



**International Journal of Islamic Marketing and Branding**

ISSN online: 2055-0952 - ISSN print: 2055-0944

<https://www.inderscience.com/ijimb>

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**DOI:** [10.1504/IJIMB.2024.10067291](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJIMB.2024.10067291)

**Article History:**

Received:	13 April 2024
Last revised:	09 June 2024
Accepted:	15 June 2024
Published online:	11 November 2024

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# Gender injustice against women in the Muslim world and the conflation of hegemonic terms (feminism) as deflection

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**Abstract:** Feminism is a movement right at the centre of ideologies of neo-liberal capitalism, patriarchy and social justice. For Muslims, these ideas come with negative connotations and, for many in Muslim countries particularly, there is little within them that equates to social justice for anyone. As a result, ‘feminism’ is distained by many in the Muslim world; while those who attempt to embrace the movement, find it does not fit so well with the culture(s) and societal organisation in many Muslim communities, although they wish to actively leverage it to seek social justice for Muslim women. This paper considers the concept of feminism and how it might fit inside a Muslim/Islamic *deen* (En: way of life) and ontology (worldview).

**Keywords:** feminism; Islam; justice; women; Muslims; neo-liberalism; womens liberation; critical; hegemony; patriarchy.

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Wood, B.P. (2024) ‘Gender injustice against women in the Muslim world and the conflation of hegemonic terms (feminism) as deflection’, *Int. J. Islamic Marketing and Branding*, Vol. 6, No. 5, pp.1–11.

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## 1 Introduction

Feminism is a hegemonic term in the English language literatures. Actually, feminism refers to the experience and trajectory of white women in the pursuit of the gender rights with regard to white men and western societies (Zakaria, 2021). As such, the use of the term feminism (Arab feminism, Muslim feminism, Islamic feminism) is scattered through the literature without consideration of context (and, therefore meaning/objective). Similarly, Muslims tend to react very badly to the term feminism, whilst not clearly understanding it or being able to articulate its meaning.

This conceptual paper looks first at the size and trajectory of the Muslim nation, as Muslims consider all Muslims to be one nation (Ar: *ummah*). Next it discusses the history and background of the word 'feminism'. Following this, a brief discussion on how the concept of feminism is received in the Muslim world. A call for a better understanding of what feminism is and what it can mean for the Muslim world is next, seeking an understanding separate from that of neo-liberal white feminism. Lastly, some conclusions are offered.

## 2 The Muslim nation

Muslims number around 1.9 billion people worldwide and are expected to number 2.2 billion by 2030 (Pew, 2011). They are also expected to represent 10% of the European population by 2050 (Pew, 2011) as economies stutter under the twin threats of low birth rates and aging populations – meaning opportunities exist for migrants from 'youth heavy' parts of the world. Muslims were responsible for 2 trillion US dollars in spending in 2021 and are expected to spend 2.8 trillion US dollars in 2025 (Tighe, 2024). Key markets are food, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, fashion, travel, and the media/recreation sectors, with the largest market for Muslim consumers being the halal food and beverage sector.

This means Muslims are important, both inherently and otherwise in terms of market power and workforce potential, to name just two issues. The knock-on effect of this should be that what Muslims think should also, increasingly, matter; that their view(s) should be better, more regularly, and most importantly, more accurately represented in the media and in popular and scholarly literature.

Muslim women, who make up 800 million people worldwide (Zahidi, 2015, 2018), are a regular 'punching bag' for media outlets in both the west (Said, 2008; Shaheen, 2003) and also more close to home. A great deal of media attention is trained on speaking for Muslim women in terms of their thoughts, dreams and aspirations (Said, 1978; Ong, 1988). It is regularly noted that little (particularly in the English language literatures of any kind), is heard from the women themselves (Read and Bartkowski, 2000; Bullock, 2007; Burton, 2009).

Much has been written about hegemonies, the (assumed) universalised views of 'those who write history', and this has been an issue ongoing in the Muslim world for many centuries (Wood et al., 2021; Kahf, 1999). One foundationally important ramification of this hegemony is the translating, defining and re-defining of words across languages to suit the appropriated meanings. A commonly referenced case in point is the word 'jihad' in Arabic, which means 'struggle' (and, in the first instance, with yourself) rather than the often substituted 'holy war', which a simple back translation would

illustrate as a nonsense (Wood, 2022). It extends much further, however, into the resignification of whole concepts and paradigms (Sen and Grown, 1986; Boulanouar and Boulanouar, 2014; Bastian et al., 2023) which are then overlaid over Muslim (or other, 'other') experience and inevitably found deficient.

