

Mehrdad Darvishpour

"Islamic feminism": compromise or challenge to feminism?

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Introduction

One of the most important questions for the sociology of gender and feminist research on "Third World woman," is the relationship between Islam and women's situation in the Islamic countries. This question has become more acute after more than 20 years of Islamic revolution in Iran. Reflecting on the subordination of women in the Islamic countries, some feminist researchers hold that Islam could be defined as one of the worst sorts of patriarchal religion, oppressing women and legitimizing gender inequality (for example Espotio 1983, Nawol 1982). Other scholars argue that this picture results from Western ethnocentrism (for example Said 1993, Mohanty 1988). Several questions can be raised within the context of this debate. Is it possible to analyze women's situation in Islamic countries, such as Iran, with western feminist eyes? Is any feminist view of Islam possible? What is the relationship between Islam and patriarchy? What can the experience of the Islamic revolution in Iran after 20 years tell us about the relationship between a religious movement and women's situation? I suggest in this article to discuss the difficulties of the Islamic feminism in analyzing the conditions of women in Islamic societies.

Islam and patriarchy

Generally, religions have a patriarchal view of the relationship between the genders. The relationship between Adam and Eve symbolizes how many religions view women. As Al Hibri writes:

God was declared male, and man was declared to be created in His likeness. Eve became the symbol of temptation and sin. The woman was consequently judged as a less likely candidate for salvation and an everlasting life in heaven than man. (1981, p 176)

But some scholars point out that, in comparison with other religions, the idea of patriarchy is even greater in Islam. They mean that there are in the Koran many verses, especially Surah 4 which clearly legitimizes gender inequality. Even hadith (stories from the, Prophets life) and Shariah (Islamic law) have the same tendency. Why? Rita Liljestrom, a Swedish sociologist, explains that there is a fundamental difference between Islam and Christianity in their attitudes to sexuality, which influences the view on women (1984, p. 10). She points out that the Christian Church attacks sexuality in itself. Sexuality is reduced to something "profane and sinful", sexuality signifies the division of human beings into body and soul. Civilization represents the soul's victory over the body, spirit over the flesh, and diligence over lust. Islam takes a different approach. It never repudiates sexuality as such. In fact sex is a taste of paradise. But Islam attacks women instead. As the living carrier of the danger of sexuality and its infinite social

destructive forces, women have to be controlled. Sexuality itself is not dangerous since it is the foretaste of paradise that leads men to Allah (Sabbah, 1984).

The different views on the nature of sexuality have resulted in separate strategies of control within Christianity and Islam.

Since Islam regards women as an active sexual power, it is important to restrict women's sexual power over men. The result is isolating women and men in different worlds. A woman's sexuality has to be concealed. Her looks and behavior must not reveal her sexual force since it will remind the man of his weakness. Fatima Mernissi, a famous Arab feminist, explained a long time ago that the Christian portrayal of the individual as tragically torn between two poles (good and evil, flesh and spirit, instinct and reason) is very different from that of Islam, which has a more sophisticated theory of the instincts, more akin to the Freudian concept of the libido. She writes:

In western culture, sexual inequality is based on the belief in the biological inferiority of woman. In Islam, it is the contrary: the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for constraining her power (Mernissi 1975, P 16).

This explains why the Koran maintains man's superiority and domination over woman. It is men's responsibility and duty to keep women under their protection and control.

The question is if every Muslim views gender relation with the same harshness as formulated in Islam. If not, could we infer that there is not necessarily any contradiction between believing in Islam and in gender equality? Muslim feminists point out that the picture of Islam as a hard patriarchal religion is based on the dominating view of Islam, which is not necessary original Islam. They mean that this picture is the result of western imagination, of Islam's attitude to women, which is problematic (Afshar, 1998; Svensson, 1996).

