



The Gadfly

Dying for the Truth since 399 BCE

Vol. 12, Spring 2022-Spring 2023

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LaGuardia Community College's Philosophy Club in
Collaboration with the Department of Social Sciences
Presents

The Gadfly

Dying for the Truth Since 399 B.C.E.

Spring 2022/2023

Volume XII

Table of Contents

Note from the Editor	ix
Note from the Guest Editor	xi
1 Beyond the Veil: <i>Rethinking Empowerment, Agency, and the Muslim Women</i> <i>Huzaijiah Islam-Khan</i>	8
2 Impact of Language Privilege on Foreign Speaker Discrimination <i>Jocelyn Carrasco</i>	29
3 Issues Surrounding Regulations of Cryptocurrency <i>Weituo Chen</i>	34
4 When Minds Collide: Let Us Take the Time to Understand Why <i>Jahrena A. Hodge</i>	43
5 Forced Welfare Dependency: <i>An Introduction and Psychological Analysis</i> <i>Laredo Regular</i>	54
6 Moral Hazard In Financial Crisis <i>Ryan Jhin</i>	62

Note from the Editor

The Gadfly has operated as an undergraduate student philosophy journal run by the LaGuardia Community College Philosophy Club for over a decade. Since its inception, the journal has published annually the works of undergraduates at LaGuardia and beyond as a way to showcase the college's vibrant and diverse student community and to offer the opportunity for wider collaboration between CUNY students and those outside of the CUNY system. Unfortunately, the 2022 edition of the journal was severely delayed, and in an effort to showcase the remarkable talents of the students from the 2022 conference and the 2023 conference, this issue combines essays from presenters from both years.

I'd like to thank the 2022 conference's keynote speaker, Professor Rosa Terlazzo, for delivering a fascinating keynote address at our first in-person conference after the pandemic, and the 2023 conference keynote speaker, Professor Kris Sealey. I also want to thank the LaGuardia Humanities Department and the Philosophy and Critical Thinking Program, particularly the program director Dr. Cheri Carr. Thank you to the instructors who brought their students to the conference and the student attendees. Thanks also to the College Association for its continued support in funding the conferences over the years and to Flora Florez, Adesine Murray, Chris Singh, and Precious Harewood for their assistance in the business office.

My two co-chairs, Dr. Choon Shan Lai and Dr. Koun Eum from Social Sciences, are due unending thanks for their incredibly hard work and mentoring of several students included in this journal. Finally, I want to thank the students who presented at the conference and the larger LaGuardia community for supporting it as well. The 2023 conference attendance for the day was 115 students, faculty, and staff from across the LaGuardia community. It feels good to be back!

-Andrew McFarland, *Editor*

Note from the Guest Editor

It is with great honor and pleasure that I present this special issue of our philosophy journal. As guest editor, I had the privilege to edit a collection of thought-provoking articles that delve into philosophical and social inquiries, pushing the boundaries of our understanding of the world today.

Philosophy dares to ask fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, ethics, and society at large. Through intellectual exploration, we uncover hidden realities, critically examine beliefs, and engage in dialogue that broadens our perspectives about the world around us. This collection reflects this vibrant spirit of intellectual inquiry, showcasing diverse topics and methodologies in our attempt to make sense of the world around us.

Within this issue, you'll encounter articles delving into various topics, ranging from ethics to linguistics, psychology to economics. The collection reflects our embrace of interdisciplinary approaches in our inquiries, bridging philosophy with science, literature, art, and social sciences. These explorations enrich our understanding, fostering cross-pollination of ideas and encouraging dialogue between intellectual traditions.

I extend sincere gratitude to the authors for their invaluable contributions. Their dedication and creativity made this collection possible, igniting discussions and inspiring future research. I would also like to thank Dr. Andrew McFarland for giving me this opportunity to be part of this project. Additionally, I would like to take this moment to extend my thanks to Dr. Cheri Carr and Dr. Dana Trusso for their unwavering support and guidance throughout my time at LaGuardia Community College. Their wisdom and encouragement have profoundly shaped my intellectual journey.

I hope you find this special issue intellectually stimulating and enlightening. Philosophy challenges, inspires, and transforms our understanding. I trust these articles will invigorate this philosophical spirit within you.

- Huzaifah Islam-Khan, *Guest Editor*

Beyond the Veil: Rethinking Empowerment, Agency, and the Muslim Women

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Introduction

Sexist oppression takes many forms, and every individual experiences it differently. Numerous factors, such as sex, race, class, culture, nationality, religion, and worldview, play significant roles in shaping these experiences. What might be empowering for one person can be oppressive for another. Take the classic case of the hijab. For many secular feminists in the West, being told what to wear - and, in this case, being forced to cover oneself - is the pinnacle of sexist oppression. This is in radical contrast to how many Muslim women see the hijab. For them, the hijab is not solely a religious obligation mandated by God but also an act of celebrating one's identity as a Muslim. And not only that, wearing the hijab serves as an act of resistance against patriarchal societies, particularly within Western contexts where women's bodies are so often objectified and sexualized.

