial democratic and nondemocratic states, powerful Islamists, members of the *'ulama* (community of religious scholars), and politicians have been under increasing pressure to heed the calls of women's movements, due in part to increasing literacy rates, educational attainments and, in some cases, raised political consciousnesses spurred by the presence of NGOs in poor rural areas (such as in Bangladesh). Male-centered Islamist organizations have responded to women's grassroots mobilization by revising their founding statements about gender roles and stressing women's importance as individuals with rights in public political life

and work (though women and men are still conceived of as having separate and disparate roles).

Relationships of power and domination between the “East” and “West” or “first world” versus “third world” polities have had numerous effects on women’s activities and the study of their movements. Muslim women’s NGOs, for example, necessarily confront a variety of fundamentalisms in many of the areas in which they operate. While not all fundamentalisms are violent or inherently pose the same challenges, the presence of fundamentalist groups necessitates that women’s NGOs respond to the fear that their organizations are neo-imperialistic and anti-Islam. Many IWMs distance themselves from Western feminist organizations, either as a conscious strategy or because of inherent distrust. It should be noted that while some IWMs do self-identify as feminist (*nisa’iyah* in Arabic), scholars also sometimes impose the term on organizations that do not. Gender-specific issues are not always prioritized or explicitly stated in Muslim women’s movement activity for a variety of reasons, including the desire to avoid crackdowns by the state for engaging in controversial activities. Responses to Western stereotypes also impact movement goals and the research process itself; Jafar (2007) states that women in Pakistan worry about cementing negative stereotypes of their country when addressing violence against women, and may be hesitant to address such issues, particularly in front of foreign observers.

However, IWMs also publically criticize discrimination and brutality justified by Islam; in India, Pakistan, Jordan, Yemen, and elsewhere, IWMs have utilized the press in order to publicize crimes of rape or child marriage, using individual cases as an impetus for wider legal reform. Researchers submit that Islamic feminisms have been more effective than secular feminist movements in pushing for personal status law reforms because of their privileged “insider” positions within the faith itself (Moll 2009). Of course, not all Muslim

women’s movements shun affiliation with the West; as discussed by Ahmadi (2006) the post-Islamic revolution activities of many Iranian women’s organizations have embraced trans-Atlantic ties with Western-affiliated activists. So while distancing one’s organization from non-indigenous influences has become a strategy of survival for many IWMs, it is important to note that this is not the only preferred or successful option for women’s movements. In addition to bridging the gap between various forms of feminism, some IWMs have addressed class and religious barriers by arguing for the right of nonelite men and women and nonbelievers to study and interpret Islam (Shehabuddin 2008).

The divide between activism and scholarship has been nonexistent in the case of many prominent Islamic scholars; for example, Amina Wadud has given many controversial public sermons in Malaysia, the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere that have sparked heated debates about women’s leadership roles in Islam. Her efforts, dubbed a “gender jihad,” have challenged tenets that ban women from praying in mosques and from becoming imams, or prayer leaders (Wadud 2006). Other activist-scholars include (but are hardly limited to) Omaira Abou-Bakr, Asma Afsarrudin, Zainah Anwar, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, and Afsaneh Najmabadi. Such scholarship and activism continues to explore the effects of Islamic women’s movements on political outcomes and social change, as well as to challenge conventional notions about what constitutes feminism, political action, resistance, and agency.

SEE ALSO: Arab Spring; Framing and social movements; Gender and social movements; Islamic movements; Religion and social movements; Women’s movements.

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