

TERM: Islamic feminism

FIELDS: Authority. Community

DEFINITION:

An ideological current with that is both epistemological and an advocacy in nature, which challenges two knowledge systems: the Western-style feminism on the one hand, and the Islamic patriarchal system on the other. It is used as both an analytical as well as an identity category.

ARTICLE:

Feminism in Islamic societies has always reserved a space for the discussion of religion, which has distinguished it from the general current of feminism in the West. In the 1970s, a discourse on gender and Islam was forged in the public sphere which overlapped with the rise of social and political re-Islamisation, which led people to speak of "Muslim feminism" as opposed to just "feminism", understood as secular feminism. The debate regarding Islamic identity and the role of women instigated a revision of Islamic historiography that led to what was called "Islamic feminism" in 1995, an expression not to the taste of some of its leading figures.

Islamic feminism differs from Muslim feminism in that it is reformist and not merely idealistic, and it has a strong identity bias: Islamic dress, social and cultural interventionism and the political activism of its militants represent a kind of economic, social and political reaction to globalisation. However, the main new development regarding what had been customary in feminist debates lies in the fact that it also undertakes a re-examination of feminist frames of reference and a deconstruction of the conceptual structures of the Islamic tradition. On the one hand, Islamic feminists advocate the critical use of gender awareness as a mechanism to oppose restrictions imposed on women because of their sex. On the other hand, they propose a hermeneutics of the Qur'an and the Hadith that reopens the *ijtihad*, the interpretation of the sources of Islam, and exposes the manipulation of both the Qur'anic exegesis and the selection process of the Hadith. This is what its leading figures, such as the Pakistani professor Riffat Hassan, call a "contextual theology."

This reinterpretation operates within a dual synchronic framework: that of the Revelation and that of the reader, as opposed to traditional diachronic criteria of authority. Thus, the comprehensive study of Islamic disciplines identifies how patriarchal discursive practices have converted women into invisible components of Islamic history, even denying women their right to participate in the management of public life or to be imams. Amina Wadud, an African-American professor and activist who in 1994 took a step forward by guiding a community prayer of men and women in a mosque in Cape Town, has called for a gender jihad against this state of affairs which, in her own words, is a denial of the "legacy of Aisha", in reference to the young wife of the Prophet Muhammad who actively participated in the affairs of the first Muslim community.

The Islamic paradigm is seen and felt by these women as the necessary connection between feminism and society, and so Islamic feminism as a reformist project seeks to restore the true Islamic order of *takamul*, the complementarity of everything created, also between men and women. This is not a gender-specific paradigm, these feminists argue, but their anti-patriarchal revision makes it possible to reconsider the notions of justice, identity, citizenship and activism so as to include the path of every human being (the *sharia*) in the world as an integral part.

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