This is one of the many examples illustrating the existence of different and often competing conceptions of oppression and empowerment, demonstrating how these concepts can vary among individuals. Based on this premise, I argue that there is no single universal framework or system that can eradicate sexist oppression and empower women everywhere. This is especially true when the conception of what constitutes sexist oppression and what it means to empower women are so radically different for women across varying backgrounds and values. I argue this by conducting an intersectional analysis of the concerns and issues faced by Muslim women living in the West and the solutions they propose to overcome these challenges. In conducting this analysis, I pay special attention to how Muslim women's religious and moral values affect their concerns and the solutions they propose, all the while pointing out how this differentiates their experiences and concerns from other women (especially those of a secular feminist disposition).

This essay is divided into five sections. In the first section, I present the challenges facing Muslim women and how many of these challenges are

unique to them, especially in light of their religious values. This includes my analysis of the phenomenon of Gendered Islamophobia and the active misogyny within the Muslim community. Then in the second section, I lay down background information on Traditional Islam and Progressive Islam necessary to understand the two different responses from within Muslim women, these two different responses being Islamic feminism and Islamic traditionalism. In the third section, I provide a short evaluation of why Islamic feminism is not utilized by traditionalist Muslim women and the implications it entails. Then in the fourth section, I discuss how traditionalist Muslim women's notion of gender justice differs from that of liberal feminist praxis and why they cannot utilize that framework (at least not in its entirety). In doing so, I provide multiple ways of how they use their own traditional values and methodology to achieve their goals and empower themselves. I then conclude by reflecting on how much our values affect the challenges we face, the solutions we propose, and why a universalist framework such as those suggested by missionary feminists to combat sexist oppression does not work.

Sexist Oppression from Within and Without

Kimberle Crenshaw, a prominent scholar of critical race theory and a black feminist, coined the term “intersectionality” to explain how intersectional or overlapping identities in a given individual or a group affect how they experience and grapple with oppression.¹ Crenshaw's theory challenges the feminist universalist assumption of treating all women as if their experiences with oppression were monolithic and so in need of one universal (feminist) framework to address all of these issues. However, Crenshaw contends that this approach fails to account for the complexities faced by individuals with multiple intersecting identities. She writes, “Where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, as they do in the experiences of battered women of color, intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles.”² Although Crenshaw here focuses on the intersections of race,

¹ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

² Crenshaw, 1246.

gender, and class, her theory can be extended to encompass religious identity, which is particularly relevant to the experiences of Muslim women in our context.

Most Muslim women residing in Western societies possess intersectional identities, encompassing their gender, religious affiliation, race, and immigrant backgrounds. Consequently, they encounter a unique amalgamation of oppression that results from the intersection of sexism, racism, and Islamophobia. This struggle is further exacerbated when the misogyny they face partly emanates from within their own community, some of whom abuse religion to justify and legitimize their oppressive actions. It is crucial here to also analyze in which sphere of their lives these challenges manifest and the specific forms it takes. While it is important to recognize that these forms of discrimination are not confined to any single sphere of their lives and are not mutually exclusive, it proves beneficial for the purposes of this discussion to categorize them as external (originating from the broader Western society) and internal (originating from within the Muslim community and within their own households).

The prevailing manifestation of discrimination in the external sphere is predominantly characterized by what is widely known as Gendered Islamophobia. Gendered Islamophobia is a compounded form of oppression resulting from the intersection of sexism, racism, and Islamophobia, generally directed towards Muslim women (especially those with hijab) who “are portrayed as weak, oppressed, repressed, and helpless victims.”³ This form of Islamophobia results in “femicide, sexual assault, domestic and family violence, trafficking, harassment, and abuse”⁴ and “is rooted in and lives at the intersection of heteropatriarchy, institutional Islamophobia, and interlocking systems of oppression that produce gender-based violence and negatively impact the quality of life for Muslim women and girls.”⁵ This reality is further illustrated in *Hijab, Gendered Islamophobia, and the Lived Experiences of Muslim Women*, an ethnographic exploration by Naved Bakali and Nour Soubani, where they observed that Gendered Islamophobia is

³ Niqabae, “What Is Gendered Islamophobia? Sidrah Ahmad Explains,” Muslim Girl, May 18, 2018, <http://muslimgirl.com/pre-ramadan-gendered-islamophobia-sidrah-ahmed/>.

⁴ Darakshan Raja, “What Is Islamophobia?,” Justice for Muslims Collective, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.justiceformuslims.org/islamophobia-2>.

⁵ Raja.

prevalent among hijab-wearing Muslim women and girls “in [the context of] societal interactions; within schooling contexts; in media representations; and through the sexualization of the Muslim female subject.”⁶ Additionally, a 2017 study conducted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) also found that American Muslim women are more likely to be victims of hate crimes in the post-Trump era and are easier targets of Islamophobia.⁷

Another equally prominent form of external oppression Muslim women actively face is from fellow women, especially those of a missionary feminist persuasion. These individuals perceive Muslim women as either victims requiring rescue or, even worse, as women afflicted by internalized sexism. Serene Khader, a feminist theorist specializing in the study of missionary feminism, states:

[Missionary feminism] stems more from ethnocentrism, justice monism, and idealizing and moralizing ways of seeing that associate Western culture with morality (and thus prevent Western culture and Western intervention from becoming objects of normative scrutiny) than from universalist commitment to the value of gender justice. Ethnocentric justice monism is the view that it is only possible to actualize gender justice within one set of (Western) cultural forms. Idealizing and moralizing ways of seeing describe the world according to a false social ontology wherein the West’s putative moral superiority derives from endogenous cultural factors and suggest that political actions are to be evaluated as expressions of moral judgments rather than negotiations of interests and power.⁸

⁶ Nour Soubani and Naved Bakali, “Hijab, Gendered Islamophobia, and the Lived Experiences of Muslim Women,” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, August 17, 2021, 21,

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/hijab-gendered-islamophobia-and-the-lived-experiences-of-muslim-women>.