Western views of women in Islamic countries

The image of women in the "Third World" generally, and of Muslim women in particular, in the West, is very schematic and prejudiced. Marred by racism and ethnocentrism, attitudes towards Muslims have become harsher in recent years. The Muslim woman has been portrayed as submissive, oppressed, and backward. Mass media and educational systems have played a major role in the construction of this representation. The popular book and movie *Not Without My Daughter* is a good example which profoundly established this image by over-emphasizing the significance of veiling as a China-wall which separates Muslims from non-Muslims. This fabricated image ignores the connection between the oppression of women in the West and East. *Not Without My Daughter* reflects more a Western view of Muslim women than the realities of women's lives in Islamic societies. It is this discourse which Edward Said (1993) calls "Orientalism." In Orientalism, the Orient is created. The Orient is thus a linguistic, discursive creation, rather than a place to which one can travel or in which one can live. The Orient of Orientalism serves a dual function. It affirms the concept of the superiority of the West, and defines West's normality by regulating the abnormal, forbidden, and dangerous to the Orient.

Chandra Mohanty (1988, p. 81) makes a similar argument when she proposes that the universal image of the “Third World woman” is constructed by adding Third World’s differences to gender relation. This image is predicted by the assumption of western woman as secular, liberated, and in control of her life, in contrast to the makeup of the Third World women. Yet not all women in the West are in fact secular and liberated, just as not all women in Islamic societies match the pre-made image of “Muslim woman.” Also, not all Muslim women have the same idea about Islam. Their ideas are influenced by their class status, cultural background, education, and position in society. Mohanty points out that many feminists write about Muslim women being powerless and oppressed, about their needs and problems. But there are few feminists who write about their choices, freedom, or power of action. Western feminists merely use images of Third World women as objects in defining themselves who are the real object of their studies. She means that in feminist theory, Asian, and particularly Muslim, women, are depicted as powerless individuals who need to be guided by Western feminism in order to become politically mature. It is unrealistic view all women or all Muslims as a homogenous group, ignoring the historical differences between them. A question rises here: can Islamic feminism be an alternative view of feminism, a view that can facilitate women’s emancipation in Islamic countries?

Islamic feminism: compromise or challenge to feminism?

Muslims feminism is not a new movement. In the beginning of the nineteenth century a few great Islamic thinkers such as Sayyid Jamal-ad-Din Asadabadi (al-Afqani), Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Reza, and especially Qasim Amin and later “the Sister’s movement” **in the Arabic countries** tried to give a modern, liberal, reformist and feminist reinterpretation of Islam (Svensson, 1996). Theirs ideas never became dominating in any Islamic country. But during the 1980s and 1990s, a similar tendency to reinterpret Islam in a feminist context reappeared in several Islamic countries.

Several secular feminist scholars (e.g., Fatima Merniss, Aziza Al-Hibri), who earlier criticized Islam, changed their position and tried to offer a feminist interpretation of Islam, making it quite difficult to place Muslim feminist into a “neat” category (Mernessi, 1996; Afshari, 1994) Jan Hjärpe (1995), a Swedish scholar of theology separates Islamic feminism from Muslim feminism. He points out four feminist trends in Islamic countries: *Atheist feminism, Secular feminism, Muslim feminism, Islamic feminism.*

Atheist feminism proposes that religion is anti-women. They believe that women’s movement cloud develop only by challenging the influence of religion in society.

Secular feminism has a neutral view about religion. Secular feminists argue that the relationship between Islam and feminism depends first and foremost on wether liberal or patriarchal view of Islam is dominant in the society. They also hold that under a theocratic government or a religious movement woman’s emancipation is impossible. But they do not think that feminist movements necessarily have to attack religious beliefs.

Muslim feminism has liberal view of Islam **and tries** to adapt it to modern time. Muslims feminism argues that for a long time, our imagination about Islam was dominated by a patriarchal vision of Islam, but that this is not necessarily an authentic Islam. They argue that we should primarily focus on the teachings of the Koran because much of hadith and shari’ah is a patriarchal reading of Islam.

However, we know that even many Koran verses (for example surah “Women”) legitimize gender inequality. Muslims feminists suggest that the Koran has two sorts of verses.

