

Re-defining Feminism/s, Re-imagining Faith? Margot Badran* on Islamic Feminism

■ Azza Basarudin**

Doctoral candidate, Women's Studies Program, University of California, Los Angeles

If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet [Muhammad], nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite.

Fatima Mernissi¹

Margot Badran is a scholar-activist and specialist in gender studies in the Middle East and Islamic world. She is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. She was recently Edith Kreeger Wolf Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Religion Department and Preceptor at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa at Northwestern University. She has lectured widely in academic and popular forums in the United States, as well as in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. She is also the author of numerous scholarly articles on feminism and Islam, and writes on gender issues for *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

I first met Margot Badran at a conference in Oldenburg, Germany, in 2002, where she gave a keynote address on Islamic feminism. Energetic and passionate about her current research on

Islam/s and feminism/s, she spoke on how Islamic feminism is not an oxymoron because it offers a holistic solution for women activists and/or intellectual-activists who are invested in gender justice but who are not interested in separating religion from their struggles. According to Badran, Islamic feminists are self-identified women who are interested in balancing women's human rights claims within the boundaries of their faith. Interested in the topic, and already familiar with her scholarly work, I approached Professor Badran for an interview on the topic of Islamic feminism. Three years later, I caught up with her on the same topic. The following are the original and follow-up interviews.

Islam and Feminism: An Interview with Margot Badran (2002)²

1. There has been tremendous interest in the West and the Muslim world on the debate on Islam and feminism. Why do you think there is so much interest in this subject? What does this debate mean for Muslim women and feminism/s (as an ideology and movement)?



If there is now great interest in debates on Islam and feminism this has not always been the case. For a long time "Islam and feminism" has been considered an oxymoron in both the Muslim world and in the West, although for rather different reasons. In the Muslim world feminism has often been considered Western, irrelevant, and invasive, or simply redundant since Islam is acknowledged as giving women all their rights. In the West, feminism is deemed to be beyond the pale of an Islam that is seen to be excessively and irredeemably patriarchal. But more recently in both the West and the Muslim world, as you have observed, this has changed. In the West we must distinguish between society at large and intellectual and academic circles. In terms of the broader society I would put any interest in feminism and Islam within the context of a heightened interest in Islam post-September 11. Having said this, however, by far the greatest interest in Islam (often obsession) has been ignited by concern about peril and danger. If there is anything said about feminism and Islam I have noticed ears prick and eyebrows raise in exclamations of surprise or disbelief. As for interest in Islam and feminism in the academy and among public intellectuals in the West, a rising increase can be traced to the mid-1990s as debates widened and took new turns in the Muslim world in the context of the continuing spread and ripening of Islamic resurgence and the growing attention to issues of religion and culture. The printed debates of public intellectuals in post-Khomeini Iran in the

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1990s on Islamic feminist questions certainly stimulated interest. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the waning of the hold of communism and socialism and the demise of the Cold War, a good number of leftist secular intellectuals and activists in Muslim societies embraced the ideology of feminism that they had formerly eschewed as "a luxury" or as diverting attention from leftist ideologies. Debates on Islam and feminism in parts of the Muslim world and in some circles in the West expanded in the context of a growing consciousness of the limitations of secularism and a critique of secularism that questioned the whole notion of the binaristic thinking that produced the "secular-religious" split in the universe of Islam.

You ask what this new debate and the wide interest in it means for Muslim women and feminism/s. Increased attention paid to debates on Islam and feminism/s provides the opportunity for protagonists to extend the reach of this discourse. At the same time it elicits a counter-attention that challenges these feminism/s. I think, however, that the increased visibility and attention is all to the good: feminist discourses within Islamic frameworks are enormously powerful and far more compelling than the counter-discourses based on limited arguments and tired platitudes. So I see this heightened focus on Islam and feminism as positive and as auguring well for the future.

2. Many have questioned the interaction between Islam and feminism. Some deny the need for any type of feminism within the Islamic framework as Islam gave women their rights some 1400 years ago, others argue that they are mutually exclusive. What is your opinion? Can you offer a comprehensive definition of the Islamic feminism which you are discussing?