⁷ Dalia Mogahed and Youssef Chouhoud, “American Muslim Poll 2017: Muslims at the Crossroads,” *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding*, August 19, 2020, 14, <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2017/>.

⁸ Serene J. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transitional Feminist Ethic*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2018), 22.

Khader highlights how this view has been used as part of imperialist projects, making “the West as primarily and exclusively an agent of moral progress.”⁹ When this view is coupled with the notion that Islam is a patriarchal religion that oppresses women, it becomes all too easy to view Muslim women as those who need saving or women suffering from internalized sexism. Consequently, this justifies why the issues and concerns of Muslim women are not taken seriously until they opt for the Western secular moral standards of gender justice. This viewpoint, whether explicitly or implicitly, thus implies that Muslim women must forsake Islam (or certain aspects of it) to become “proud feminists,” effectively depriving them of agency in determining what approach best serves their overall struggle against oppression, which is now tinged with shades of imperialism.

This view that Islam oppresses women is not unfounded, as evidenced by the treatment of Muslim women within their own communities. It is, however, essential to note here that the issues highlighted by feminists concerning Muslim women, although sometimes overlapping with the concerns expressed by Muslim women themselves, do not encompass the entirety of the problems being addressed by Muslim women. Take, for example, the case of the hijab. While it is a central concern for missionary feminists, for most Muslim women, it is not directly related to the core issues they strive to tackle. Instead, what concerns these Muslim women is the misogyny they face from within their own Muslim communities, where they are actively marginalized by Muslim men in both social and, more importantly, religious spheres. This ranges from gender stereotypes to the lack of women's representation in leadership positions, hindering their ability to voice the concerns of Muslim women effectively. Particularly, these concerns revolve around limited access to suitable prayer spaces in mosques and a lack of opportunities to acquire religious knowledge and education. This problem is illustrated in a survey cited in *Is Feminism the Problem?*:

mosques [across North America in 2014] reported a decade-long average female attendance of 18% at events like Friday prayer, compared to male attendance of 77%. [...] While many mosques included women's programs, only 4% of them prioritized these programs and activities, and only 3% of

⁹ Khader, 48.

mosques prioritized women's voices at events, lectures, and other platforms.¹⁰

The relatively low attendance of women in Friday prayers at mosques can be partially attributed to the fact that men's attendance is religiously obligatory in Islam, whereas it is optional for women. However, the statistical evidence presented above undeniably indicates that these places of worship are largely unwelcoming to women. The most distressing and formidable aspect of this oppression and misogyny lies in the exploitation of Islam as a justification for such acts. So Muslim women who challenge these sexist oppressions are made to be seen as not challenging the oppressor and the system of oppression, but rather the religion itself - and in effect - God. This dynamic has created a significant obstacle within the Muslim community, hindering the empowerment of women and their ability to contribute meaningfully both socially and spiritually. However, it is also important here to note that despite these challenges, as I present in the following sections, "some Muslim women continue to exercise their own agency to excel, achieve, represent their faith, and lead in their communities."¹¹

Traditionalist vs. Progressive Islam

With sexist oppression stemming from both within and without, Muslim women are confronted with two very perplexing questions: 1) Where does this oppression originate? 2) How should they, as devout Muslim women, address these issues? Leaving their religion to pursue "gender justice," as proposed by missionary feminists, is categorically dismissed as an option since Muslim women perceive Islam not as the problem but as the solution itself. However, in trying to use Islam as a tool to achieve gender justice and combat the issues they face, two distinct and contrasting responses emerge among Muslim women. The first response is what I will refer to as Traditionalism due to the absence of a specific name for this group, which comprises Muslim women who adhere closely to tradition and are associated

¹⁰ Nour Soubani and Tesneem Alkiek, "Is Feminism the Problem? Why Ideological Bandwagons Fail Islam," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, November 1, 2017, 6,

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/is-feminism-the-problem-why-ideological-bandwagons-fail-islam>.

¹¹ Soubani and Alkiek, 6.

with Traditionalist Islam. The second response is Islamic feminism, which falls within the broader movement of Progressive Islam. Although this paper focuses on the approaches employed by traditionalist Muslim women to attain gender justice, it is beneficial to briefly explore how their discourse on gender justice differs from that of Islamic feminists. This discussion will elucidate why traditionalists do not embrace Islamic feminism as a framework for addressing sexist oppression. So to understand this tension between traditionalist Muslim women and Islamic feminists, we have to first understand the two conflicting manifestations of Islam as it stands in the modern vernacular, the conflict between Traditionalist Islam and Progressive Islam.

