

# Conclusion: The Islamic Struggle Against Feminism

The brief points made above, though sketchy, should be sufficient to show that the incompatibility of Islam with feminism is profound. It is not just a disagreement about how Islamic law is to be interpreted or what sort of rights should be accorded to women.

Islam and feminism have contradictory views on the most fundamental issues in metaphysics, ethics, social and political philosophy and theology.

Muslim women have also argued that feminism is an ideology relevant only to the lives of Western affluent women, and that even for them it has only resulted in making them into quasi men or sex objects. They have also pointed out that while Muslim women see their own most important roles to be mother and wife feminist ideology belittles the importance of these roles in its combat against gender stereotypes.

The most obvious marker of the struggle against feminism by Muslim women is Hijab (the canons of modesty in Islamic dress). While feminists have taken the scarf to be a symbol of their subjugation to men in Muslim societies, the faithful take it to be a symbol of respect and modesty.

## [The Prohibition By Islam Of The Oppression Of Women](#)

No prohibition is given greater emphasis in Islam than that against injustice. In the Qur'an, particular attention is drawn to various areas in which there is a potential for injustice against women, but in general it is social acceptability and moral conscience to which appeal is made in order to discern what is just from what is oppression.

The laws of Islam set outer limits, but that does not mean that whatever falls within the perimeters is condoned. With respect to worship, for example, the law specifies the outward conditions for correct prayer, fasting and ritual purity, but one may offer formally correct prayer in ways considered repugnant

(makruh) even with respect to external form. It is rather trite to mention, additionally, that validity of external form is no guarantee of interior soundness (ihsan).

According to a hadith related by both Shi'i and Sunni sources, on his last pilgrimage, the Prophet (s) said, "O people! Fear Allah regarding women, for you have taken them in trust from Allah." Since what is taken in trust must be properly cared for, some scholars have allowed that the legal religious authorities may intervene even when there has been no explicit violation of Islamic precepts in case of mistreatment of a wife by her husband.[1](#)

## **The Misuse Of Islam For The Oppression Of Women**

Islam has been and continues to be misused as an instrument for the oppression of women. This happens in various ways. Sometimes men take advantage of the position of women in Muslim societies to deny women opportunities that should be protected were Islam properly practiced. The dictates of Islam against injustice to women are simply ignored, and Islam itself is falsely used as an excuse for this.

An example of this is the way the Taliban in Afghanistan misuse precepts of sexual segregation to deny women educational opportunities and access to health and other facilities. Another way women are oppressed in Islam is when the letter of the law is observed but its spirit is violated. Instances of this are too many to even begin giving examples. These are issues that need to be addressed by men and women in Muslim societies today.

Because of the abuses that exist, feminists argue that Islamic law should be changed, but there are other ways to fight abuse. More attention needs to be paid to the spirit of Islamic teaching. Islamic law should not be seen as a framework within which one can get away with whatever one likes with impunity.

Muslims need to be just as careful about the need to mold themselves according to the ideals taught by Islam as they are careful about conformity to its legal injunctions. The feminists seem to share the same blindness as those who use Islamic law as a pretext to oppress women, neither can see beyond the law to Islamic values and ideals.

The issue is addressed in some detail by Shahid Mutahhari who recognizes the problem and describes it as follows:

These cruelties are the outcome and an offshoot of a wrong conception of Islam, which, according to them, says: "A woman must bear such cruelties like a terminal cancer patient." This has created an impression of Islam that is more harmful than any of the evil propaganda against our faith.[2](#)

Shahid Mutahhari calls for the organization of Islamic women's movements in order to oppose the injustices done to women in Muslim society:

In our country we are in need of a women's movement, but we need a pure Islamic movement and not a dark and gloomy European movement.[3](#)

## **Muslim Women's Movements**

Struggles for the elimination of oppression to women based on an acceptance of Islam may be termed Islamic women's movements. In the modern period, Islamic women's movements arose as a reaction against feminism, although they concerned themselves primarily with the improvement of the conditions of women in Muslim societies.