Islam did give women as human beings (like men) their rights 1400 years ago and it is high time women enjoyed these rights. Feminism, in its simplest definition includes an awareness that some human beings are deprived of rights or are subjected to discrimination and oppression (*zulm*) simply because they are female, a rejection of this thinking and practice, and forms of activism aimed at achieving lost rights. Islamic feminism is an affirmation of the rights Islam gave to women as human beings and an affirmation of the gender equality and social justice embedded in the Qur'an. It is not that feminism and Islam are mutually exclusive but that (rights-depriving) patriarchy and Islam are mutually exclusive.

3. A very important part of many Muslim women's feminism/s is the process of *ijtihad* (rereading and reinterpreting the Islamic sacred texts). How effective is this strategy when it comes to the reality of Muslim women's lives? Are the reinterpretations of the Qur'an actually being utilized in Muslim societies?

The connection between a feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an with Muslim women's actual lives is a frequently asked and extremely germane question. It is precisely because so much oppression (*zulm*) has been committed and "legitimized" in the name

of Islam – and because this oppression has also been linked to notions of honor – that a clear demonstration that oppressive behaviors and attitudes toward women are not only not Islamic but are *anti*-Islamic stands to have some effect. If some people do not mind committing *zulm* against women (or others) these people do not want to be seen to be doing so and certainly do not wish to be seen to be doing this in contravention of Islam; this does not bring honor. Of course, discourse – a new discourse in and of itself, will not change women’s lives. Discourse needs to be accompanied by organized collective activism and everyday acts of feminism. But to have a wider understanding of the full amplitude of religion on your side is no small thing.

4. What does/do Islamic feminism/s have to offer, not only to Muslim women, but also feminist discourse and the larger feminist movement/s?

I have just given an answer to the first part of this question. As I moved more deeply into Islamic feminism – analyzing the discourse of its major articulators and going myself to the Qur’an and doing my own *tafsir* (*explanation*) – I see more and more its clear declaration of the notion of full equality of human beings. The notion of the absolute equality of all human beings whether female or male alongside the recognition of biological difference and the roles of both sexes in procreation is powerfully stated. It took us as second wave feminists in the US and other parts of the West some time to work out issues of difference cum equality. Human beings are created male and female for the procreation of the species and as partner or *zawj* to the other (the same word is used for each member of the pair); they are biologically different but fully equal. The Qur’an relates that it is only through performance – the achievement of *taqwa* or “God-consciousness” (sometimes called piety), that the practice of the principles of gender equality and social justice into action distinguishes human beings from each other. I think that explicating the way gender equality and social justice are conveyed in the language of the Qur’an can contribute to the ongoing task of the elaboration of a universalist feminist discourse. An examination of the Qur’an can also help to dismantle the notion of the incompatibility of religion (as such) with feminism and can help us grasp the inter-meshing of the religious and secular in Islam and stimulate discussion about how this might work in other religious traditions and what the implications of this are for gender.

5. The act of naming Muslim women who are working towards women’s empowerment within the Islamic framework as Islamic feminists can be a somewhat problematic classification (as the “F” word has been associated with colonialism, imperialism, or just because they are uncomfortable with the term and its implications). Imposing feminist labels and naming people/groups as such can sometimes impede their agency. What is your opinion on this?

I am glad you raised the question of naming, or labeling. I think it is important not to call women feminists, or Islamic feminists, etc. if they themselves do not assume such a label. As an historian I have tried to be careful in not assigning an identity where it is not self-ascribed. The questions of feminism and feminist identity are so highly charged that it is unfair and irresponsible to foist a feminist label upon persons who reject it. Some women may act or speak like feminists but do not claim, nor like, the label. We can analyze discourse and behaviors and recognize them as “feminist” but we need to be clear that women whom we may see as speaking or behaving like feminists may not identify themselves as feminists. In a paper I wrote in 1990 on Muslim women and feminism/s when I saw some women behaving in ways that could be recognized as “feminist” but who adamantly refused the label I referred to their thinking and actions more neutrally as “gender activism,” indicating that I was simply using this as a descriptive category. At that time I had never heard the term used but later, while in South Africa where I met women from different African countries, I noticed that some referred to themselves as “gender activists.” This distances them from association with the term feminist, which for many still holds unacceptable colonialist connotations. Yet, other women refuse to toss out the powerful word feminism or feminist with the colonial bathwater. Indeed, some feminists in Egypt stress, “We had “feminism” before colonialism” and refuse to get bogged down in etymological debates. Women know the environments and historical moments in which they are operating. If they feel a label will be used against them they may prefer not to assume it. Yet, others may believe it crucial to name and claim their feminism and find this is integral to the empowerment process.