Traditionalist Islam is characterized by *tradition*, or how Islam has been understood and practiced for the bulk of Islamic history. This trend makes up the majority of Muslims today compared to its significantly smaller progressive counterpart. Traditional Islam rests on the idea that Islam rests on three fundamental sources, all of which are considered to be inviolable and binding. These are 1) the Qur'an, the literal word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, 2) the *Sunna*, the traditions, sayings, and practices of the Prophet as recorded in what is known as the *Hadith* literature; and 3) *Ijma'*, unanimous consensus of Islamic scholars in the matter of Islamic law and theology.¹² These are considered the primary basis of Islam, and any religious, ethical, and legal claims made should be derived from within this framework to be counted as what is "Islamically" permissible and legislated. Muslims would use the *sunna* and *ijma'* to understand and interpret the Qur'an, and *vice versa*. So all three sources have to go in tandem to generate the "true" interpretation of Islam, as intended by God and His Prophet. And although there are secondary and tertiary sources utilized by Islamic scholars (such as *ijtihad* or judicial reasoning), all these sources are contingent upon the three primary sources. Muslims would insist that anything outside of this is an innovation (*bid'a*) in religious matters and should not be adopted.

In their struggle against sexist oppression, traditional Muslim women use these three primary sources and traditional hermeneutics. This is what is meant by "the tradition" that these Muslim women constantly refer to, the belief that justice is revealed by God through these sources. It is noteworthy that, akin to their male counterparts, traditional Muslim women contend that

¹² Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Shariah Law: Questions and Answers* (London, England: Oneworld, 2017), 19.

concepts such as equality, gender justice, sexual differentiation, and human rights should be derived exclusively from religious texts rather than modern liberal thought. This has led them to accept essentialist notions of gender and gendered laws within their social and religious practices. They believe that although men and women are ontologically equal, they are different in their own God-assigned roles and disposition. Take the example of the Islamic law that forbids women to fast and pray during their period or the law that forbids men from wearing gold and silk while permitting it for women. Or, more controversially, the law of inheritance that assigns the daughter half of the son's share. These laws for traditional Muslims are all well established, and traditional Muslim women do not consider this sexist or patriarchal - because they believe it to be the law as mandated by God. Instead, what they regard as patriarchal or sexist is the failure of Muslim men to accord women their God-given rights, actively marginalizing them within the community.

This differentiation of the sexes in matters of Islamic law has caused Islam to be labeled patriarchal and sexist by feminists and consequently resulted in positing a clash between Islam and feminism. Nevertheless, a segment of Muslim women insists there is no clash between Islam and feminism. This segment of Muslim women argues that Islam is a gender-egalitarian religion. The only reason it seems to have lost its true ethos is due to the prevalent male scholarship in its interpretation and understanding. This scholarship and control have resulted in Islam's rampant patriarchal understanding and the oppression of Muslim women throughout history. So it is not Islam that conflicts with feminism, but rather a patriarchal interpretation of Islam that has resulted in this clash. So the solution is to reclaim Islam from patriarchal understandings and interpret it in light of feminist principles of gender justice. This argument is the crux of what is known as Islamic feminism. It is defined as "a feminism anchored in the discourse of Islam with the Qur'an as its central text and exegesis as its main methodology. The core idea of Islamic feminism is the full equality of all Muslims, male and female alike, in both the public and private spheres."¹³

It is important to clarify here that Islamic feminism, as a movement, does not belong to Traditionalist Islam, which is why they differ from traditionalist Muslim women. Instead, Islamic feminism belongs to another

¹³ Margot Badran, "Exploring Islamic Feminism," Wilson Center, November 29, 2000, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/exploring-islamic-feminism>.

trend known as Progressive Islam, which emerged as a result of the Islamic revivalist movements in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁴ This trend is characterized by its espousal of liberal thought from within Islam. This includes advocating and arguing for progressive values such as democracy, human rights, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights, among other things.¹⁵ They do so by reinterpreting the Qur'an and employing *ijtihād* (independent juridical reasoning) in its understanding while dismissing the *ḥadīth* literature and *ijmā'*. This is in sharp contrast to the traditionalist Muslim methodology where the Qur'an is understood in light of the *sunna* and *ijmā'* - and not alone, and definitely not just on *ijtihād*, where *ijtihād* is secondary or even tertiary to the *sunna* and *ijmā'*.

The Progressive Muslims and Islamic feminists deem the *sunna*, as documented in the *ḥadīth* literature, as not being authentically preserved and should therefore be dismissed. They see the *ḥadīth* literature as containing dictums and actions that are incongruent with the "gender egalitarian" spirit of the Qur'an and feminist principles.¹⁶ They cite an example of this in the dictum of the Prophet, where he declares to Muslim women that they are "deficient in intellect and religion."¹⁷ Additionally, they dismiss the authority of *ijmā'* (consensus) as they view it as a means of control exerted by male scholars over the religion. Consequently, Islamic feminists develop their own "modern" hermeneutical approaches to interpreting the Qur'an – which, for the most part, has no precedent in classical and medieval Islamic scholarship. Aysha Hidayatullah, a scholar of Islamic feminism and a Muslim feminist herself, explains this hermeneutics:

scholars of feminist exegesis commonly employ the methods of historical contextualization, intratextual reading, and the tawhidic paradigm [the assertion that sexism is a form of polytheism/idolatry since it attributes a God-like role to men over women]. They have argued that the Qur'an should be understood as a text revealed in the terms of its immediate

¹⁴ Charles Kurzman, ed., *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, Reprinted (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010).

