Abstract
The emergence of ‘Islamic feminism’ has prompted significant debate that pits secular feminisms against cultural relativist arguments for placing religious beliefs on an equal standing with women’s rights. Islamic feminists, who pursue rights for women through the reinterpretation of religious texts, argue that a religious approach is the most viable for progress in theocratic states (Mir-Hosseini 2006; Ahmadi 2006). Their secular opponents question whether the reinterpretation of religious texts is sufficient for real change in Islamic states and culture (Mojab 2001) and whether feminism based in religion can be considered feminist at all (Shahidian 2002). This paper submits that Islamic feminism is severely limited as a tool for achieving women’s rights, due to the challenges inherent in disputing official state interpretations of the Quran and the focus on Muslim women at the expense of other women, such as those who are non-Muslim or non-heterosexual.

Keywords
Feminism, Islam, women’s rights, Iran, religious feminism

Islamic feminism, or the pursuit of women’s rights within an Islamic framework through the reinterpretation of religious texts (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2006), is the subject of substantial debate that pits secular feminisms against cultural relativist arguments for placing religion on equal standing with women’s rights. While Islamic feminists and their supporters characterise their approach as a genuine ‘feminism’ that is the most viable for progress in oppressive theocratic states (Mir-Hosseini 2006; Ahmadi 2006), secular feminists question whether mere reinterpretation of religious texts is sufficient for the overhaul of Islamic patriarchal states and culture (Mojab 2001).
and whether a ‘feminism’ grounded in religion can be considered feminist at all (Shahidian 2002). This essay will argue that Islamic feminism is a severely limited tool in the achievement of women’s rights, due to the challenges inherent in disputing official state interpretations of the Quran and the focus of Islamic feminism on Muslim women at the expense of other women, such as those who are non-Muslim or non-heterosexual.

This paper will begin with an elaboration of the methods and goals of Islamic feminism. Following this, analysis will proceed in three parts. Firstly, this essay examines the failure of Islamic feminism to challenge Islamic states that define themselves in opposition to secularism, which too often involves women’s rights violations in the name of Islamic authenticity. Secondly, the claim that Islamic feminism is the most viable option for challenging sexist Islamic law from within will be evaluated. Lastly, the degree to which Islamic feminism is complicit in sexist practices will be determined, via analysis of its support for veiling, reluctance to cooperate with secular feminists, and its harmful impact on women in secular states. It will also note that secular efforts at reform such as those carried out by the United Nations have been more effective at negotiating with Islamic elites than the Islamic feminists themselves. In view of these concerns, it will be argued overall that Islamic feminism’s utility in furthering women’s rights is minimal, and constrained by both the power of Islamic state apparatus and Islamic feminists’ own limited ambition. It will also question whether Islamic feminism constitutes true, authentic ‘feminism’ as its proponents claim.
I- The theory and methods of Islamic feminism

Islamic feminism defines itself in relation to Western feminism, which it variously criticises as monolithic, exclusive, lacking credibility and ineffective in Islamic contexts. Among its main proponents is Ziba Mir-Hosseini, who argues that secular feminisms have failed to secure rights for women and as such is losing its legitimacy (Mir-Hosseini 2011). The justification for grounding their ‘feminism’ in religious terms is typically framed in functional terms, arguing that only those willing to ‘engage with Islam’s sacred texts and its legal tradition can bring change from within’ (Mir-Hosseini 2006, 644). Margot Badran, similarly, claims that religion and the cultures in which it exists are ‘not going to go away’ in supporting a ‘discourse of Islamic feminism’ (2001, 51). As such, Islamic feminists engage in *ijtihad*, the ‘independent investigation of religious sources’, and *tafsir*, ‘interpretation of the Quran’, in re-reading these sources from a specifically female perspective and thus using what Fereshteh Ahmadi terms ‘important post-modern concepts’ (2006, 36).