6. You are currently a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) working on Islamic feminism in the Middle East and Africa. Can



you elaborate on this project and its importance in contributing to the discourse on Islamic feminism?

I am finishing up a book on comparative Islamic feminism/s looking at discourse and experience in Egypt, Turkey, Yemen and South Africa. I have spent quite a bit of time in all four countries interacting with feminists and learning from them about Islamic feminism/s. There is, as we know, a universalist Islamic feminist discourse circulating most rapidly on the web that is fed from various local points around the globe. Meanwhile, there are local forms of Islamic feminist activism that surface in response to specific local challenges and priorities. In Egypt for example, (unlike in Turkey, Yemen, and South Africa) where women were barred from being judges and Islamic arguments were used to prevent women from holding these positions, Islamic feminist activism helped win the day. In January 2005, the first three women were appointed judges in Egypt, one to the Supreme Constitutional Court. The call for women to be officially appointed as *muftis* (those who dispense religious readings in response to specific questions posed) is, however, a cause yet to be won. In South Africa there has been a vibrant mosque movement aimed at expanded participation of women in congregational worship. Islamic feminists, who include women and men, have supported the practice of women delivering pre-*khutba* (or pre-sermon) talks at Friday congregational prayer. This has met with success in at least two mosques: one in Cape Town and one in Johannesburg.

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There has also been a move for women and men to occupy parallel space in the mosque during congregational prayer, instead of relegating women to the back of the mosque, to mezzanines, or to outside space, and indeed, this has become the practice at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town.

In Egypt, Yemen, and South Africa debates around Muslim personal status law are feminist issues that can and must be argued in the discourse of Islam. At the moment the question in South Africa is whether there should be a separate religious code regulating personal status for Muslims and what form this

should take. In other places, such as Egypt, there has been a long-standing campaign to reform the Muslim personal status law. The still-new *khula'* law in Egypt whereby women may initiate an annulment process to end a marriage which includes relinquishment of financial claims (including any remaining part of the dowry due them) has been acclaimed a success by some feminists but criticized by others as paltry. In Turkey women as committed Muslims and feminists are critiquing various patriarchalist assertions advanced in the name of Islam, including the use of *hadith* (sayings about the words and deeds of Muhammad) of questionable provenance that are degrading and oppressive to women. In Yemen, in the context of a vibrant university-based women's studies center, analysis of customary and Islamic gender practices became part of an intellectual feminism without the name. The destruction of the center by hostile forces can be attributed in part to the center's success, which found itself in the crossfire of larger political battles. These examples are just a brief indication of the work of Islamic feminism/s in comparative perspective.

7. What do you see in the future for Islamic feminism?

We can say that Islamic feminism is the solution. It is the solution to ridding Islam of gender and related oppressions, or *zulm*, committed in its name. Islamic feminism is the path towards recuperating the rights women are granted in Islam. It is a way to move from mantra to reality – toward the enjoyment in practice of the gender equality and social justice embedded in the Qur'an. Islamic feminism is on the roll. It has met with successes and will continue in this direction. This does not mean that the work ahead will be easy. It will not. But, whether we are Muslims or not in this globe of intermeshed peoples, Islamic feminism bodes well for all of us.

Follow-up Interview in 2005

1. We spoke about three years ago on the topic of Islam and feminism. How do you see things today? What constitutes feminist projects within an Islamic framework?

I would like to make three observations of change since we last talked.

1. There has been a marked acceleration of interest in Islam and feminism, and particularly in Islamic feminism, a feminist discourse grounded in the re-interpretation of Islamic religious texts, most impor-

tantly the Qur'an. Muslims, both women and men, are increasingly seeing Islamic feminism as a potent transformative force in the lives of their societies and in their own individual lives. Non-Muslim Westerners are showing greater interest in Islamic feminism and have become aware that Islam and feminism are not contradictory as they had assumed.

2. Now, much more than before in Muslim societies, Islamic feminists (and they may or may not explicitly identify themselves as such) and secular feminists (who employ a multi-stranded discourse including secular nationalist, Islamic reformist, and humanitarian/human rights discourses, and who tend to freely announce their identity) are joining forces in promoting the cause of gender-justice. It is striking how the previous wariness that existed in the past between Islamic feminists and secular feminists has been diminishing.