¹⁶ Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 126.

¹⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Bukhārī, no 304.

seventh-century Arabian audience but also as a universally meaningful text for all its audiences. They have prioritized the Qur'an's general principles over its particular statements, observing the conditional and restricted meanings connoted within its syntactical structures. They have also resisted sexist and violent meanings of the Qur'an by insisting that its verses must be read in line with the Qur'an's larger messages of justice, harmony, and equality, as well as the principle of God's unity and oneness. [...] [They] are concerned with "going back to the sources" and reevaluating the Qur'an independently, laying claim to the right of *ijtihad* and bypassing traditional authorities.¹⁸

So overall, the modern hermeneutical approach of Progressive Islam enables the advocacy of a uniquely "Islamic" feminism that exposes and eliminates patriarchal interpretations of Islam while fostering a gender-egalitarian understanding of the religion. This framework strives to attain complete equality between genders within the Muslim community. It works towards the feminist objectives of gender justice in both external and internal spheres, as experienced by Muslim women. Noteworthy proponents of Islamic feminism, particularly within Western discourse, include Riffat Hasan, Azizah al-Hibri, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, Kecia Ali, and Aysha Hidayatullah, among others. These female scholars, situated within the Western academic context, employ this methodology to counter "patriarchal Islam" and address the challenges of missionary feminism.

Evaluating Islamic Feminism

Apart from the fact that Islamic feminism is a manifestation of Progressive Islam, there is resistance and skepticism among many traditionalist Muslim women toward this movement. The question arises: Why are Islamic feminists deemed to be uncredible by the majority of Muslims? After all, isn't Islamic feminism an answer for the liberation of Muslim women from the clutches of patriarchal Islam while also effectively addressing how Islam and feminism are compatible contrary to the suggestions of missionary feminists? The answer to this lies primarily in the serious theological implications it has for traditionalist Muslims in employing the modern hermeneutics as

¹⁸ Hidayatullah, 125–26.

proposed by these Islamic feminists in their struggle for gender justice. Due to this, traditionalist Muslims have conducted extensive critiques of Islamic feminism. These critiques range from pointing out methodological inconsistencies within their hermeneutics to problematic theological conclusions Islamic feminists draw. For the purpose of this discussion, I provide three main critiques as to why traditionalists do not subscribe to or utilize Islamic feminism in their combat against sexist oppression.

Firstly, one of the central premises that underlie the Islamic feminist project is the idea of reclaiming the “true” gender-egalitarian spirit of Islam that has been misunderstood by the bulk of Muslims throughout Islamic history, right until modern times when Islamic feminists are able to draw it out through their modern hermeneutics.¹⁹ However, this premise presupposes that the modern conception of gender equality is established by the Qur’an, a premodern text, where the notion of gender equality was understood very differently and was not a primary concern like it is today. Raja Rhouni, a scholar of Islamic feminism, makes this point as she writes:

The major flaw of Islamic feminism is its central assumption of recovering gender equality as a norm established by the Qur’an, ignoring the way Qur’anic discourse contains at least two competing voices regarding women, one egalitarian (ethical) and the other hierarchical (practical).²⁰

For Rhouni, this then leads to the “tendency to put forward the project as essentially one of retrieval, retrieving the egalitarian truth of Islam that was buried,” which is unjustified and assumes a feminist conception of gender justice in the Qur’an *a priori*.²¹ Based on this, she further critiques the Islamic feminist hermeneutics in their exegesis of the Qur’an as inconsistent:

I do not agree with the methodology that chooses to give a more progressive, or egalitarian, meaning to a verse and presenting it as the truth, when it has the means to do so, while resorting to the idea that such and such verse needs to be

¹⁹ Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, Original edition (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 324.

²⁰ Raja Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009), 35.

²¹ Rhouni, 34.

contextualized in order to discover its contingency, when it reaches a semantic dead-end. To put it clearly, I disagree with the approach that reinterprets verses to invest them with a more modern and more egalitarian meaning, on the one hand, and that resorts to a historical and contextual reading when no progressive meaning can possibly be invented, on the other hand.²²

Indeed, Rhouni's critique raises valid concerns that shed light on why traditionalist Muslims often approach the Islamic feminist project with suspicion. The rejection of "the tradition," as advocated by Islamic feminists, is a central factor in this apprehension. Hidayatullah identifies this as the primary reason why many traditionalist women perceive Islamic feminists as suspects of "participating in a project guided by foreign and imperialist notions of feminism, and of advocating a revamping of gender roles that are antithetical to Islam."²³ Indeed traditional Muslim women, such as Tasneem Alkiek and Nour Soubani, a scholar of Islam and a Muslim activist, respectively themselves, express this sentiment:

