

# THE RAISING OF ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN EUROMEDITERRANEAN SPACE

**Marie-Laure Rodríguez Quiroga**

EMUI\_ Complutense University of Madrid

**Abstract.-** The XXI century has been defined as a historical process of relevance in the claims and pursuit of equal rights between the sexes. From within Muslim communities, women and men are involved in this process of change, involving to an unconditional commitment to the struggle against gender injustices. Thus, the Islamic Feminism has become a reference worldwide, through speeches and actions that contribute to the struggle against violence and gender discrimination. In recent years, this movement is taking a leading role in introducing not only activism, but even in the social policies of the government or in academic.

## About feminism

What is feminism? Why women are excluded? Where is the origin of such discrimination? What can be done to combat this global pandemic such as gender violence? lots of questions that have been raising in different parts of the world for centuries and that track the struggle towards gender justice.

Amelia Valcarcel referred to feminism as the "unwanted child of the Enlightenment age"<sup>1</sup>, when in the evolution of the eighteenth century the French Revolution proclaimed the ideas of equality, liberty and fraternity. It is in this particular European context where begins the claiming of the principle of equality of citizens (and not so much from the women citizens), relegating them to an excessive subordination. From there, there is a growing critical movement of women who challenge the established order, claiming a number of legitimate rights, some, not yet achieved.

Thus, feminist theory introduced in the historical sources, anthropological, cultural, economic, political, scientific, philosophical or religious, with the sole purpose of dismantling the patriarchal system:

Feminism is a political discourse based on justice. Feminism is a theory and political practice articulated by women who, after analyzing the reality in which they live, are aware of the discrimination suffered by reason only of being women and they organize to stop them, to change society. Based on this reality, feminism is articulated as a political philosophy and at the same time, as a social movement.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, feminism is founded on the principles of equality, free and equal citizens to law. A recurring mistake is to consider it as opposite to machismo, ignoring this is built on discrimination based on the belief that men are superior

<sup>1</sup> VALCÁRCEL, Amelia (2001), *La memoria colectiva y los retos del feminismo*, Naciones Unidas, Santiago de Chile, pág. 8

<sup>2</sup> VARELA, Nuria (2008), *Feminismo para principiantes*, Ediciones B, Barcelona, pág. 14

to women. Therefore, not only is not the same, but they are totally opposite positions.

### **Another way to show the essential islam**

Islam, emerged in the Arabian Peninsula was formed fourteen centuries ago as a spiritual lifestyle in direct connection between the person and the Divine<sup>3</sup>. It brought important changes in a society so-called "to ignorance", precisely because of its high degree of illiteracy, corruption and social inequality. Undoubtedly, the speech characteristic of Islam is the struggle against all social injustices and as a result, gender ones.

Islam is often presented as a whole, unique, ahistorical and monolithic, as if there was a closed-ended definition in advance. This way, is not taken into account if you are referring to an exhibition based on the spiritual, social, cultural or political.

Islam is a way of life, through which cements a source of guidance and inner development is feeding. Reducing it to a religion is totally wrong, because only recognize a system of dogmas and doctrine only, and therefore, directing toward orthodoxy. The revelation of the Qur'an encourages consistent ethical principles aimed at achieving cohesive and equal societies.

There is an intention to objectify the spiritual experience of the teachers of mankind, as if their message was too wide to fit an exercise of power. Should be differentiated, this sense of spirituality and religiosity, between a genuine experience of transcendence and its objectification in dogmas and doctrines, transitional forms too attached to worldly interests to pass as innocent..<sup>4</sup>

The reason plays a crucial role in human existence and Islam is no stranger to its meaning, which gives each individual responsibility in the government of his own life, both individual and collective aspects.

A careful study of the Qur'an also makes clear that revelation in any way is contrary to reason. Both are indeed complementary. While the reason helps us understand the physics of this universe (the whole development of the natural sciences depend on human intelligence), revelation helps us to find definitive answers to our origin and destiny. While the reason is an important source of enrichment in our material life, revelation is necessary for our spiritual growth.<sup>5</sup>

It is necessary not showing shyness about the wealth that Islam has in its interpretive plurality. Democratic values are closely related to the Quranic revelation and marked a historic turning point against the pre-Islamic establishments. Islam as a theoretical built, includes a duty to give voice to their

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<sup>3</sup> I use here the translation of Allah as 'Divinity', being conscious that the election of the name 'Good' has, in European imagination, a humanized male connotation linked to Catholic-Christian interpretations. It should be clear that, in Islam, Allah has no number no gender.

