

No Spring without Flowers: Islamic Feminism and Public Opinion

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Abstract

Due to its believed ties with Western Feminism, Islamic Feminism and Arab Feminism has faced harsh criticism in the Arab world. The amount of research on the public opinion in regards to feminist culture and towards the current Muslim Feminist movement is limited. I hope this research can introduce a modest understanding of the ties between secondary education and the advancement of democratic thinking and awareness of women's issues in the opinion on, and therefore directly effecting, the Islamic sphere of academia. Through the research of students' opinions, I hope to answer whether education type, be it same sex or coed, has a causal effect on the awareness and acceptance of Islamic Feminism in the region and Jordan, specifically. If a correlation may be tied between a certain educational system and awareness of women's rights and the role of women in Islam, we may be able to advance our current state if it is heading into a gender healthy direction, or we may be able to stop in our tracks and alter our direction.

Introduction

A revolutionary wave is spreading across the MENA region, with unique progress between nations and a yet a common factor between them all. Women. The voices of women during such a time, have made a strong push to be heard and one of these is the voice of Muslim Feminists. This movement demands the rights of women that have been clearly established in a non-patriarchal religion, a religion that has been picked up for political agendas. Due to its believed ties with Liberal Feminism and Western Feminism, Islamic Feminism has been greeted with an onslaught of negative public critiques and unpopularity among a majority of Arab citizens across the MENA region. This paper seeks to better understand the public opinion in

regards to this movement and how this opinion may differ in regards to students from differing educational system backgrounds.

The Arab Spring was not only a movement of the upper and middle classes but it was made of masses from varying classes with differing demands. The Uprisings have seen minority groups such as the marginalized, youth, women, and lower class citizens, take to the street to demand equal representation in government and changes to their current states. It is not anomalous of the West, or any powerful body, to define and create a discourse that will advance its interests. One such instance occurs in the case of Feminism in the Arab world.

When women took to the forefront as a catalytic arm during the protests, and afterwards, as they began to demand to be included in decision making processes, they and their rights were marginalized to that of the society's. During the time of sociopolitical upheaval women played a pivotal role but once it became time to decide on the new order, they were once again excluded and their right's compromised. A Feminist movement such as Islamic Feminism, since its birth, has sought to marry two extremely influential aspects of Arab Muslim women's lives, that of Faith and women's rights. In a region that is already conscientiously suspicious of Western influences, and with the current uprisings Feminism has faced an onslaught of resistance as being no more than a Western tool of imperialism. Islamic Feminism has not only been critiqued at home but also in the West.

During a time that is witnessing the development of new social orders and opportune moments for the advancement of minority rights, and more specifically to this paper, women's rights, can Islamic Feminists contribute to the discourse at hand. This research hopes to study the Jordan University's youths' views on women's rights in the region during these events and the roles of Islamic Feminists.

Margot Badran (2002), defines Islamic feminism as “a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence” (Al Ahram). It is the application of the feminist belief in the equity in existence between males and females, as believed to already exist in the Quranic text. Islamic feminism came in rise during the “20th century to assume a strong stance against patriarchal norms, providing both a scholastic, theoretical basis for women’s rights and viable political development” (Eydat, 2013, p. 3).

Methodology

To test the public opinion of UJ foreign language students, I created a closed-ended structured survey that I distributed to a sample of students. I selected a class with first year, first semester students, because they have yet to fully develop new ideologies from the university environment and we can better analyze the ideologies they have received from school. I selected a sample of ten same sex students and ten coeducational students and distributed the survey.

Analysis

A Feminist by Any Other Name?

Table 1

	Coeducation	Total	Same Sex	Total
Advocates for women’s rights are feminists.	5	50%	6	60%
Advocates for women’s rights are <u>not</u> feminists.	2	20%	4	40%
Do <u>not</u> advocate women’s rights, are feminists.	2	20%	0	0

Do <u>not</u> advocate women's rights, are not feminists.	1	10%	0	0
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The first two questions were to establish the student's position in regards to women's rights issues, while simultaneously gauging their readiness to accept the title of feminism. 100% of same sex students were advocates for women's rights, while 70% of coeducational students were. The results of the right's activists from the same sex students, bifurcated between whether they dubbed themselves a feminist or not. 60% of advocates for women's right from the same sex school background believed themselves to be feminists, whereas 50% of students from the coeducational background accepted the title. The term was less derogatory to students from a same sex background, which shows their willingness and acceptance of the feminist cause. Whereas, coed students, found the title 'feminist', negative.

This shows that same sex students are more active in regards to women's rights but still believe there is a derogatory connotation to the term feminist. Whereas, coeducational students half are aware of the need to fight for women's rights in the area, while a percentage of the students do not believe women are in need of a state of change.