[Islamic feminists asking traditionalist Muslim women] to embrace everything labeled 'feminism' and jump wholeheartedly on to this ideological bandwagon in order to solve the community's challenges associated with gender. Meanwhile, other Muslims see feminism as a foreign threat to the integrity of Islam, a poison that will gradually erode all core Islamic values by forcing Muslims to change religious traditions to adopt western liberal ideals and norms.²⁴

Although I will return to the point about how traditionalist Muslim women view feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression, it is essential to point out here that they view Islamic feminists as not allowing the Qur'an "to speak for itself" and to be manipulating the text to align with "western liberal ideals." It is important here to understand that for these women, Western values of equality and justice are just another set of values that are set in history and context - and so are not universal as it is treated by both

²² Rhouni, 14.

²³ Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, 145.

²⁴ Soubani and Alkiek, "Is Feminism the Problem? Why Ideological Bandwagons Fail Islam," 7.

Muslim and missionary feminists alike. So when Islamic feminists employ their hermeneutics, they are, in effect, projecting historically specific notions of gender justice onto the Qur'an, rendering their reading anachronistic. Hidayatullah herself contends to this point, as she assesses:

We [Islamic feminists] have perhaps become blind to the historicity of our feminist viewpoints in encountering those instances when the Qur'an does not easily conform to our understandings of gender egalitarianism. As a consequence, we have developed interpretive techniques and complex interpretive maneuvers to try to prove that, in spite of what the text appears to mean, the Qur'an somehow coheres with our notion of gender egalitarianism. This strategy is inadequate and at times disingenuous, as it obfuscates the inclinations of the Qur'an that may be irreparably nonegalitarian from our contemporary perspective. To put it bluntly, on some level our critics are correct: we have sometimes tried to make the Qur'an mean what we want it to mean, manipulating the text in our desire to derive textual support for our notions of justice.²⁵

Even granting this *a priori* assumption of the Qur'an, another widely held critique of Islamic feminism is in their hermeneutical approach of historicizing the Qur'an in its reinterpretation. Islamic feminists employ this method of historicization to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive laws, enabling them to dismiss much of the gendered laws within the Qur'an on the basis that it was meant for 7th century Arabia and not for modern times.²⁶ This has then allowed them to make space to advocate for religious and social laws that treat men and women equally in all aspects, outside explicit verses of the Qur'an. However, this is a cause for another set of methodological inconsistencies by their own standards. This is primarily because the historical context in which the Qur'an is revealed is recorded in the *ḥadīth* literature, which, as I have discussed previously, is rejected and dismissed by Islamic feminists for not reflecting the gender-egalitarian ethos of the Qur'an. Despite this, traditionalist Muslims point out, Islamic feminists have nitpicked specific *ḥadīth* reports when it supports their cause and interpretation - while they reject the bulk of it when it is not in their favor. Hidayatullah, in her assessment of this issue, writes:

²⁵ Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, 151.

²⁶ Hidayatullah, 71–81.

[Islamic feminists] are inclined to cite certain Hadith reports positively without scrutinizing their historical authenticity when they support the just treatment of women, and they use them to buttress their interpretations of the Qur'an. In other cases, they argue for the inauthenticity of Hadith reports that demean women, rejecting those reports and maintaining that the Qur'an must be prioritized over them. Furthermore, in many of their interpretations of the Qur'an, they do not consult the Hadith tradition at all. Thus the application of the historical contextualization method in the field of feminist tafsir [exegesis of the Qur'an] as a whole reveals an inconsistent usage of the Hadith and Sunna [the normative practices of the Prophet] and a selective scrutiny of the sources of historical information.²⁷

Having illustrated the methodological critiques of Islamic feminist hermeneutics, we now turn to the primary reason why traditionalist Muslim women do not utilize Islamic feminism in their combat against sexist oppression. This stems from the profound theological implications that arise from the methodology employed by Islamic feminists, which entails a reevaluation of the divine nature of the Qur'an. Muslims view the Qur'an as the literal verbatim word of God, His last revelation to humanity, and it holds the theological status of having "eternal and unchanging validity."²⁸ The Qur'an is revered as the ultimate spiritual, moral, and legal authority and guide. To question the divine nature of the Qur'an is viewed as a grave heresy within all sects of Islam, and it is considered an inviolable tenet of the religion. However, Hidayatullah, in her book *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, after analyzing and providing many critiques of the works and methodologies employed by her Islamic feminist predecessors and contemporaries (some of which have been presented above), concludes "that feminist conceptions of justice and equality may not be fully reconcilable with the text of the Qur'an."²⁹ However, as an Islamic feminist herself, she will not "surrender the Qur'an to patriarchy and sexism."³⁰ So with this insistence, in the final

²⁷ Hidayatullah, 81.

²⁸ Jane Dammen McAuliffe and Fred M Donner, "The Historical Context," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23.

²⁹ Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, 178.