It is not always clear whether organizations and individuals base their struggle for the improvement of the conditions of women on Islam or on a feminist ideology disguised as acceptance of Islam. Nor is this a black and white distinction.

It appears that a considerable number of Muslim women influenced by feminist ideas sincerely believe that the proper interpretation of Islam is one that calls for absolute equality (i.e., identity) of rights for men and women and the elimination of all distinctions based on sex found in Islamic law as traditionally interpreted.

On the other hand, other Muslim women may sincerely but incorrectly believe that there are no valid arguments within Islamic jurisprudence for reform of the traditional interpretation of the law. So, among Muslim women's movements, as opposed to explicitly secularist feminist movements, we will find some to be firmly grounded on an attempt to be guided by God's final revelation as taught by His chosen Prophet, Muhammad (s), while others will attempt to manipulate the teachings of Islam for their own agendas, whether these are feminist or traditionalist agendas, and there will be much gray area between pure faith and hypocrisy, as there always is in matters of religion.

Feminists have taken note of the great popular support for Islam among women in Muslim countries. Some have responded by calling the Muslim women foolish or duped. This seems to be the attitude of Leila Ahmed. She claims that women are attracted to the moral ideals of Islam and are unaware that the legal ramifications of Islamic law put women at a disadvantage. This is an incredible hypothesis, to say the least.

It is hard to imagine a Muslim woman who has not heard that Islam has different rules of inheritance for sons and daughters, let alone one who is unaware of sex based differences in the marriage laws.

Some feminists have admitted that the Islamic movement has actually improved the status of women, regardless of whether improvement is judged by feminist or other standards. Haleh Afshar admits that the revival of Islam after the victory of the Islamic Revolution has been "almost literally a Godsend" in the context of which Iranian women have fought "against their political, legal and economic marginalization.... Throughout, their arguments have been anchored in the teachings of Islam, the

Koranic laws and the traditions and practices of the Prophet of Allah."<sup>4</sup>

Afshar's attitude appears to be that if Islamic rhetoric can be used to win feminist objectives, this can justify compromises with Islam. Ziba Mir-Hosseini seems to agree:

I argue that, contrary to what the early literature contends, and what remains implicit in the later wave, the impact of the revolution on women has been emancipatory, in the sense that it has paved the way for the emergence of a popular feminist consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Mir-Hosseini, like Afshar, seems to think that it may be worthwhile making compromises with Islam in order to achieve feminist objectives. She refers to all women's movements as feminist, regardless of whether they are based on feminist ideology or Islam, although she offers the following conclusion about the indigenous 'feminism' she sees emerging in Iran:

This process has inadvertently been nurturing an indigenous 'feminism' which is as much rooted in Iranian family structures as it is in the interaction of Islamic and Western ideals of womanhood. It could emerge only after challenging and rejecting the state-sponsored and Western-inspired 'feminism' of the Pahlavis, as well as the liberal-leftist feminism of 1970's women's liberation, and yet in the process assimilating some of the features of both.<sup>6</sup>

We can only pray that Muslim women's movements comprising both Muslim women and Muslim men will continue to be advance in their struggle against injustice and will continue to provide an alternative to feminism so that the family is strengthened rather than undermined in loving obedience to the Most Merciful of the Merciful.

<sup>1</sup>. Murtaza Mutahhari, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (Tehran: WOFIS, 1991), 314, 309-312.

<sup>2</sup>. Mutahhari (1991), 306.

<sup>3</sup>. Mutahhari (1991), 66.

<sup>4</sup>. Haleh Afshar, "Women and the Politics of Fundamentalism in Iran," in Haleh Afshar, ed., *Women and Politics in the Third World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 126.

<sup>5</sup>. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Women and Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran," in Afshar (1996), 143.

<sup>6</sup>. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1996), 163.

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