3. Islamic feminist discourse has been, and continues to be, enriched by ongoing Qur'anic interpretive work. *Fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, continues to be scrutinized from a gender perspective in efforts to reform personal status codes or family legislation based upon the shari'a (Islamic law). Islamic feminism is being taken, especially by the younger generation, into the domain of culture in the broad sense of everyday life practices. And also in the sense of the arts: poetry, song, performance, and painting, drawing, and photography – examples come to mind of young Muslim performance artists in Indonesia and South Africa. The younger generation is carving out new spaces for less constrained lives for themselves within an Islam they are holding on to and insisting on refashioning. Islamic feminism is also expressed through Sufism, which has traditionally transcended or blurred gender categories, and continues to attract huge numbers of adherents around the world.

2. You have argued that Islamic feminism on the whole is more radical than Muslim secular feminism/s (Al-Ahram 2002). Can you elaborate on this? What are the ways in which Islamic/Muslim feminist and secular discourses of feminism can be placed in dialogue with each other?

Islamic feminism from its inception (at the end of the twentieth century) articulated a strong stand on gender equality, enunciating the full equality of women and men in public and private realms – posited as a continuum rather than sharply divided

spheres. Muslims' emergent secular feminism/s (first formulated in the early twentieth century) called for gender equality in the public sphere but acquiesced in the notion of gender complementarity in the private or family sphere.

Secular feminism located its notion of gender equality in the ideals of liberal democracy including the full equality of citizens. Secular feminism/s, articulated by Muslims together with Christians, emerged during national independence movements in the early and middle decades of the last century. The focus was on "public" gender equality within a secular nationalist framework enunciating the equality of all citizens, whatever their religion, ethnicity, or gender, and asserting the equality of all human beings, rejecting the hegemonic colonial model and its blatant human inequalities. Secular feminism/s articulated by Muslims went along with the model of the prevailing patriarchal family, concentrating on the reform of laws governing the family and the reform of men's behaviors as husbands and fathers without challenging the fundamental paradigm. Toward the end of the last century, secular feminists, becoming increasingly impatient with the gender inequalities in Muslim family law and practice, began to join forces with the new Islamic feminists who could bring to bear the power of their re-interpretation of the Qur'an and re-thinking of *fiqh* in the struggle to effect reform.

Although Muslims' secular feminism/s called for full equality of women and men in the public sphere, including equal rights in work and the professions, secular feminism/s did not take up issues of women's equal access to the religious professions and equal ability to perform communal religious functions, a last bastion of public inequality – this would become the concern of Islamic feminism. In arguing for advances on this front Islamic feminist discourse continued the elaboration of the doctrine of full gender equality. In ways just mentioned, Islamic feminism is radicalizing secular feminism, or we can say, pushing it beyond its previous limits and limitations. Islamic feminism and secular feminism are porous and indeed from the start Muslims' secular feminism/s included an Islamic reformist strand and Islamic feminism/s are also situated in the real world. In strategic and practical ways,

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both need to take into account the realities of the particular mundane worlds that they inhabit.

3. Many scholars have argued about the limitations of working within a religious framework to empower women, citing problems when religion is not only personal choice or belief but is legislated at the state level and has the possibility to be co-opted by the state in the service of politics (i.e. Iran and Egypt).³ What are your thoughts on this?

It is important to point out the practical and political problems posed by working within a religious framework, i.e. within an Islamic feminist paradigm, and this critics can do, even hostile critics. But why toss out Islamic feminism simply out of fear that it can be co-opted by the state or exploited by conservative political movements? Secular feminism/s, historically and in contemporary times, have not escaped co-optation by the state. The whole point, as I see it, is to re-define Islam, along the lines Islamic feminists are doing and not simply let patri-

archalists continue their centuries long hi-jacking of Islam and casting it in their own misogynist image. If states and political movements were to take up the Islamic feminist vision of Islam and apply it for its own sake that would be excellent. But the possibility for states to use Islamic feminism, or bend it to their ends, as I have mentioned, is something to be rightly concerned about. States have done this in

the past with secular feminism/s but no one proposed dumping secular feminism because of it. States need to be monitored and made accountable. Islamic feminism does not need to be jettisoned – this I see as another form of capitulation.

4. The debates on Islam and feminism beg the question of who has the right to speak for and about Islam. Can you comment on this question by taking your positionality into consideration? Do you/can you consider yourself an Islamic feminist?