<sup>4</sup> PRADO, Abdennur (2006), *El Islam en Democracia*, Junta Islámica, Almodóvar del Río, pág. 1

<sup>5</sup> ALI ENGINEER, Asghar (2010), *Teología Islámica de la Liberación*, ADG-N Libros, Moncada (Valencia), pág. 29-30

citizenship, based on consensus and participation of all members. Necessarily implies pluralism, freedom of expression, conscience, human rights, etc.

### **About Islamic Feminism**

The association of concepts as "feminism" and "Islam" produce reactions, mostly of impact and disbelief, as if the union of these two words were an oxymoron, something difficult or impossible to combine. Therefore, in the beginning of this chapter is binding an attempt to match them that allow reaching an understanding of their meanings and ideological presuppositions on which it is immersed.

There are several attempts to define the term "Islamic Feminism." The term itself has been, and remains, subject of debate, controversy and discord within Muslim communities. It exist Islamic feminism? Can be feminist readings of the sacred texts of reference done? Is it necessary to label "feminist" to Islam? Can be feminism considered as a secular western discourse and an intrusive concept to Islamic praxis?

The task is not easy, but attempts to put on the table these and other issues, represent themselves a dialectical exercise that forces Muslim people think, reflect and analyze what is the reality in which they live and see any interference by the patriarchy in their ways of life, introducing speeches and practice outside the genuine islam. Of all the possible definitions, highlight that, in my view, is the most complete and accurate, provided by Valentine Moghadam:

Islamic feminism is a reformist movement focused on the Quran, led by Muslim women with the necessary theoretical and linguistic knowledge to challenge patriarchal interpretations and offer alternative readings towards improving the situation of women at the same time as a refutation of Western stereotypes and Islamic orthodoxy. Islamic feminists are critical about the legal status and social position of women and recognize that women are placed in subordinate positions, by law, by custom, in the family, economy and politics. In particular, they are critical of the contents of the "Muslim Family Law" and the ways in which these laws restrict the human rights of women to favor men. They reject the idea that Islam is involved in this kind of affairs. Their alternative argument is that Islam has been interpreted over the centuries (and especially in recent times) in a patriarchal and often misogynistic way, and the so-called Islamic law or sharia has been misunderstood and misapplied, and that both the spirit and letter of the Quran have been distorted. Their insistence that what is presented as "God's law" is in fact a human interpretation that constitutes a bold challenge to contemporary orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, we could say that Islamic feminism is a movement based on the Quran, which claims the ability to achieve equal rights between women and men within the framework of Islam. It should be stressed that the term "Islamic

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<sup>6</sup> PRADO, Abdennur (2010), *El lenguaje político del Coran. Democracia, pluralismo y justicia social en el Islam*, Editorial Popular, Madrid, pág. 192

feminism" is used in its generic use, knowing that there are a wide range of sensitivities, realities and priorities, therefore, should have no place contextualization of the various existing Islamic feminism, which should be engaged in another chapter. In this way, pick up the dynamic and concrete changes that occur within communities.

### **Origin of Islamic Feminism**

Drawing on original sources, I start from a foundation to consider feminist ideological assumptions that are deeply linked to Islamic cosmology. I take Joan W. Scott's reference to these yardsticks considering history before the arrival of the Quranic revelation, in that particular space-time context, the Islamic discourse was a breakthrough in a patriarchal system, providing a liberation for women and a breakdown of those subjugated forms of life that ran over the fundamental rights of women.

From the beginning until today, feminist discourses have been present in the different stages in which Islam has developed, but until some decades ago has not acquired the name. The history and Islamic tradition have collected many symbolic actions in the promotion and implementation of a latent equity. So, why the term Islamic feminism emerges? Where does the rhetoric happen? In response of what this movement consolidate? Are we talking about something different than Islam?