One addresses the practical aspects of Muslim's everyday life in the primitive Arabian society. Other verses concern morality and are normative. Unlike the former group of verses whose interpretation must change to reflect the present conditions of any society, the latter do not depend on time. But even in normative verses (especially in the surah "Women") one can find patriarchal ideas. Muslim feminists' answer is that if you believe that Good is just and the Koran is God's word, it is not reasonable to consider that any verse could legitimize gender inequality. They argue that the Koran introduces many powerful female figures who played important roles in Islam and in the Prophet's life, something that many of his successors did not favour (Svensson, 1996; Sajidzade, 1996). Muslim feminists point out that a liberal and feminist review of the Koran could contribute to the development of women's emancipation in the Islamic country (Hassan, 1999).

Islamic feminism is clearly state feminism, or a part of fundamentalist and religious movement, and according to this trend, women's identification with religious movements help Muslim women's emancipation. For example, NESTA Ramazani, an Iranian scholar (1993), points out that women's gathering in religious mourning, their presence in Friday prayers, and their participation in revolution and war eventually will lead to their emancipation. It is true that after the Islamic revolution in Iran, women have been more active in political and social life. However, Islamic women are usually active in officially sanctioned arenas such as religious rituals and campaigns in support of the regime. In fact, women stand to lose the most after revolution in the Iran (Darvishpour, 1993).

As an ideology, policy, and social movement feminism generally have been connected to secularism. It is not surprising that many secular feminists found Islam to be a major opponent for the feminist movement. For example, Shahrzad Mojab (1995) and Haiddeh Moghissi (1999), two Iranian feminists, belonging to the first type of feminist groups, argue that Islam is a challenge to feminism. Mojab argues that from an initial total rejection of Islam, feminism has moved towards a more sophisticated readjustment. She identifies five factors contributing to this development in feminism. First, a sizable modern middle-class of women has formed in the urban centers. The women are in professional occupations such as engineering, teaching, medicine, politics, business, etc. Second, women are elected as members of the parliament in at least a few Islamic countries. Third, the increasing participation of women in the expanding capitalist economy has contributed to further awareness of the inequalities between genders, both at work and at home. Fourth, knowledge about feminism and struggles in other countries is transmitted widely. Fifth, in many Islamic countries, women's organizations are active independent of the state. Under these conditions, Muslim leaders and ideologists must meet the challenge of the feminist movement. According to Mojab, Islamic feminism is not a serious challenge against patriarchy and it is still far from independence, secularism, and democracy. The Islamic feminist movement is more, a compromise with patriarchy than a realistic movement for the emancipation of women.

A problem with Mojab's argument is that she never asks herself if any theoretically feminist reinterpretation of Islam is possible. Another problem is that both Islamic feminists and atheists feminist have only an ideological approach to religion. One argues that without believing in religion, women's emancipation is impossible; the other proposes that it is only possible when you do not believe on religion. The question is, with these views, if any dialogue for women solidarity and equality between these groups is possible.

But Muslims feminists and secular feminists can have a dialogue about gender equality. Maybe it can be claimed that a liberal and milder interpretation of Islam, which tries to distance itself from Islam's misogynist rules and accepts gender equally, can improve the status of women

in Islamic countries to a certain degree. But Question is to what degree a liberal review of Islam can improve women's rights. Why do women's **rights** have to be depending on any religious views? The experience of political Islam shows the difficulties of compromise between Islam and feminism (Nawol, 1982, Hjärpe, 1983). The experience of the Islamic revolution in Iran clearly shows the antifeminist and antidemocratic tendency of the fundamentalist and religious movement on which Islamic feminism depends.

The situation of Iranian women, Two decades after the Islamic revolution

Generally, women's share of rights and resources has deteriorated since the revolution in 1979. It is a result of the regressive policy of the Islamic regime. Compulsory veiling, sex segregation, stoning women to death for adultery, were direct results of Islamic government's policy, which still continues, after more than 20 years. In particular, Iranian women suffer from the return to traditional laws of marriage and from reduced educational and occupational opportunities.