The (potentially deliberate) misinterpretation and the resulting misunderstanding between cultures and groups feeds the Machiavellian objectives of capitalism and imperialism outside the western world, resulting in a grand division, and making conceptualisations of out-groups, 'others' and divisions simple – almost natural (Davies et al., 1993). It also supports the rise of immanence (Sennett, 1974), a state where humankind is reduced to a single, material dimension – 'commodified' as Marx (1909) called it – far different from the kaleidoscopic, transcendent depiction of people in many religious teachings, and very clearly in Islam in particular.

### **3 A history of the term 'feminism'**

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines feminism as the “advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex [and] the movement associated with this” (OED, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/feminism\\_n?tl=true](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/feminism_n?tl=true)). In the etymology section of the same online entry, an elaboration of this states that during the French and American revolutions of the late 1700s the issue of rights for women (especially regarding marriage and property ownership), became prominent. Women became increasingly interested in their liberation from men and their empowerment as independent creations. Up until this time, in keeping with these societies' Christian beliefs, and the laws based on them, women merged into one legal being with their husbands upon marriage (coverture), were the chattels of men and had no rights to property or within a marriage beyond what their husband might allow them. They could be “beaten and raped by their husbands, could not sue, be sued, enter into contracts, make wills, keep [their] own earnings, or control [their] own property...they existed as citizens only through their husbands” [Saini, (2023), p.43].

As a natural result of dissatisfaction with these overarching controls by men, feminism sought to redress the balance of rights for women and created movements in pursuit of it. The Suffragette movement, rising in the late 1800s, which sought the vote for women in democratic societies, is widely regarded as the most prominent of these, and marks the time when actual political change began to occur. As such, (white) women protested to get to vote as their male counterparts did, and this was achieved in 1920 in the USA and 1921 in the UK. Interestingly, the UK was led in this venture by its colonies, with New Zealand being the first country in the world to practice universal suffrage in 1893. This is particularly noteworthy as New Zealand has an indigenous population which numbered around 100,000 at the time of colonisation, but was reduced to 43,000 (5% of the population) by 1900 due to war and disease (Results of a Census of the Colony of New Zealand taken for the night of the 31st March 1901, <http://www3.stats.govt.nz>).

One of the main criticisms of the women's suffrage movement in the US was the pitch white women took to voting, invigorated by the prospect of non-white men getting the vote (through the end of slavery and the referencing of the constitution of all men being equal), white women abandoned their coloured sisters to plead their cause as more

worthy of the vote due to their skin colour. Rebellion became valued, rather than the resilience exhibited by non-white women in grappling with more than one kind of oppression (intersectional oppression) (Zakaria, 2021). This shift in the pitch of feminism's campaign also opened the door to portraying non-white men as the opponent of non-white women, allowing a vocabulary of savagery and barbarism to be linked to these men (and so, these women) in 'common' understanding (Davies et al., 1993; Bryce et al., 2013). This link between white supremacy and feminism has effected the lives of millions of Native American women and also worldwide as America joined the imperial powers, and exported their 'way of life' (Saini, 2023; Zakaria, 2021).

"A 'second wave' of feminism arose in the 1960s, concerned especially with economic and social discrimination, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood" (OED, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/feminism\\_n?tl=true](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/feminism_n?tl=true)). This wave, accompanied as it was by an expanded programme of war by the US, focused still on individualistic rights, impacting the identity of women as individuals looking out for themselves and in an on-going arm wrestle with the normative male role model. The rights fought for in this period were ones Muslim women already had.

"A more diverse 'third wave' is sometimes considered to have arisen in the 1980s and 1990s, as a reaction against the perceived lack of focus on class and race issues in earlier movements" (OED, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/feminism\\_n?tl=true](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/feminism_n?tl=true)). Third wave feminism, by this description, should have taken us back to where we started with the movement – where the priority was fighting injustices against women in the patriarchal and regulatory systems that seek to suppress all those who are without privilege (Delphy, 2016). However, now feminism as a concept was indubitably infused with the cultures of neo-liberalism, white supremacy and all the other ideologies dominant in western democracies. In order for non-western women to embrace feminism, they needed to either prefix it as Americans do with race (e.g., Korean-American) such as 'Muslim feminism' or even 'Islamic feminism'. The trouble is these compound expressions represent something of an oxymoronic framework for Muslims.