Performing a historical review of feminism is a necessary exercise to understand how the chronology of the human existence-feminist, is framed on a Eurocentric point of view. Thus, virtually all of the texts, publications and studies related to feminism have as protagonist the Western European context.

Still, no one can deny the fact that colonialism had a fundamental influence in the emergence of what today is meant by Islamic Feminism. Since the beginning of last century, the existence of ties between women from both sides of the Mediterranean sea, allowed the formation of transnational alliances in feminist struggles. The year 1923 will be marked as a milestone, after the Ninth Congress of the International Alliance for Women, which fought for the common interests of gender. Egypt was undoubtedly the starting point in Muslim societies in creating such distinctly feminist theoretical constructs, the result of the constant relations with the European secular feminism.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, an ideological Egyptian movement raised, majority covered by a euro-style feminism, secular, colonialist. Thus, Muslim feminists assume that there is no possibility of achieving gender equality from religion so, they must go towards secular society and policies.

In response to this view, comes another culturally Muslim women's movement to recognize Islam as part of their own identity and they can get benefits, but like the previous, take refuge in blaming Islam as the cause of gender discrimination and as a patriarchal religion, so action should be taken to combat it.

The decade of the 70-80 started to produce a turn of feminist consciousness through immanent readings of discourses developed so far and done a genealogy of its own postulates and a critique of power devices promoted by the "traditional feminism." Universalist and totalizing vision of the concept of "woman" did not consider these other peripheral women did not identify with the principles upheld.

Islamic Feminism falls within the third wave of feminism called postmodern. It is subdivided in contemporary tracks, sometimes divergent, each responsible for analyzing and reviewing concepts. This wave joins various forms of reflection, as is the case of postcolonial thought in which would be immersed the movement we focus in.

The ideological assumptions that European secular feminism maintains think of Islam as a religion is the cause of the oppression of women, so the only way to salvation for women will be abandoning their faith. It thus promotes a universal way feminist concept whose reading is secularization.

In this context, Islamic Feminism emerged as the movement that claims the ability to achieve equality between women and men in the framework of Islam, in an attempt to validate and recognize the struggles against gender discrimination from the essence of the Qur'an. Finally, is in the 90's when the term Islamic feminism is seen as a way to visualize and gain a voice.

Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Peace Prize, said to be feminists is not necessary to leave to be fully Muslim and it was from that condition of Muslims can denounce patriarchy as a system of oppression of one part of humanity on the other.

Thus, the degradation of Islamic tradition and the distortion of sacred texts has recognized. Therefore, we must attach to the Koranic tools to combat the patriarchal system interference within Muslim societies.

The continued attacks on Islam and the need to "Westernization"<sup>7</sup> of women's rights, are generating a response from the fundamentalist movements. Those see the female containment barrier to external attacks "modernization"<sup>8</sup>. All European pressure to release the woman feels like a colonial imposition, so that fundamentalist movements appeal to Islam as a sign of identity of Muslim communities, based on an ideology of resistance against Western imperialism. In this way, everything that has to do with modernity as advocates from the Western-style (including democracy) has to be brutally expelled and rejected.

In this way, forms a tight circle to which it is necessary to generate a strict separation of the sexes differently and define gender roles. This reaction to what is considered interference and Western penetration, plays multiple discriminations against women, which in turn are presented in the context of secular / Catholic as a sample of their oppressed condition latent because of Islam.

No doubt about the close relationship between Islamic fundamentalism and gender violence. Since the principles promoted by fundamentalist Muslim

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<sup>7</sup> Meaning secularization and abandon of faith

<sup>8</sup> From the orthodox perspective, the concept of modernity is understood as a western interference alien to Islam.

communities, all you have to do with "Western modernity" must be rejected and fought. In this context, Muslim women around the world are carriers of modernity and, therefore, if the woman is modernized, so does the whole society.

In this way, the woman is turned into the scapegoat on which to put all the pressure, by isolating and unable to develop independently. Despite the liberating message of Islam, patriarchy exported to the historical roles that have defined the women: submission, available to the individual for the benefit waiving family / collective selflessness, kindness, etc.