³⁰ Hidayatullah, 172.

chapter of her book, she took the goals of Islamic feminism to its logical conclusion and wrote:

We [Islamic feminists] will need to pursue a vision of the Qur'an as a divine text that allows us to imagine justice outside the text's limited pronouncement. [...] I posit that there are ways to pursue this route while also maintaining the belief in the divine revelation of the Qur'an if we are able to rethink the nature of God's speech in the Qur'an.³¹

This radical reinterpretation of the nature of the Qur'an, solely based on the argument that it does not align with the feminist vision of gender justice, is regarded as highly problematic by traditionalist Muslims. Aisha Hasan, the founder of the Qarawiyyin project, a global initiative for traditional Muslim women, articulates this perspective by highlighting the inherent challenge it poses to the concept of God's justice and guidance for humanity. Such a viewpoint is deemed an extreme form of heresy within mainstream Islam and is therefore considered theologically unacceptable.³²

The analysis presented above indicates that while Islamic feminism proves effective in addressing issues facing Muslim women in both the external and internal spheres, subscribing to it as a model to combat sexist oppression will result in radically challenging the fundamental theological tenants of Islam. This is particularly evident when the methodology employed by Islamic feminists is viewed in achieving this goal is seen as being inconsistent and ingenious by traditionalist Muslims.

Gender Justice from Within the Tradition

So, what framework do these traditionalist women use to address both the internal and external oppressions they face if they refuse to subscribe to Islamic feminism? Even if there is a conflict due to the theological premise of Islamic feminism, why can't they utilize feminism? Will they neglect the feminist goals and feminist framework as a whole? It is important to point out here that for traditionalist Muslims, Islam represents a complete system

³¹ Hidayatullah, 173–76.

³² Al-Arqaam Institute and Aisha Hasan, "Feminism," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfFFfF880XQ>.

of life and ethical code set by God Himself to guide and facilitate every aspect of human morality. So as devout Muslims, for every moral choice they make, they must be guided by the teachings and values laid down in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. So traditionalist Muslim women, based on this theological premise, cannot predicate their notions of women's liberation, equality, gender justice, and sexual differentiation on the sociocultural norms of the secular West or any other ethical code. These notions are all to be derived purely from the tradition as revealed by God - if indeed they can be derived. So in line with this belief, traditionalist women propose that the solution lies in re-emphasizing and reviving the discourse on gender and justice as taught in the Qur'an and the *sunna* and by implementing its teachings within their families, mosques, and communities. However, they are willing to utilize feminism as a framework where it aligns with Islamic values and feminist goals. Zara Khan, a scholar of comparative political theory, explains that liberal feminist praxis is based on several premises, among which are:

[1] social, economic, and political equality for all genders; [2] That there are more than two genders; gender is not necessarily linked to biological sex; gender is fluid; and individuals can identify their own gender; [3] Violence against women and sexually non-conformist people is wrong and must be stopped; and [4] Human beings enjoy complete sexual freedom (bound by consent) including the freedom to sexually couple without a marital contract and the freedom to sexually couple with same-sex partner(s), etc.³³

Traditionalist Muslims cannot agree, at least to its full extent, with these premises - especially considering that Islamic law is gendered. For instance, the Islamic law of inheritance stipulates that daughters receive half the share of sons, which may seem sexist and contrary to the principle of economic equality emphasized in liberal feminist praxis. However, traditionalist women point out that although men are favored over women in this particular scenario of inheritance, there are, in fact, ten scenarios in which women get the share equal to men and sixteen more cases in which women get more

³³ Zara Khan, "Balancing Feminism, Human Rights, & Faith," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, July 16, 2019, 4, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/balancing-feminism-human-rights-faith>.

than men.³⁴ The difference in inheritance shares is not based on gender but rather on factors such as proximity to the deceased and the Islamic legal responsibility of one party to provide for the other.³⁵ So rather than understanding Islamic inheritance law based on the first premise of liberal feminist praxis, they argue that it has to be understood in its own term with its own notion of justice and equality - which is different from that of the modern notion of economic equality for the genders in all aspects. A similar analysis can be done with the rest of the premises presented, but suffice to say that feminism as a whole is not the most suitable framework for these Muslim women to employ in their struggle against the various forms of oppression they face, especially given their differing conceptions of justice and equality. However, it is important to note that when it comes to the external oppression they face, such as gendered Islamophobia, Muslim women are more than willing to fight alongside feminists and fellow women for women's overall well-being in general society. While they may not explicitly identify as feminists due to underlying ideological differences, they are open to forming alliances with various groups to secure rights for all oppressed individuals, thereby benefiting themselves as well.

However, these Muslim women take a more nuanced Islamic approach when it comes to the internal oppression they face. So what does it mean to implement the teachings of Islam and revive the Islamic discourse on gender and justice? Is it, not those very “Islamic” notions that have subjected these women to begin with? When traditionalist Muslim women advocate for implementing the teachings of Islam and reviving the discourse on gender and justice, they do not see it as perpetuating the very oppression they seek to address. They acknowledge that problematic interpretations of Islam by certain scholars have reinforced misogynistic rhetoric and marginalized Muslim women. However, they argue that this issue stems from culturally biased readings of the tradition rather than the religion as a whole. Unlike Islamic feminists who advocate for modern gender-egalitarian hermeneutics, traditionalists believe that the problem can be resolved within

³⁴ Salah Soltan, *Woman's Inheritance in Islam : Discrimination or Justice?* (Hilliard, OH: Sultan Publishing, 2004), 39.