Feminism, or more correctly, neo-liberal [white] feminism (Azzurra et al., 2019), is considered in the literature as the universal response to gender injustice (Zakaria, 2021) and raises many issues surrounding gender inequity such as lower salaries, 'pink' taxes, glass ceilings, legal rights, harassment, discrimination and safety from violence within the home and in wider society – but (how) does the concept fit into an Islamic/Muslim worldview? "The consequence of being unable to separate whiteness and feminism's agenda is that feminists everywhere continue to be tied to the history and trajectory of white feminists" [Zakaria, (2021), p.11].

#### 4 Response to feminism in the Muslim world

There is a lot of negativity around the term 'feminism' in the Muslim world, with many Muslims objecting to feminism as:

- 1 A political movement, concerned as it is with the promotion of women's rights, in the face of injustice, subjugation and oppression. This is perplexing, as this is an idea that has a natural home in Islam, which is a *deen* (En: way of life) with justice at its heart.

- 2 It is also seen as a western/foreign movement, where women reference men as the normative measure (Boulanouar, 2006) and object to this in the face of Islam's teaching of male and female complementarity, an idea which acknowledges male and female differences without suppressing or oppressing either sex on this basis.
- 3 The movement is further seen as combative and individualistic, concerned more with individual women's rights vis-à-vis men, rather than how the injustices that are, indeed, perpetuated against women could be rectified for the benefit of all society.
- 4 Lastly, feminism is a movement that is seen to be associated with immanence, secularism, commodification of womanhood, and the antithesis of transcendence in society.

In many respects, and in much Muslim practice, women and men really are not in competition. Often women's domains of autonomy are completely unchallenged by men, and vice-versa. However, the format of Muslim lives, where men deal primarily with issues outside the home and women those within it, can result in norms – and even laws – which do, in fact, operationalise gender injustice. Muslim women, for example, are free to work outside the home and we have good examples of successful women with responsible community positions from as far a back as the time of the Prophet Mohammad (SAA) himself. His first wife, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, is lauded as a rich and successful businesswoman, independent, clever and very capable. The controller of the Madina market, Shifa Bint Abdullah, was appointed by the Caliph Umar ibn Khattib to ensure trading was equitable, honest and law abiding.

Islam has a structure which considers Muslims, first and foremost, in terms of their good deeds – not their gender; entry to heaven (Ar: jannah) is through mothers in Islam, rather than through the father or husband as the 'Godhead'; Christianity; feminism is a political movement, and that may be the reason it is largely unwelcome.

In Islamic teaching women are not required to contribute to the financial support of their families, and may keep all their money, earned and inherited, to spend as they see fit (Briegel and Zivkovic, 2008). Similarly, Muslim women, while revered in their roles as mothers to the point where *jannah* (En: paradise) lies at their feet (Sunan al-Nasā'ī 3104) are also afforded a privileged position in relation to fathers, with the obligations of their children to them emphasised three-fold (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5971, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2548) over their obligations to their fathers.

Islam also granted divorce, reproductive, property rights and other forms of autonomy – both social and financial – to women, more than a thousand years before women's liberation movements started in the west.

An idea related to feminism, and part of the package against which feminists rebel, is patriarchy – or rule by the father (Gr: patriarkhēs). Walby (1990) states there are six types of patriarchy – paid work, housework, culture, sexuality, violence and the state – with the singular rule by the father being dominant in 'first wave' feminist times with each man dominant in his own family, to now a more public patriarchy exhibiting as a collective male authority. Walby also maintains that the exact nature of the patriarchy remains local to its setting. Saini (2023) agrees, noting that a single patriarchy does not exist, as patriarchy is embedded in both cultures and power structures in different ways (Beechey, 1979).

We see within the Abrahamic religions, and therefore the majority of the world's legal systems, that patriarchy is, indeed, enforced and in place in most societies in the

world. However, as Walby points out, the form of patriarchy depends on the context, and this accounts for the variety of applications of patriarchy you see – even within Muslim countries. As mentioned earlier, Allah (sa), who is not of any gender as we know it, does not favour men over women, but better Muslims over good ones based on what is in their hearts and in their deeds – an issue repeatedly brought up by Muslim women fighting against overextended male rights granted in Muslim communities. The reason for the rise of injustice against women in Muslim communities has been attributed to colonisation, proselytism (Saini, 2023) and also the fall of our societies from the Golden Age of Islam – now some thousand years ago – resulting in much ignorance, illiteracy and *bid'ah* (En: innovation) in the understandings of the teaching of Islam which have filtered down to our societies today. Colonisation, which has afflicted much of the Muslim world, relies on so-called white saviourism based on (claimed/imagined) moral superiority (Zagarri, 2011; De Mooij, 2011; Khan et al., 2023). As such, the patriarchy in our communities, which was only aimed to leverage the best of men in protection and provision of their families, has been twisted into a case for domination and suppression of the rights of women as Muslims in many categories of being.