There is a growing discourse of confinement as religious precept, subjugating women and confined to the home living space finite. Contrary to the Quranic teachings, expand and promote a set of guidelines that restrict the emancipation of women, both psychological, social or economic or spiritual. So preach the duty to remain at home, not leave except what is necessary, delivered and absolutely devote to family, prohibiting the use of contraceptives, restriction of work outside the home, limitations on access to education, separation of visceral space, among other things.

In short, it outlines a deformed Feminine Mystique, enhancing the home in response to the message of liberation of Western women. Thus, the theory of domesticity for women seems to begin to grab the ideological bases of these groups want, uncontrollably, to avoid "contagion" of the Western liberating ideas.

This is where get special meaning the obsession about women's dress look. Thus, not only postulates a rejection of Western clothing, but is driven again, the excuse of the divine mandate to impose a way of dressing that further separates the public space. This is where using the Niqab comes to scene, as a brake for social relations, to access the job market, and ultimately with the exterior isolation and an impediment to their full political exercise as citizens.

Thus, this innovative construction of the human being women in Islam, as discriminative to Muslims women, making necessary to deconstruct these interpretations of the Qoran, to recover the liberating message that fourteen centuries ago guaranteed social status, economic and legal full rights of women and men.

### **Theoretical foundations of Islamic Feminism**

Despite popular belief, the transverse axis of Islam lies in recognizing the position of women on equal terms, and thus raise her status to full citizens, in balance with the masculine gender.

Thus, as Prophet Muhammed, a man who ran as defender and promoter of equal rights for women. During the early decades, was developing as Islam, correcting the inequalities were inherited from the Old Regime (pre-Islamic era) and setting a greater empowerment of the female gender. The arrival of Islam meant for women, recognition of a number of revolutionary rights to a patriarchal context in which the women lacked a proper and equal status.

The Quran recognizes the biological differences between men and women, but these differences do not assign any gender symbolism. In this way, does not bind men and women to specific gender roles, so the social roles of the sexes do not respond to their biology. Nor does it say that biological differences make them unequal. In this way, it is not regulated that social roles of women are focused on the domestic sphere. Both men and women are a fundamental pillar of society, so they are as capable as each other to perform any task.

For example, Muhammad worked with his own hands while other domestic responsibilities. "He was often milk, mend his sandals, sew clothes, feed the camels, shop lifting, etc.. Without accepting help from anyone."<sup>9</sup> .

Taking as example about the first Islamic society, Medina, we will appreciate the biography of women who played roles in both public and domestic sphere, recognizing women's right to work in any social field.<sup>10</sup> .

Another mention of vital importance, it focuses on the education of humans. The Islamic belief is based on that before the Earth was inhabited by human beings, the Divine created the pen to write, that was their first creation. Without a doubt, this story confirms the vital importance that in Islam has the knowledge. Since the Islamic worldview, education and the pursuit of knowledge is considered a religious duty for both women and men. It should be emphasized the concept of religious duty and not merely a recognized right. Through education builds character as a human being, regardless of the sex they belong. A person who has studied, which seek knowledge, is free and able to take decisions for themselves, without intermediaries and thus able to discern right from wrong.

Since the Islamic conception, spiritual beings, the woman and man are equal, because the woman's spiritual experience is not unlike that of man.

The highest level of jihad (effort) that everyone has to develop is the pursuit of knowledge. There are examples of women scholars in the Islamic tradition, which since the beginning of Islam, achieved strong positions of knowledge. The Mother of believers, Aisha bint Abu Bakr, is undoubtedly the historical reference for excellence, have earned recognition for his extensive knowledge in Islamic jurisprudence, medicine and literature, among others.

Aisha's contribution to the Islamic religious sciences is vast and significant. She excelled in all fields, both in the Quranic sciences and Tradition of the Prophet as in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).<sup>11</sup>

In summary, there are some of the rights of women and are part of the theoretical foundations of Islamic Feminism:

0. Right to life and decent treatment: The practice of burying newborn girl in the sands of the desert below the male was considered strictly forbidden and condemned. Also, do not allow any kind of abuse towards women. The last words of the Prophet Muhammed before his death were: "Treat women well," which certainly conveys the degree of commitment to the cause of female.