Anyone can speak about Islam. If a person has knowledge and discernment he or she will be more

readily listened to. Anyone can undertake *ijtihad* or critical engagement with religious sources. If, for example, persons make cogent readings of the Qur'an others may take notice; they may think about the interpretation and consider arguments. The readings carry their own weight. Many of the new interpreters of Islamic religious sources, men and women alike, were not trained in the religious sciences as students in seminaries and Islamic universities like Al Azhar. Those who articulate gender-sensitive readings of the Qur'an and other religious texts will be listened to by persons concerned with gender justice, whether or not these interpreters have official religious imprimaturs, if they are perceived to be treating the sources with care and offer meaningful expositions. Asma Barlas, whose discipline is political science, comes to mind with her book "*Believing Women*" in Islam: *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. The persuasiveness and power of her readings have had a wide impact around the world. You asked about my own "positionality" I suppose you are referring to someone who was not born Muslim and who is not ostensibly Muslim, asking do people listen to my takes on religious texts? As you know, many years ago I was a student at Al Azhar and I return from time to time and engage in debate with some of the *sheikhs*. They listen to what I have to say, to my arguments, they will agree or challenge them based on what is said, not who is saying it. Of course, I wear no *imma* (the turban of the Azharite sheikh). I simply share my own *ijtihad*. If people get hung up on who is speaking about Islam so be it. Some do. Some don't. To answer your question: Yes, I am an Islamic feminist. I am also a secular feminist. I am both together because, like most people, I use multiple discourses, discourses that support each other, not cancel each other, and inasmuch as discourses – and activism flowing from it – define us, I am both an Islamic feminist and a secular feminist. Yes, I claim both identities.

5. What has been the reception of your work on Islam and feminism by Muslims in general as well as the interpretive communities, specifically the orthodox *ulema*?

I suppose you must ask others about the reception of my work. But I can say in my travels I have seen that my work on Islam and feminism has resonated. It has produced discussion and debate, more agreement than disagreement. It is the engagement that is important. I also publish essays in the general press, mainly in *Al-Ahram Weekly* which I like because the response is immediate. The piece on

... feminists share the common goal of eliminating patriarchal thought and practices.

“Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?” published in 2002 spurred interest and was translated into several other languages. It came out at the right moment, a moment when a lot of questions were out there. I was trained as an historian and my main interest has been to chart and analyze feminist experience in Muslim, and trans-communal, contexts. Although, like many others, I do my own *tafsir*, interpretation of the Qur’an is not my primary work. I do believe, however, that *ijtihad*, (rational investigation of Islamic religious texts) is open to anyone and that our understandings are enhanced by our own direct examination. You ask about interpretive communities and receptivity of my work. If you speak about the new interpretive communities, especially women, then I would say I feel that my work on Islam and feminism/s in Muslim societies, historically and contextually grounded, is generally well received. I have felt there is some kind of appreciation – maybe even relief – that someone raised outside the Islamic tradition has taken the trouble to study Islam, its ideas and lived experience, and to probe issues of gender justice in an Islamic context. But, of course, in my travels I have met those who think it is presumptuous or preposterous that, as they see it, an “outsider” should meddle in their religion and culture. But in secular contexts, turf wars in the heyday of identity politics in the 1980s were even fiercer. It goes with the territory. Several years ago I had an audience with the Sheikh Al Azhar, Muhammad Tantawi, (on a return visit to the institution that taught me) and gave him a copy of my book *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, which is an historical treatment of the secular feminist movement in Egypt (which had an important Islamic modernist dimension) in the first half of the twentieth century. He instantly ordered a member of his staff to read it and examine what it said about Islam and women. Later when the sheikh so charged told me that the book had been pronounced *halal*, I didn’t quite know how to take it!

6. You were the recipient of an award by the Fulbright New Century Scholars Program for 2004-05 where you worked on Islamic feminism in Nigeria – can you tell us more about that project?