The first and most important method of Islamic feminism, that of reinterpreting religious texts in a way that is deemed more progressive, is in itself a flawed method of pursuing women’s rights. The Quran describes itself as a guide for conduct, and only eighty of its over six thousand verses possess even arguable legal content (Rehman 2007, 110). Islamic feminists seize upon this in arguing that ‘state appropriation of Islam’ can be challenged by reinterpreting the Quran for the modern purpose of equality between the sexes (Mir-Hosseini 2006, 638). Official sexist readings of Iranian election laws read the Arabic word for ‘personalities’ as ‘men’, thus barring women from entering the 2005 presidential elections despite progressive interpretations arguing that the law ought to allow women to run (Esfandiari 2009). The reinterpretation of religious
texts relies on an accompanying ability to influence the official interpretation that constitutes the law and, as shall be argued below, this combination is out of reach of Islamic feminism.

II- Islamic states and women’s rights

The reinterpretation of religious texts for any end means little when the extent of actual reform is determined by the state. Hammed Shahidian has illustrated the severity of this obstacle in identifying Iran’s ‘patriarchal triad’ of the state, Islam and patriarchy itself (2002, 14). These mutually reinforcing elements demonstrate that Iran and other Islamic states are far from possessing ‘neutral’ laws that Islamic feminists and cultural relativists argue may be negotiated or challenged (Mojab 2001, 138). It is not the Iranian Constitution’s declaration that ‘women should equally enjoy the protection of the law’ that matters, but that this is followed by the clarification ‘in conformity with Islamic criteria’ (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008, 29). Regardless of whether Islam itself is the source of patriarchy, the state interpretation of Islam is what becomes law, with severe punishment for transgression (Shahidian 2002). The elites of Iran and other Islamic states, in believing that women must be oppressed for the sake of [Islamic] ‘social cohesion’ (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008, 23), show that their political systems rest clearly ‘upon the subordination of women’ (MacKinnon 1989, 161). When Islamic feminists such as Mir-Hosseini and Ahmadi claim that reinterpretation of religious texts may effect change when Islam is not ‘part of the oppositional discourse, but in power’ (Ahmadi 2006, 36), they fail to recognise that they themselves constitute an oppositional discourse with little clout in a state controlled by religious patriarchs.
That Islamic feminists and Islamic governments share an interest in maintaining their religious culture leaves women at the centre of their ideological conflict with the West. In one work, Mir-Hosseini argues for the value of ‘different feminisms’ along cultural and religious lines (2011, 76); in another, she admits that women, as ‘symbols of cultural authenticity and carriers of religious tradition’, find it difficult to escape oppressive Islamic practices (2006, 639). In their desire to shield their societies from Western non-Islamic influence, Iranian elites rejected the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women on the grounds of it being ‘un-Islamic’ (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008, 28) and dismissed criticism of their human rights violations as ‘politically motivated’, ‘Western’, and ‘un-Islamic’ (Mokhtari 2004, 470). Scholars such as Mona Eltahawy (2012) and Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh (2006, 1490) agree respectively that women in Islamic states effectively constitute ‘bargaining chips’ and ‘contested territory’, which Islamic feminism does little to mollify in its support for a society governed according to Islamic principles. In short, feminism based in Islam serves to perpetuate ideological conflict between Islam and the West that has proven harmful to women.

III- Challenging the Islamic state from within?