Islamic Academia

Table 2

	Coeducation	Same Sex
Islamic academia is dominated by men, and there is a stronger need for female scholars.	5	5
Islamic academia is dominated by men, and there is <u>not</u> a strong need for female scholars.	3	4

Islamic academia is equally divided by men and women, and there is <u>not</u> a strong need for female scholars.	2	1
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The next part of the survey was created to see whether students understood how inactive women were in the national decision making discourse. Students were asked if Islamic academia, exegesis(Quranic interpretation), hadith interpretation, and Fiqh(Islamic Jurisprudence) are dominated by male scholars? Also students were asked if they believed women should participate more. Half of both, same sex and coed, agreed that males dominated. The variations were apparent in the belief that men were leading and yet women were not highly needed in Islamic scholarship.

40% of the sample same sex school students, believed that male scholarship was all that is necessary. The research by Mael, Alonso, Gibson, Rogers, & Smith, (2005) was an “exhaustive systematic review of quantitative research” (p. 2) done in the area of study. They found that a set of “salient outcomes [could be] used to evaluate the efficacy of single-sex schools versus coeducational schools” (Mael et al., 2005, p. 11). One of these indicators focused on the adaption and socioemotional development of students on the short term level, including a focus on issues such as: future academic aspirations. In other words students from same sex school backgrounds, especially women, were usually highly exposed to gendered choices in college majors. USAID’s vocational tracking follows these stereotypes, showing that boys and girls rarely deviate from traditional careers. “Young women ...are encouraged to study hairdressing, handicrafts, manicuring, and sewing; young males are offered training in automobile mechanics, plumbing, and woodworking” (USAID, 2012, p.13).

I believe these women in same sex background were taught traditional gendered aspirations.

The careers would be selected in accordance to a person's sex. In this regard, since men are already dominating Islamic academia, then women should not strive to lead in such areas. This leaves Islamic interpretation biased.

Oxymoronic or Not

Table 3

	Coeducation	Same Sex
It is possible to be a Muslim and a Feminist.	9	8
It is <u>not</u> possible to a Muslim and a Feminist.	1	2

One of the leading misconceptions in the Middle East, is the belief that Islamic Feminism is directly tied and connected to liberal, imperialist, white feminism. The aversion to anything feminism is built on the belief that it is a foreign tool that has aided in the destruction of neighboring countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. A tool that empire has exploited, so as to free the voiceless Eastern colored women. To attach the term 'Islamic', which entails the qualities of a religion that already has clearly stated the relationships between male and female and the ways in which both should behave and the rights of both, is to deviate from those rules by applying Western Liberalist 'Feminist' beliefs. It is in this misunderstanding that the two terms can not be married in the perspectives of some.

Islamic Feminism ultimately rejects western feminism, but its eventual rise can be directly traced to the influence of western feminists thought in the 20th century as Islamic feminists were forced to assert themselves and create a movement that revolted

against the norms of western feminism, which they saw as a continuance of western dominance” (Eyadat, 2013, p. 3).

Counterproductive Shairah Rulings for Women’s Rights

Table 4

	Coeducation	Same Sex
Yes	7	9
No	3	1

In this question I attempted to gauge what students thought, if some so called ‘Islamic’ rulings, were actually counterproductive towards women’s rights, in politics, education, etc, or whether they believed these rulings were correctly based on the Islamic doctrine regardless of the way they were influencing women’s rights on the ground. 90% of same sex students believed that many rulings today were created in deviation from the true faith and were keeping women down, while only 70% of coed students believed that these rulings should be reevaluated. Also a higher number of student believed that these counterproductive rulings were actually based on true Islamic teachings.

Conclusion

I believe that my study has shown that students from a same sex background are taught to indeed follow gendered traditional jobs, but these students are still leading in comparison to same sex schools in their awareness of the need for women in these areas of Islamic study. I hope that during such a time that is witnessing the development of new social orders and opportune moments for the advancement of gendered rights, and more specifically to this paper, women’s rights, that women can be pushed in the schooling system to deconstruct derogatory meanings, break the belief in traditional careers and majors, and seek change in their current environment.

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Appendix

Survey

Circle the answer that best applies to you?

Age:

Faculty:

Gender

Male

Female

Your secondary school was:

coeducational

same sex

Would you consider yourself an advocate for women's rights?

Yes

No

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Yes

No

Other (Please Specify)

Do you believe an individual can be a Muslim feminist?

Yes

No

Do you think Islamic academia, exegesis(Quranic interpretation), hadith interpretation, and Fiqh(Islamic Jurisprudence) are dominated by male scholars?

Yes, men are leading in these areas.

No, it is somewhat equally divided.

No, women are leading.

Do you believe there is a strong need for female scholars in Islam, Hadith interpreters, Quranic exegetes (interpreters) and Fiqh jurists?

Yes

No

Do you believe it would be better for women's rights, in the region, if a female scholar were to tackle issues in Islam pertaining to women?

Yes

No, it is not necessary

Do you believe that there are specific interpretations and Shariah rulings that are counterproductive to women's rights?

Yes, in certain parts of the region.

No, all are based on true Quran and Hadith interpretations

Do you believe Jordan is in need of reform, in regards to women's rights?

Yes

No

Do you believe the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region is in need of reform, in regards to women's rights?

Yes, all

No, only in some countries

No, women's rights are not an issue

Do you believe the Arab Spring had a positive or negative effect on women's rights in the region?

Positive

Negative

Nothing changed