## 5 Separation of feminism from neo-liberal [white] feminism

Grassroots movements (Sen and Grown, 1986) have long objected to the trajectory of ‘white’ feminism as, instead of seeking empowerment for the oppressed – usually an intersectional (race/class/gender) division between the ‘have’s’ and the ‘have not’s’ – the focus is now on enhancing the rights of white women with regard to white men, i.e., between the ‘have all’s’ and their ‘second in command’s’ in the project of feminised imperialism (Zakaria, 2021; Azzurra et al., 2019). “Neo-liberal feminism is part of the problem ... its proposals seek to ensure that a few privileged souls can attain positions and pay on a par with men *of their own social class*” [Azzurra et al., (2019), pp.10–11]. This means that by definition the benefits accrue to those who already possess significant social, cultural and economic advantages – making neo-liberal/white feminism a vehicle for white supremacism (Zakaria, 2021). These same women rely on migrant labour, paid at low rates, to succeed in their professional capacities (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Azzurra et al., 2019). In this way, ‘liberal feminism supplies the perfect alibi for neoliberalism’ and focuses on elitism and individualism and it is the feminism of elite power holders (Azzurra et al., 2019). White feminists look for professional access, whereas women of other colours still look for justice (Zakaria, 2021). Misogynistic ‘himpathy’ as Manne (2017) calls it.

The British Lord Acton is widely quoted as saying (at least the first part) of the following: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you superadd the tendency of the certainty of corruption by authority.” Sunnah Bukhari (6438) offers us the same sentiment: “If the son of Adam were given a valley full of gold, he would love to have a second one; and if he were given the second one, he would love to have a third, for nothing fills the belly of Adam’s son except dust. And Allah forgives he who repents to Him.” There is wide recognition that too much power centred in any one place is problematic, and when it is in the hands of one group of humans, you are unlikely to see justice.

Almessiri (2004) differentiates the women's liberation movement from feminism and considers the former term was subsumed under the term 'feminism' from the mid-1960s onwards or, during the second wave of feminism. The OED characterises this period as that concerned with unity and sisterhood, but El Messiri characterises it as the rise of human materialism, which sees people without society (as individuals/rootless/unconnected). He sees the women's liberation movement as one which situates "a belief in the centrality of man in the universe, as well as a belief in a common humanity which embraces all races and colours, both men and women. It also recognises the fact that man derives his humanness from his civilizational and social affiliation. Man, from the vantage point of women's liberation movements, is the product of culture, which is independent of the world of nature-matter; he cannot exist except within society" (p.15).

He sees neo-liberal feminism as an attack on the identity of women, attempting to redefine them so that they cannot see their identity realised except outside of the family, where traditionally they have been central and had a unique role to play. This push towards materialism, he feels, threatens to collapse the family and, with it, "the most important line of resistance against imperialist infiltration and western hegemony" (p.30). He sees this deconstruction of the family, through the shattering of women's value in society and in the family, as a way for Muslims to be colonised in a way the past direct military actions had failed to do. He calls for Muslims to find their own solutions, rooted in their own epistemological paradigms, which centre around societal collectivity, rather than sovereign individuality.

All of this ties into the goals of capitalism, which is recognised as exacerbating gender disparities (Saini, 2023). Almessiri (2004) highlights the impact of the commodification and materialist reduction of women which is encouraged by capitalist markets – the focus on 'beauty' and the goods and services required to 'guarantee' that for women – a theme widely discussed by others (Jeffreys, 2005; Wolf, 1995), and considered one of the hegemonic west's largest exports.

For Almessiri, the further step, and the more important one, is the commodification of women as (paid) workers – capitalism values only paid work and, by extension, must therefore see unpaid work as unproductive/consumptive (Dholakia and Firat, 1998). Similarly, women are seen as un(der) used human resources if they toil in the home and this is reframed as a reduction of their personal identity and personhood (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1981). Almessiri suggests we respond by re-centring our perceptions of 'women's work' and giving the due credit to the private social sphere of the home where many women prefer to be, and where their identity power may actually lie (Zakaria, 2021) – therefore encompassing an imagined universal understanding of value. Concomitantly, he sees the excessive individualist push to lead men to be poor fathers, putting pressure on the family unit and assisting the cycle of the division of collectives (starting with the family unit) in a cultural 'divide and conquer' model with which history is rife.