<sup>9</sup> Hadith reported by Al-Bukhari

<sup>10</sup> Further reading: BEWLEY, Aisha (2001): *Islam: el poder de las mujeres*, Palma de Mallorca: Kutubia Mayurqa

<sup>11</sup> LAMRABET, Asma (2008), *'Aisha Épouse du Prophète ou L'Islam au féminin*, Éditions Tawhid, Paris, pag. 69

1. Equal participation in social, political and economic world: the Prophet's companions participated actively in the development of public life. There is evidence of women rulers, public officials, judges, doctors, wise, imams, merchants, and so on. 100% participation on equal opportunities as men.
2. Recognition of Divorce: One of the forms of ill treatment to a woman, is to force her to be married against their will. If she requires, she can be divorced as if she were a divorced man. Failure to comply with any provision of the marriage contract is reason enough to justify breaking the marital bond.
3. Property rights: direct and immediate power of objects and goods, which is attributed to its owner the ability to dispose of it.
4. Legal status: which gives recognition to incur obligations and activities that generate full legal responsibility, compared to herself and third parties. Therefore, she has the right to develop an autonomous and independent contracts of the husband, father or another person.
5. Right to sexuality: The use and enjoyment of their own sexuality and may be grounds for divorce even sexual dissatisfaction. The husband is obliged to meet his needs whenever she requests it. The couple's sexual relationship is permitted as long as any act with the consent of both parties. Similarly, it is recognized the right to contraception as a form of self-control of sexuality as well as preventing unwanted pregnancies. Similarly, it is recognized the right to abortion.
6. Right to Work: Women can work on their own or for others, with the benefits intact in these activities for her, for use and enjoyment. The husband may not refuse to her work or exercise any kind of power on the money she earns. This measure involved in the origin a form of economic independence for women, thus avoiding the consequences that may carry for a woman her economic dependence on men. In case of divorce, she will have their own economic resources to succeed and the experience necessary to enter the labor market.
7. Rights of Women in the Mosque: Women has recognized the right of the entrance to the mosques where she would have, in mixed and the front door.

#### Islamic Declaration on the Rights of Women in the Mosque<sup>12</sup>

- Women have the right to access Islamic mosque
- Women have Islamic right to enter for the front door
- Women have the Islamic right to visual and auditory access to *Musala* (main chapel)
- Women have the right to pray at the Musala without gaps and can be located in the front rows and with believers mixed with men
- Women have the Islamic law to address any member of the congregation

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<sup>12</sup> Asra Q Nomani redacted the 'Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Mosque' after her return of the peregrination to Mecca, on March 1, 2004. NOMANI, Asra Q. "Rebelde en la Mezquita". En *La emergencia del feminismo islámico. Selección de ponencias del Primer y Segundo Congreso Internacional de Feminismo Islámico*. Barcelona: Oozebap - Colección *Asbab* (vínculos) - 02, 2008, pág. 75-83

- Women have the Islamic right to lead positions of responsibility, as imam, be part of the board and management committee
- Women have the right to participate fully in all activities
- Women have Islamic right to direct and participate in meetings and study sessions without any separation
- Women have the right to be treated with kindness
- Women have Islamic right to be treated with respect and without gossip or slander.

Since the essence of Islam, women do not come from man, as happens in the biblical account. Similarly, the human being has a spiritual value, so there are no differences between men and women. Whatever his attributes, all people are equal, so the base where Islam distinguishes between humans focuses on their moral praxis.

Affirm and repeated insistence that Islam is a patriarchal religion is a serious error. It should be clarified that while it is true that emerged at the core of a society rooted in patriarchy, in no way justifies that Islam advocates defend and patriarchy. So epistemology is inherently contrary to Islamic patriarchy.

### **Islamic Feminism dialogue with the other groups of women**

To participate in shared spaces in which different ways of understanding women and feminist, is an undeniable opportunity to contribute in strengthening ties of friendship, complicity, creating synergies between people who share fundamental values, such as gender equality and pluralism.

Communication is an essential tool for changing the model of a world has shown its failure. All women, to a greater or lesser degree, regardless of culture, society or context, have suffered throughout her life an episode of violence and inequality that subjugates their most fundamental rights.