I wanted to look close up at the cases of two Muslim women – Amina Lawal and Safiyya Hussein – accused of adultery and condemned to death by shari’a courts under the new Hudud laws or Islamic penal laws in their respective states in the north of Nigeria and who were later acquitted in higher Islamic courts of appeal. I wanted to know how the

stories of these cases passed into local legend: how they were retold and the lessons drawn. I wanted to know more about the impressive and daring campaign mounted by women and men, and Muslims and non-Muslims, in the legal profession, scholarly community, and NGO world to defend the women and prevent them from being made facile victims or convenient scapegoats. In moving around the north and middle belt of Nigeria, I saw how the stories of the two women going from victim to victor had had a profound effect on people, women and men. Issues of gender and class were intertwined. There was wide offense that women and the poor should be victimized and made to pay prices from which men and the wealthy and powerful few in this poverty-stricken country were exempted. Debates around justice for citizens engendered by the two adultery cases and articulations and application of a progressive reading of *fiqh* constitute a milestone in Islamic feminism’s still young history. Nigeria is the only country with Islamic Hudud laws on the books where women have not been stoned to death for adultery. In defending Lawal and Hussein it was necessary to work within the framework of the Islamic penal code as formulated in the two northern Nigerian states where they were arraigned. This did not necessarily mean that their defenders, and people at large, had favored the enactment of Islamic penal law; indeed, there has been considerable opposition to this. It is to show, rather, the breadth of *fiqh* and how it can serve social justice if it is not bent to serve other ends. Last March, women and men across the professional and social spectrum gathered to continue debates around Islam, gender justice, society, and the state, that the two adultery cases ignited, at a conference organized by the Centre for Islamic Legal Studies at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria and the Security, Justice and Growth Programme.

7. What strategies and methods do Islamic feminists and Muslim secular feminists use, and how do they link up with other feminists in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia? Are the strategies and methods similar or different? What does this mean for transnational feminist organizing?

Nigeria is the only country with Islamic Hudud laws on the books where women have not been stoned to death for adultery.



Islamic feminists, Muslims as secular feminists, and other feminists share the common goal of eliminating patriarchal thought and practices. Strategies and methods at some level are generic, but also specific to local contexts. Theory travels, including feminist theory; it informs and supports local activist efforts. Thus, Islamic feminist theory grounded in Qur'anic reinterpretation and re-thinking of religious texts can be applied in specific ways at local levels, and this local experience in turn feeds back into theory. At the moment there are efforts underway in various countries that have Muslim personal status codes to achieve changes, or in certain Muslim minority countries. For example in India, Muslim women activists are pushing for limited legislation of Muslim marriage which in their eyes stands to give women protections, whereas progressive Muslims in Canada have recently successfully fought against the institution of any shari'a-backed law as not serving the interests of gender justice. New interpretations of the Qur'an, and the refinement of interpretive methodologies offer tools for those fighting for gender justice in specific environments. There is not one solution for all. New collaborations are also proving helpful. Secular Muslims are increasingly linking up with Islamic feminists, as I have already noted. Islamic feminists are taking lessons from the longer organizational and activist experience of Muslims' secular feminist movements. Secular feminists are accessing the new women and gender-sensitive religious interpretations of the Islamic feminists. They are pooling and sharing the benefits of new religious knowledge and the lessons of seasoned gender activists. As for cross-communal linkages, these happen at the local or country level – as also just seen in the case of Nigeria – as well as transnationally, regionally, and globally.

The network, Women Living under Muslim Laws, for example, includes women of any religious affiliation, although most are Muslims. From the start, WLUML has been an effective network for bringing together women from Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. For two decades, members of this pioneering network have shared advocacy methods such as circulation of alerts about violations of gender justice, and letter-writing and publicity campaigns. They have published documents and article collections, and have run innovative training sessions and workshops. An example of regional secular feminist work can be found in the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, run by women who are committed scholar-activists. The AGI organizes conferences, hosts visiting scholars

and publishes *Feminist Africa*, a journal that appears online and in print form. The AGI offers a space where all women meet, whatever their religion – Muslims are among them – or strand of feminism. Feminists, of whatever kind, recognize that in the most immediate sense work has to be done on the ground and in cooperation with those who will support their goals. Returning to the transnational context, the quickest way Islamic feminists, Muslim secular feminists, and other feminists connect is through the internet. Muslim secular feminists and Islamic feminists take good advantage of cyber communication through their websites, listservs, chat groups and email. One of the most recently created electronic forums is *Hot Coals*, an online zine, published by the Abu Dharr Collective composed of seasoned theorists and activists resident in various parts of the globe. Muslims as secular and Islamic feminists from their diverse locations offer and receive instantaneous support. For the first time in history, patriarchal states are having a hard time continuing with impunity to perpetuate misogynist ideas and agendas, although they are doing their best to hold on.

