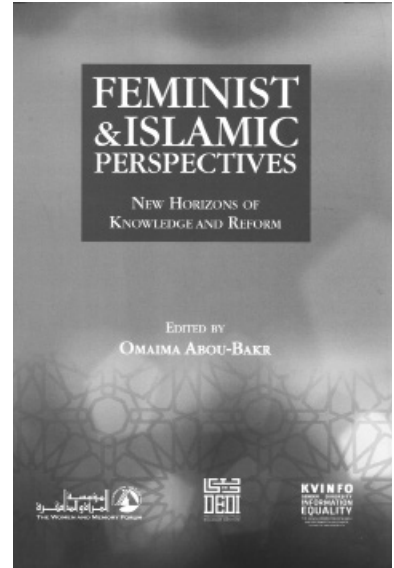


Review

Feminist and Islamic Perspectives: New Horizons of Knowledge and Reform, Edited by Omailma Abou-Bakr. Published by Women and Memory Forum.

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The production of this volume spanned various stages, beginning with the idea of holding a conference that gathers Muslim women researchers from the Arab region and Europe interested in the cause of Islamic feminist knowledge and reform, to the event itself, the publications, and their launch. The idea was first born and discussed in 2011 during the period of excitement and ambition for change that swept Egypt. It was going to be the first conference to be held in Cairo, home of the al-Azhar, and to discuss directly as its central topic and title the phenomenon of Islamic feminism, rather than just the traditional approach of 'women in Islam.' The event itself was held in March 2012, following the parliamentary elections that saw the landslide and majority win of the Islamist parties (the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis), signaling their rise to political and public power. Indeed, the extent to which the rise of Islamism and its conservative gender ideology can affect Islamic feminist pursuits was the main issue raised in a closing roundtable session. The conference was attended by a diversified audience, including secular feminists, activists, Islamic feminists and researchers, and one notable Azharite scholar, in addition to the European participants and invited guest consultants. The proceedings were edited and published in 2013 during the actual rule of the Muslim Brotherhood president and government. The Arabic volume was launched in Cairo in mid-2014, following the ending of their rule and the beginning of a new political phase.



The conference and the resultant proceedings were experimental in the sense of exploring the potential for producing Islamic research with a feminist perspective and methodology, or putting it differently, arguing for feminist rights and consciousness within the religious sphere. Papers presented covered a range of diversified areas and topics that may appear to be disconnected or unrelated, but the idea was to spark the debate publically for the first time among an Arab audience and to introduce the feminist cause as a means of vitalizing and hybridizing Islamic research on the one hand, and seeking legal, cultural, and social reform for women in Muslim societies and communities outside the region on the other hand.

In the last twenty years, the idea of an Islamic feminism, as both a critical practice and an ontological stance, has developed into the application of feminist consciousness and methodological tools of analysis to sift through the Islamic interpretive tradition, study it, engage it, and interact with it critically and earnestly. The double-objective is to re-claim the relevance of the Islamic ideals of justice, fairness, equality, goodness, beauty, and human dignity for gender relations, and to improve women's conditions and lives on that basis.



Conference participants

This volume (i.e. the proceedings of the conference) contains entries on a range of diverse issues related to the meeting ground of Islamic and feminist perspectives. As the outcome of a two-day conference that was held in Cairo, March 17-18, 2012, with participants from the Arab region and Europe, the topics of its chapters represent 'bridges and dialogues' on more than one level. Initially, the event itself hosted researchers from a number of European countries – Denmark, Italy, Germany, France – and from Egypt, Tunis, Morocco, Lebanon, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia for an exchange on Islamic feminist views and activism in different contexts. Papers were presented in both Arabic and English, the former group translated for this volume. Hence, it provided a bridge for Muslim feminists in Arab societies and European Muslim feminists to explore common issues and concerns, and divergent interests as well. At the same time, the issues discussed in the chapters demonstrate the importance of internal dialogues between European Muslims and their own mainstream societies and communities, on the one hand, and between Muslim women feminists and their Arab societies and cultures, on the other. Lastly, bridging the gap, or estrangement, between feminist consciousness and Islamic research was a major goal of the conference, both on a conceptual and an applied level.

Two keynote speakers were invited to set the tone and share their thoughts on Islamic feminism as both a field of study and a lived experience. Amani Saleh and Asma' Abdul Hamid initiated the discussion, first with Saleh offering basic definitions and analysis of the distinguishing features of Islamic epistemology and how it encompasses the "feminist idea." Abdul Hamid then raised the issue of living overlapping identities, while highlighting the ideas of bridging distances, dialoguing, mutual understanding, and the need to dispel stereotypes or misconceptions on the part of all.



Panelists during one of the conference sessions

Part I of the proceedings explores the relationship between Islamic feminism and activism in the Arab world with three papers on the Saudi context, on Islamic women's activism in Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt, and on the challenges of personal status law reform by women's NGOs in Egypt. Part II presents the Muslim European experience and the challenges faced by Muslim women feminists in minority communities in Germany, Italy, and France. Part III illustrates particular cases of re-thinking legal thought and theology. Part IV continues with examples of new re-interpretations and alternative feminist discourses in relation to certain issues. The volume concludes with the first annotated bibliography to date that attempted to provide a very useful survey of studies and research contributions to this field in Arabic, hence providing a service to Arab readers/researchers interested in the field.

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