Therefore, I consider essential to create events that allow not only meet, share experiences and build networks, but also have a space so that from the various proposals, dreams and needs, are offered options to design a different model, removing and turning the society.

But what challenges Islamic Feminism in dialogues with other groups of women / feminists? What obstacles are in other feminist discourses in order to develop on an equal conditions?

So cartoonizing I will try to show these barriers for islamic feminism in its dialogue with other groups of women / feminists.

Undoubtedly, there is resistance within the Muslim communities, but they also occur outside, as an opposition to accept the possibility that a Muslim person (whether male or female), can be a feminist at the same time. We, as collected in the Fourth International Congress on Islamic Feminism, have seen the persistence of a Eurocentric discourse that thinks that feminism is a property of West and you can not claim gender equality from another cultural context or

reference other than the European Enlightenment culture, and above all, secular.

Throughout all my years of experience in both conferences and participation in media debates, I have been collecting the most repeated phrases and formulas used to combat Islamic Feminism, which are but a sample of the phobia for religion and a rejection of other ways of understanding women.

*The "law of privilege"*

Tendency to make feel lucky European Muslim to be born in western societies more or less democratic. Pointing the finger to "blame" for being born in a specific geographical context, is an underestimation of their struggles and what is worse, a constant victimization of the "poor Muslim women submissive" to which they have to save the submission of the barbarism of men

*"Islamic feminism does not exist"*

A few months ago, Wassila Tamzali appeared in the media with an explosive headline: "Islamic Feminism does not exist," a repeated statement between some feminists who do nothing but deny the very existence of Islamic feminists and thus have fallen into the trap of patriarchy to make women invisible to others, belittling, excluding, deprived of the voice, the legitimate right to freedom of conscience, expression and ultimately usurping the right to be already exist.

*"Feminism does not have surnames"*

Sample refusal to put "names" to feminism. I am of the opinion of the need to add the word feminism to contextualize their struggle, not to be exclusive. Working within a religious framework attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal exegesis of the Qoran have been made. It condemns the abuses committed in the name of Islam and calling for freedom for all women, based on immanent readings to change their own reality.

*"Only One political agenda"*

Indeed, feminism / s is defined within a political agenda in the struggle against discrimination and gender inequality. Within the different feminisms there is a wide range of sensibilities, of realities and priorities. Can not provide similar solutions in different contexts. Not only is ineffective but may even be dammaging.

*"No religion is compatible with the freedom of women"*

It is true that Islam is used as the protective umbrella to carry out all types of discrimination, but if we identify as the source of these atrocities, then it will be agreeing with the fans and will incur the essentialist mistake about reading religion. And that's where the focus of Islamic Feminism differs.

Starting from the idea of treating all religions is inherently misogynistic as the only way to release the abandoning of belief. But why do we have to accept that they are the only possible interpretations? Why you can not have the right to interpret from a gender perspective?

*"I promote a secular state"*

There is a growing movement to reach unanimous truly secular states, at least in the European context, where individual freedoms are respected without governments, administrations and services have no cuts or deference to certain beliefs. Rarely there is an Islamic feminist discourse proclaiming the Sharia as a form of government.

### **As a conclusion**

8. In the XXI century, we are seeing a commitment by Muslim men and women to Islamic feminism. This is great news, to be spread and make visible.
9. Starting of the base of the awareness that gender equality is absolutely indispensable value and as Muslim citizens have the obligation to fight for gender justice.
10. The media are recreated in patriarchal attitudes, misogynistic and sexist, as if the only existing reality.
11. There are interpretations that are rooted in the egalitarian message of the Koran, but in the misrepresentation of the readings from a patriarchal perspective.
12. The secular model of emancipation of women has been a failure in the countries / Muslim communities, which is perceived as a manifestation of colonialism.
13. You must overcome the skepticism, supporting the movement of Islamic Feminism. Failure to achieve gender equality within the Muslim communities, it is creating a handicap to achieve more cohesive societies.
14. It must meet the bet and the need to collect Islamic feminism as a moral imperative.
15. You must claim the mantle of the political, intellectual, religious and social to combat gender violence.
16. To effectively fight against the patriarchal system, one must understand how it works in every context, and from there, it may provide the best solutions come from the sectors to come, secular and / or religious.