Obviously, Muslim cultures are what are referred to as 'collectivist' (Triandis et al., 1988) and, as such, members of the societies are socialised in a way which conforms to this norm/expectation (Kagitcibasi and Ataca, 2005). Therefore, the intersection of neo-liberal feminism and womens liberation movements pits individual identity against justice for (all) women within society. "The underlying premises of feminism are deconstructive, denying common humanity, aiming at enhancing the efficiency of women in their struggle against men" [Almessiri, (2004), pp.26–27].



Women have a privileged position in Islamic teaching – and this is a main point used in the transmission of *dawah* (En: invitation) by our community. However, we are not generally observing this privilege in many of our homes, communities and countries today. We undervalue the contributions of women in general, following other ways of life in discounting the value of ‘women’s work’ and ‘women businesses’ in ‘feminised industries’ – women have been tasked (by Allah) with raising children and supporting their (Islamic) education. However, we disregard their nurturing and educating of our ummah, despite Allah neither subjugating women, nor undervaluing them in any way. We focus on housework (not a task assigned by Allah) and physical appearance. Women do, in fact, usually do the housework – including preparing food – these are good deeds, an account of charity to other family members and also the manifest provision of the hospitality most Muslims pride themselves on. Raising (often larger) families, Muslim women are frequently very skilful in managing large groups, catering, organising functions and also in advocacy.

I suggest that we are suffering, in the case of feminism, from having our definitions/framing of issues given to us by ways of life which are outside of ours. ‘Feminism’ may not represent a format that fits with Islamic teaching and thinking, but the issues of injustice towards half our ummah are real and worthy of being raised. As Muslims we need to understand that we are required to actively deliver justice in our communities and households and that starts with how you deal with others (Ar: *mu’amalat*). Individually and collectively, we need to understand that our struggle is not with ‘feminism’, or women with men, but with the injustice that surrounds us all in all of its forms and manifestations.

## 6 Conclusions

Objections to the term ‘feminism’ by Muslims (and especially Muslim men) are probably less well thought out than reactive. However, reacting to the term allows deflection from the problem, without acknowledging the widespread injustices perpetuated against (Muslim) women by both Muslim men and many people, of both genders, in communities worldwide.

As Islam is a *deen* of justice, there is a place for considering the lives of women in many of our countries and communities and reflecting on whether women are receiving justice – the justice provided to them by Allah. The American scholar Hamza Yusuf has identified three injustices that Muslim communities perpetuate despite Allah rejecting them – discrimination based on gender; discrimination based on race; and injustices to the natural environment. Allah has clearly stated that, “Verily, Allah will not change the (good) condition of a people as long as they do not change their state (of goodness) themselves” (Qur’an: al-Ra’d 13:11).

There have been a number of works written about “Islamic/Muslim” feminism, many written by non-Muslims (e.g., Fernea, 2010) and across different realms of interest (e.g., Gallant, 2008; Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Althalathini et al., 2022; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2023), and there is no reason why the path forward for Muslim women to seek redress from the gender injustices they face within their own communities and beyond should not be labelled ‘feminism’. The problem with the term is that it comes with its own culture and history, and that is not from a perspective widely shared in Muslim communities. For that reason, Almessiri may be right that women’s liberation is a better term, given that it

suggests women should be liberated from all the oppression they face – structural, familial, legal, organisational – as is their right in Islam. Regardless, the feminism/women’s liberation that Muslim women generate and practice for themselves should certainly be studied and reported. One of the most important overall steps forward for women fighting gender injustice is to participate in, perpetuate and also encourage research – specifically, interview data collection and the collection of statistics. The worldwide shortage of statistics on women is directly contributing to failures in safety and healthcare for women (Perez, 2019) as well as perpetuating manifold injustices. Further, we need education and solutions which fit our needs, that are run through ‘Al Furqan’ (the differentiator, i.e., Qur’an), so we have just and *halal* dealings with women and respect them as Muslims and people, based on the rights given to them by Allah. Hussein (2006) states that “for the majority of people (regardless of social positions), their acceptance or rejection of what comes from the west is determined by its consistency or lack thereof with Islamic principles” (p.88). This position, if correct, should mean each Muslim is motivated towards enacting the justice for women dictated by Allah for them and to know it to be *ibadah* (En: worship) and a contribution to changing the conditions for the Muslim *ummah* (En: nation).

## Acknowledgement

This research was supported by a UAEU Program for Advanced Research Grant number 12B024.

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