³⁵ Nazir Khan, Tesneem Alkiek, and Safiah Chowdhury, “Women in Islamic Law: Examining Five Prevalent Myths,” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, July 24, 2019, 29, <https://yaqueeninstitute.org/read/paper/women-in-islamic-law-examining-five-prevalent-myths>.

the tradition using traditionalist hermeneutics. Take, for example, the case of a Prophetic dictum that declared to Muslim women that they are “deficient in intellect and religion.”³⁶ Islamic feminists reject this dictum entirely as it contradicts their vision of gender equality in Islam, while misogynistic scholars use it to justify the mistreatment of women.³⁷ Traditionalist women contend that both sides are at fault for selectively reading the saying without considering its proper context. Within the context of the saying, they argue that the Prophet was encouraging women to increase their charity and was not making any kind of ontological claim about the relative worth of women in relation to men, nor was he propagating a form of cosmological hierarchy where women are subjugated to men. Instead, they point out that traditionalist scholars, who have employed proper traditional methods and are not sexist, have observed and interpreted this dictum to mean, “Reduction in religion does not entail a reduction in religiosity, for indeed there are many women who exceed men in religiosity. Rather, it means lessened responsibility [in religious obligations], as a woman does not need to pray or fast during her period.”³⁸ They even cite the argument of a medieval Islamic jurist Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1064), who similarly argued that those who read this dictum in a misogynistic light must also accept that the revered female Islamic figures such as Mary (the mother of Jesus), the mother of Moses, Sarah (the wife of Abraham), Aisha (the wife of the Prophet Muhammad), and Fatima (the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad) among other women, must too be inferior in intelligence and religion compared to any men - which to any Muslim is blasphemous! Ibn Hazm, too, explained this dictum as meaning deficiency in women’s reduction from the obligation of praying and fasting during their period and the reduction in testimony in Islamic law - which does not entail the denigration of the ontological status of women in comparison to men.³⁹ This example illustrates how traditional Muslim women argue for their rights within the Islamic tradition and challenge misogyny by reclaiming the religious narrative. They do so by operating within the parameters set by Islamic theology and legal theory.

³⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no 304.

³⁷ Qudsiya Mirza, ed., *Islamic Feminism and the Law*, 1st edition (London: Routledge-Cavendish, 2006), 31.

³⁸ Soubani and Alkiek, “Is Feminism the Problem? Why Ideological Bandwagons Fail Islam,” 8.

³⁹ Ali Ibn Hazm, *Kitab Al-Fasl Fi al-Milal Wa-al-Ahwa’ Wa-al-Nihal*, vol. 4, n.d., 104, <http://www.islamport.com/w/aqd/Web/2595/552.htm>.

Another way they combat and address sexist oppression within the Muslim community is to actively use religious teachings and activism to promote the training and education of Muslim women to become female Islamic scholars and community leaders. This mechanism of using religion and female religious scholarship is especially effective in bringing awareness since Muslims are obligated to heed and take more seriously calls based on religion. In doing so, they allow Muslim women to voice their opinions and address their issues. This type of campaign to train more female scholars and leaders also allows Muslim women to have better access to adequate prayer spaces in mosques and build institutions and resources to cater to the needs of Muslim women. The Qarawiyyin Project is one such successful project, self-described as “ a global initiative aimed at reviving Islamic discourse among Muslim women. With writers from all corners of the world, we seek to analyze contemporary challenges from an Islamic lens.”⁴⁰ Together with its many other variants, this type of institution can overall facilitate and empower Muslim women's needs and active participation in the Islamic discourse on gender and within the Muslim community.

Conclusion

If the argument presented in this paper is successful, it should provide a compelling rationale for the need for a unique framework that addresses the complex and intersectional oppression faced by women, such as traditional Muslim women, while remaining true to their religious and moral values. Furthermore, it highlights that universalist feminist tendencies, like those seen in missionary feminism, may inadvertently contribute to the oppression of these women by imposing external values upon them instead of empowering and facilitating their own agency. Throughout this paper, substantial evidence has been provided to defend the framework adopted by Muslim women who utilize the Islamic tradition to empower themselves and implement practical solutions. Additionally, three key critiques have been presented to challenge the effectiveness of Islamic feminism and question the discourse of missionary liberal feminism. While the long-term effectiveness and potential challenges of these practical solutions are yet to be fully explored, it is important to consider Webb Keane's question when contemplating Saba Mahmood's project on debates within the secular liberal

⁴⁰ “Our Mission,” *The Qarawiyyin Project* (blog), April 27, 2021, <https://qarawiyyinproject.co/our-mission/>.

discourse: “Can traditions of critical theory rooted in Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism, or liberalism transcend their Euro-American foundations without exerting dominance over those who do not share the same worldview or sensibility, such as an atheist perspective or an individualistic outlook?”⁴¹

⁴¹ Webb Keane, “Saba Mahmood and the Paradoxes of Self-Parochialization,” *Public Books* (blog), August 3, 2018, <https://www.publicbooks.org/saba-mahmood-and-the-paradoxes-of-self-parochialization/>.

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