8. In our first interview when I asked what you see in the future for Islamic feminism, you mentioned that it is “the path towards recuperating the rights women are granted in Islam... Islamic feminism is on the roll. It has met with successes and will continue in this direction.” Can you speak about this? Can you give specific examples?

Concerning women's roles in religious life, I had mentioned, as you will recall when we spoke earlier, that a woman had given a pre-*khutba*, or pre-sermon talk in a mosque, at a Friday congregational prayer, referring to Amina Wadud's talk at the Claremont Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1994, an act of considerable symbolic value. A step further was made a decade later when Wadud took up the role of imam, leading a Friday congregational prayer in New York (this time in a church which offered space when no mosque would accept a woman leading prayer) and again a few months later Pamela Taylor served as imam in a Friday congregational prayer at a mosque in Toronto. These latest symbolic acts triggered off debate about gender and the ability to lead a congregation of women and men in prayer.

We can also credit Islamic feminists along with secular feminists in Morocco for playing a role in achieving the reform of the *Moudawwana*, now the most

progressive shari'a-backed family law to be found in Muslim countries. However, Indonesian Islamic feminists, as religious specialists on a commission set up within the Indonesian Ministry of Justice, have proposed a still more fully egalitarian draft family code. It remains to be seen when it will be adopted.

Islamic feminism is above all a process. It is a path with significant milestones, but always a path and one that needs to be paved with the help of like-minded others. Islamic feminism's consciousness-raising has been effective and widespread. The pressing challenge is greater application.

Afterword Azza Basarudin

Islamic feminism can then be broadly understood as one strategy for Muslim women to struggle for women's rights from within an Islamic paradigm that is compatible with indigenous socio-cultural and religious locations. For if feminist scholarship considers feminism as not restricted to one culture or another, then feminism/s is indigenous. With indigenous feminism/s comes a variety of strategies of resistance that might not just entail resisting without complying – this might include understanding creative ways of resisting such as those explored in this interview. Women's strategies of resistance are situated as the forms of patriarchal and religious oppressions they encounter, which is how Islamic/Muslim feminists can also contribute to de-essentializing Eurocentric feminist discourses.

Working within the framework of religion and building progressive alliances with secular forms of feminism have produced a new direction for women to engage with religion and feminism that is practical and holistic to their history, social, cultural, and political settings. The liberatory potential that Islamic/Muslims' secular feminism/s can offer, be it a form of identity, a project to re-excavate the gender egalitarianism in Islam, a way of embracing the new modernity of the twenty-first century, of becoming "modern" – not at the expense of religion and culture but within the context of religion and culture, or a tool to push for Islamic reformism in the public sphere, and/or a way of claiming new roles and opportunities remains to be seen. One aspect we can be sure of: Speaking for and about Islam in this contemporary moment of globalization entails radical redefinition of what constitutes Islam and how it can provide progressive spaces for women to reclaim their religious self-identification in the twenty-first century. I leave you with Fatima Mernissi's thoughts, "We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition."

Endnotes

* Margot Badran holds an MA from Harvard, a Diploma from Al Azhar University, and a D.Phil. from Oxford University. Among her books are *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 1995) which appeared in Arabic as *Raidat al-Harakat al-Niswiyya al-Misriyya wa al-Islam wa al-Watan* (published by the Supreme Council of Culture in Cairo in 2000) and *Opening the Gates: An Arab Feminist Anthology* (first published by Indiana University Press in 1999 and as a new expanded version in 2004) which she co-edited. Badran is currently completing a book on secular feminism/s and Islam, from an historical and contemporary perspective. She is also working on a book on comparative Islamic feminism/s for which she has done research in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

** Azza Basarudin is a doctoral candidate in the Women's Studies Program at the University of California Los

Angeles (UCLA) where she is working on a comparative study of gender, Islam and feminism in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

1. Cited from Mernissi, F. 1991, "Preface to the English edition", *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, New York, Perseus Publishing, ix.

2. This interview was first published in the Newsletter for the Center for the Study of Women (CSW) and Women's Studies Program at the University of California Los Angeles UCLA. Spring 2003, 5-7. Reprinted with permission.

3. See Moghadam, V.M. 2002, "Islamic feminism and its discontent: towards a resolution of the debate", in *Gender, Politics and Islam*. eds T. Saliba, C. Allen & J. Howard, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 15-52.

4. Mernissi, op. cit. p. viii.