

"Islamic feminism": perils and promises.

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As a result of increasing modernization, many Muslim societies, including the Middle East, have witnessed an unprecedented rise in women's literacy rates. In 2000 literacy among the female population aged '15 years or over was estimated at 65% compared to less than 50% in 1980 (author's estimates, based on statistics reported for three regions of Asia in *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics*, NY: United Nations, 2000, 89). The traditional gender gap in the realm of education is closing and in some societies women's enrollment in higher education is equal to or even surpassing men's. This development has naturally resulted in women's increasing engagement in cultural, religious, and social life outside the private realm. Not only are women influenced by modernity, as a highly educated professional group, they themselves have become significant agents of change and modernization.

But changes in the patriarchal and patrimonial structure of the legal, political, religious and economic institutions of Middle Eastern societies, especially family law, family structure, gender stereotypes, and sexual mores, have lagged far behind the modern changes in the levels of socialization and political awareness of the new middle class women. On top of this contradiction, and in part because of it, women have faced a surge of Islamism that has commonly entailed a retrogressive gender agenda. While Islamism has brought about many setbacks in the individual rights of modernized and privileged urban upper and upper-middle class women, it has paradoxically pushed a, growing number of traditional, previously marginalized, recently urbanized middle class women into social, political and religious activism. Dominance of religious politics in all aspects of social as well as private life has ironically opened arenas--whether they be physical spaces, such as mosques, or intellectual arenas, such as learned theology debates--previously inaccessible to women.

Against this background, during the past two decades, a reform-oriented religious feminism--known in the West as "Islamic feminism" or "Muslim feminism"--has grown among Muslim women in different societies. This trend emerges primarily in cities among highly educated, middle-class Muslim women who, unlike many earlier pioneers of women's rights and feminism in the Middle East who were of a secular liberal, socialist ("Western") orientation, are unwilling to break away from their religious orientation, and hold Islam as a significant component of their ethnic, cultural, or even national identity. A growing body of literature and discussion on "Islamic feminism" has emerged in the field of the Middle East Women's Studies, stimulating at times useful and at times divisive debates among scholars and activists (e.g., Paidar, Smith, Mernissi, al-Hibri, Ahmed, Hassan, Hoodfar, Mir-Hosseini, Kian-Thiebaut, Tohidi, Fernea, Roald, Najmabadi, Nakanishi, Afshar, Moghissi, Abu-Lughod, Badran, Wadud, Keddie, Webb & Saleh, Moghadam, Cooke, Rostami-Povey, and Barlas) concerned with women's issues in the Middle East and other Muslim societies.

The confusion and controversy begin with the very name "Islamic feminism" and its definition. In the context of Iran, for example, two ideologically and politically opposite groups have expressed the strongest objections to this term and to any mixture of Islam and feminism. These include right wing conservative Islamists (fundamentalists) inside Iran who adamantly oppose Islamic feminism because of their strong anti-feminist views and feelings, and some expatriate leftist secularist feminists outside Iran who hold strong anti-Islamic views and feelings. Both groups essentialize Islam and feminism and see...

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