Family Legislation

After the Revolution, the family protection lawⁱ was repealed and declared incompatible with the canon of Islamic laws. Consequently, the right to polygamous marriage was once again restored. The minimum age for women marriage fell from 18 to 13. The legal rights of women in application for divorce and custody of children were severely curtailed (Darvishpour 1993). Even though in recent years parts of the law have been revised, nothing has radically changed in the law. For example, Article 1043 of the civil law makes it clear that the marriage of a girl is dependent upon the consent of her father or grandfather. Articles 1117 and 54 declare that married women can only accept jobs that are not incompatible with her responsibilities as a wife. Otherwise, she needs permission from her husband. Article 1133, states that a man can divorce at any time he wishes, while a woman can request divorce only for "exceptional reasons."

Women and employment

Under the Islamic Republic the proportion of employed women has drastically declined. Within a decade, it fell from twelve percent in 1976 to six percent in 1986, resulting in hundreds of thousands unemployed women (Darvishpour 1993). While the Islamic Republic of Iran introduced measures to demobilize the more secularized Iranian women, it encouraged the participation of thousands of religious women in the military, social, and political arenas. The "new" active women were mainly from the traditional middle-class who fought for the Islamic republic in the revolution. Although in recent years the percentage of employed women has increased from 6 in 1986 to 9 in 1996, it is still less than women's employment immediately before the revolution.

Women and education

Generally, after the Islamic revolution education policy adapted to complete gender segregation in the preliminary schools. More than 100 fields of studies, out of a total 431, at universities were prohibited to women. The government's justification was that, in accordance with the shari'ah (Islamic law), those courses were appropriate only for men. It is notable that this policy did not change the proportion of female college students to their male classmates. When comparing 1977 with 1987, the percentage of women is almost unchanged: about 30% of all students at the university are women. Even if some courses were closed to women, percentage of female students remained almost the same because they attended other courses (Darvishpour 1993). But in recent year, after the initial bars on women's study in some majors were lifted, the number of female college students has increased. To day more than about 40% of all students at the university are women, which is first of all result of women's resistance (Darvishpour, 2001).

Women's Resistance

As I pointed out earlier, women's situation cannot be explained only as subordination. They have power to act, too. Their resistance against discriminations in the educational system is a clear example. Another instance of women's resistance relates refusal to wear "the Islamic veil," despite probable punishments. In 1993, 113,000 women were arrested in Iran for not complying to the dress code.

A third example is the new waves of the independent female magazines, books, and cinema. Despite all hindrances, great female writers, journalists, and film directors have called people's attention to **women's questions**. While the fundamentalist government tried to limit independent art, literature, films, and magazines, many women have been more active in those arenas than under Shah's government.

Examples above show just some aspects of women's active resistance. Despite the facts that a large group of Iranian intellectuals, middle class, and secular women were executed, imprisoned, or forced to run away from Iran, it is clear that women as an active group try to defend their rights.

Conclusion

The question is whether women's movements in Islamic societies such as Iran have found their way to challenge the establishment and to change the situation of women. Maybe not yet. We need more research on these questions. Perhaps it is not necessary for the feminist movement in Islamic countries to declare war on religion. However, the experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran shows how dangerous a religious movement could be for women. Secularism is an unavoidable prerequisite in women's battle for liberation. Therefore, I insist that we should encourage secular feminism!

Mehrdad Darvishpour
Dep of Sociology
Stockholm University

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ⁱ In 1967 and 1975, the first and second Family Protection laws were enacted. They ensured women the right to divorce, restricted polygamy, and prohibited pre-mature marriages. The laws changed the status for women. Civil laws, predating the Islamic regime, restricted the discretionary power of men through the family protection law. Disputes concerning the undisputed rights of men in polygamous marriages, divorce, and custody of children were settled through court rulings. For example, a dispute arising from the custody of children was given to the court. The right to divorce was made conditional on the court ruling, and women obtained much more favorable terms and conditions for divorce. Having a second wife was made conditional on the consent of the first wife. Besides the inequality of treatment in civil rights, concerning adjudication, testimony, inheritance, employment, and education, the new civil laws extend inequality to the realm of marriage. They ensured women the right to divorce and restricted polygamy.