Perhaps the most fundamental flaw of Islamic feminism is that it fails to challenge the regime that created and perpetuates sexist laws and practices. In the case of Iran, the replacement of a secular regime by an Islamic Republic in 1979 was accompanied by declarations that women’s rights were ‘un-Islamic and Western’ (Mojab 2001, 129). Despite the core tenet of Islamic feminism being that women’s rights can be achieved under Islamic law, the new Islamic Republic was responsible for
the suspension of the 1967 Family Protection Act, under which the fallen secular regime had provided women with more rights within the familial context, such as divorce and the prevention of polygamy, among others (Shekarloo 2005). The new state proceeded to reimpose compulsory veiling, while its relegation of women to the private sphere caused female participation in the workforce to drop rapidly (Bahramitash 2007). In establishing the new regime, it was deemed necessary to distinguish the Islamic Republic from secular systems such as those of the West and, as discussed earlier, rejected rights for women as a means of doing so (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2006, 1490; Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008, 28). Unelected clerical councils were given unfettered power in the new Islamic Republic, yet Mir-Hosseini merely describes them as ‘dominated by conservative clerics’ (2002, 38). One of the bodies in question, the Council of Guardians, is responsible for blocking attempts at reform for women’s rights, and yet remains effectively unchallenged by Islamic feminists in their support (tacit or otherwise) for the maintenance of an Islamic Republic.

The Council of Guardians is an unelected body of clerics with the power to block legislation from the elected Iranian parliament (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008, 28), and is responsible for scuttling many progressive bills endorsed by Islamic feminists. That Islamic feminism does not challenge the existence of Islamic states such as Iran with these powerful conservative structures in place is widely regarded by scholars including Haideh Moghissi (1999) and Hammed Shahidian (2002) as its fundamental flaw. To conclude this section’s examination of Islamic feminism’s claimed ability to bring change from within Islamic states, the extent to which the Council of Guardians and the Islamic government determine the boundaries of reform (that is, exclusively) will be analysed.
The presence of reformist women within the Iranian parliament, while positive, has achieved little when the Council of Guardians can strike down even a semblance of women’s rights at its pleasure. If there is reform, it is often severely diluted. The increase to the minimum female marriage age, for example, was from nine to only thirteen, and this can be circumvented if a guardian plus a judge or medical practitioner declare the child ‘ready for marriage’ (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008, 27). Similarly, custody law reform that placed the right of ‘fostering’ a child with the mother if the father died did not address the issue of ‘guardianship’, which places control over finances and other legal elements with male relatives (Mojab 2001, 133). Again, the Council of Guardians permitted only slight incremental improvements for women.

Even that, however, is preferable to the Council of Guardians’ habit of blocking rights for women altogether. As mentioned earlier, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was dismissed outright (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008, 28). Legislation introduced in the Sixth Majlis (parliament 2000-2004) advocating for equal inheritance rights for rural women that enjoyed significant parliamentary support was likewise scuppered by the Council, as were numerous other family law reforms (Bahramitash 2007, 95). Mir-Hosseini herself concedes positive steps such as the 1992 amendments to divorce laws to compensate divorced women were severely limited by unequal access to divorce between women and men and the ease with which the revisions could be bypassed (Mir-Hosseini 1996). In sum, it would appear that Mojab (2001) and other secular feminists are correct in identifying the Islamic state as an incorrigible barrier to reform.
Despite mass protests to the contrary, Islamic feminism is complicit with, or even actively supportive of laws and practices that are in clear contravention of women’s rights. The first case in point is that of veiling, which is supported by Islamic feminists within the context of both Islamic and secular states. While the latter secular governments do not punish women for failure to cover themselves, secular feminists are still silenced by Islamic feminists such as Afshar (2008) who consider any questioning of the practice to constitute Islamophobia or Orientalism. This is despite women in secular states being threatened by fundamentalists with murder (Granados 2010) or dismissal from the workplace (Littleley 2013) for not covering. In Iran, where failure to veil oneself results in severe punishment, Mir-Hosseini claims that the veil represents a ‘choice’ and a ‘right’ while dismissing secular feminist objections that this constitutes oppression’ (2007, 1). However, secular feminists are able to identify that veiling constitutes a harmful cultural practice: compulsory veiling is not merely a law that can be theoretically disputed, but part of ‘rape culture’ that symbolises and perpetuates patriarchy (Dworkin cited in Jeffreys 2012, 128). While Iranian activists such as journalist Azadeh Moaveni do not regard the veil as their worst grievance, they regard it as representing their oppression and over the past years have dedicated great effort to opposing the practice (Basu 2009). Veiling, therefore, is an example of intentional Islamic feminist complicity in sexist practices.

Islamic feminism fails to advocate for the rights of all women. Many Islamic feminists, such as Mir-Hosseini, Afsaneh Najmabadi, and Nayereh Tohidi, live in Western countries such as the United States and United Kingdom and are unaffected by the laws and practices of the Islamic states they endorse (Moghadem 2002, 1142).
Despite acknowledging that only elite, highly-educated women have the ‘luxury of choice’ in ‘rejecting or challenging’ Islamic law (Mir-Hosseini 2006, 645), Islamic feminists pursue the rights of heterosexual Muslim women at the expense of others. The feminist organisation Women Living Under Muslim Laws is ‘especially concerned about marginalized women’ in Islamic states, namely those who are non-Muslim or non-heterosexual (Women Living Under Muslim Laws 2014). Non-Muslim women are subject to more brutal penal laws (Mojab 2001), while expressing secular or Western feminist views in states such as Iran would certainly be met with punishment (Jeffreys 2012). Lesbianism and other same-sex attraction, meanwhile, is declared ‘sin and deviation’ in states such as Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and punishable by Islamic law (Siraj 2012, 450). By limiting itself to the pursuit of rights within an Islamic framework, the piecemeal approach of Islamic feminists leaves minorities behind in favour of heterosexual Muslim women.

By having self-proclaimed ‘feminist’ women declare that Islam is compatible with women’s rights, Islamic feminists risk legitimising the oppression of women even in secular states. As mentioned earlier, many prominent Islamic feminists are academics resident in the United States and United Kingdom (Moghadem 2002, 142) and thus operate from a privileged position with qualified access to the public sphere. Some, such as Haleh Afshar (2008), also deploy accusations of ‘Islamophobia’ in an attempt to silence secular feminists who question the impact of religion on women’s rights. Afshar, it must be noted, sits in the House of Lords in the United Kingdom, where Sharia courts are permitted to resolve civil disputes (Moosa 2010, 45). As identified by Zohra Moosa of the Minority Rights Group International, this allows conservative Islamic communities to suspend the government’s comparatively progressive laws on women’s rights in regard to Muslim women in the name of cultural relativism (Moosa
2010, 48). With prominent Islamic feminists such as Afshar and her cultural relativist allies calling opponents of such parallel laws ‘Islamophobes’, it becomes far too easy for women’s rights to be jettisoned in favour of ‘religious’ rights.

If Islamic feminists were to stop fetishizing religious difference and join forces with secular actors, women’s rights would become more attainable. As noted above, secular feminists are punished more severely than Muslim women, yet Islamic feminists content with the existence of Islamic law do not challenge this situation (Jeffreys 2012). Secular women aiming to abolish Islamic law altogether occasionally appropriate Islamic feminist arguments as a ‘matter of political expediency’ (Moghissi 1999, 134). Islamic feminists such as Ahmadi dismiss secular feminism as ‘neither adequate nor widespread enough’ to effect change (2006, 34), yet do not consider cooperation as a means of rectifying the situation. As Barlow and Akbarzadeh note, this could of course be different if Islamic feminism were to challenge the idea of running a state according to Islamic law (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008, 26). Given that secular states enjoy much higher positions on equality rankings such as the United Nations Development Fund’s Gender Inequality Index (2012), it ought to be apparent that women’s rights would be more easily pursued if Islamic feminists were to unite with secular feminists.

While Islamic feminism may claim its strength to be its ability to ‘engage with Islam’ and ‘bring change from within’ (Mir-Hosseini 2006, 644), secular actors are far more effective at doing so. Islamic feminists do not have a monopoly on using religious concepts to pursue change. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has proved successful in establishing reproductive health programs in Iran by beginning with the ‘least sensitive issues’ such as general women’s health before progressing to reproductive matters, all in cooperation with local health workers and religious leaders.
More than 17,000 reproductive health instructors have been trained and its message incorporated into the national literacy programme, which is then shared with nearby Islamic states. Rather than deferring to religion as Islamic feminism does, UN missions have found success with a ‘technical or scientific perspective’ in addressing ‘culturally sensitive issues’, while culture-based beliefs about sex inequality have been shown to weaken when opportunities are created for women to demonstrate their capabilities (UNFPA 2014). In short, creating a neutral image has allowed secular organisations such as the United Nations Population Fund to make far more progress than Islamic feminism in achieving women’s rights.

In view of the concerns examined in this paper, it is questionable whether Islamic feminism constitutes ‘feminism’ at all. As discussed, Islamic feminists do little to contest the antagonistic stance of Islamic states towards the West that sees women caught in the crossfire, fail to recognise that interpretations of religious texts and the boundaries of reform are determined by the state and therefore conservative Islamists, and pursue the rights of heterosexual Muslim women with insufficient regard for non-Muslim or non-heterosexual women. As noted by Shahrzad Mojab (2001, 143), Islamic feminists and their cultural relativist supporters fail to recognise the detrimental effect of dividing feminism into secular and religious varieties. Within Islamic states, for example, ‘Western’ feminism is punished in ways that Islamic feminism would avoid (Jeffreys 2012). This essay is in agreement with Shahidian that although Islamic feminism may seek to alleviate some elements of patriarchy, its failure to aim to eliminate it entirely and for all women leaves ‘Islamic feminism’ an oxymoron (cited in Mojab 2001, 130-31). In assuming that Islamic fundamentalism will not disappear, ‘Islamic feminism’ is therefore the ‘most profound pessimism’ (Moghissi 1999, 145).
Its lack of ambition and efficiency in achieving women’s rights thus leave Islamic ‘feminism’ undeserving of the term.

**V- Conclusion**

This essay has argued that Islamic feminism is far from a useful tool in achieving women’s rights, either in Islamic states or elsewhere. The primary method of Islamic feminism, that of *ijtihad* or reinterpretation of religious texts, combined with its failure to challenge states built on Islamic principles comprise its fundamental, and perhaps fatal, flaws. If religious texts are indeed open to plausible reinterpretation as progressive and compatible with women’s rights, it follows that reformists must possess the ability to effect change. In Islamic states such as this essay’s case study of Iran, from which most Islamic feminists originate and around which much of the debate centres, those in favour of women’s rights are unfortunately not those who wield that ability. As this essay’s discussion of the Women’s Faction in parliament has shown, the Guardian Council has the final word on the extent of reform, and too frequently outlaws it altogether.

As well as limiting its own potential by neglecting to oppose Islamic government, Islamic feminists also sell short their fellow women via exclusion and complicity in sexist practices. While criticising secular or ‘Western’ feminists as allegedly failing to recognise diversity for not supporting Islamic feminism, Islamic feminists have not shown themselves to sufficiently appreciate diversity within Islamic states. Non-Muslim and non-heterosexual women are unlikely to be well-served under any Islamic law.
Furthermore, Islamic feminists’ use of terms such as ‘Islamophobia’ and ‘Orientalism’ to silence dissenters serves to help insulate sexist Islamic practices from being eradicated in countries such as the United Kingdom, where Islamic feminists such as Haleh Afshar and Ziba Mir-Hosseini are based. Conversely, in Islamic states, secular efforts at reform have been met with more success than those attempted by Islamic feminists. Insisting on limiting one’s pursuit of women’s rights to within an Islamic framework, in short, does not appear to yield results in any country.

In conclusion, Islamic feminism is both ineffective in achieving women’s rights as well as fundamentally misguided. While Islamic feminists have licence to term their ‘feminism’ what they will, they cannot claim to act in the interest of all women, as feminism ought to strive to do. Their determination to abide by Islamic principles, whatever they define them to be, is indicative of a fatally limited claim to strive for women’s rights.
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