MULKI AL-SHARMANI

Islamic Feminism
Transnational and national reflections

This article focuses on contemporary interpretive knowledge projects that engage critically with Islamic religious sciences, and which are driven by the question of gender justice. These projects, which have been loosely termed as Islamic Feminism, are undertaken by Muslim women scholars from different countries who are committed to their religious faith and who are working towards the production of alternative, gender-sensitive religious knowledge. The paper has three aims: 1) to review the contestations about the definition, categorization, goals, and significance of what has been termed Islamic feminism, 2) to provide an alternative description of these knowledge projects and identify some hermeneutical characteristics that link them and which perhaps could be the basis for delineating them as a new field of knowledge, 3) to map out the trajectory of building new religion-based feminist knowledge in Egypt, shedding light on light on current knowledge projects that can be labelled as Islamic feminism.

OVER THE LAST THREE AND A HALF DECADES there has appeared a new area of scholarship that engages with Islamic sacred texts (the Qur'an and Sunnah) and its interpretive tradition (i.e. exegesis, jurisprudence, Hadith compilations, etc.), driven primarily by the question of gender justice and methodological reform.[1] This scholarship consists of studies that critically revisit and unpack dominant religious interpretations that are patriarchal and discriminatory against women, and aim to produce new knowledge that makes the case for gender equality and justice from within an Islamic paradigm. These studies are being produced predominantly by Muslim female scholars (and some male Muslim scholars) from different disciplines and countries. The new scholarship has been called Islamic feminism.

Some of the scholars who have been studying or engaging in Islamic feminism see a great epistemic and political value in it, not only for Muslim women but also for the reform of religious tradition (Abou-Bakr 2012, Barlas 2002, Badran 2005, Mir-Hosseini 2006). Other scholars have critiqued Islamic feminism as being an unsystematic and heterogeneous body of knowledge, as having weak methodological links to classical religious sciences and being politically insignificant, or even counterproductive, for women (Moghissi 1999, Moghadam 2002, Tohidi 2003).

Some of the women scholars undertaking such projects have also linked their production of knowledge to building a global Muslim movement for gender equality and justice. For example, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, the Iranian UK-based anthropologist, is one of these pioneer scholars. She writes critical studies of Islamic jurisprudence to highlight its problematic construction of marriage and marital duties and rights. In 2009, Mir-Hosseini and Zainah Anwar, the former executive director of Sisters in Islam (the Malaysian women's rights advocacy group), co-founded the global movement Musawah, along with other Muslim women activists and scholars from different countries. Musawah, which means equality in Arabic, is a knowledge-building movement that is led by Muslim women. Using a four-pronged approach,[2] Musawah links scholarship with activism

2   This approach integrates Islamic teachings, international human rights conventions, national constitutions and laws, and lived realities of Muslims.

to produce knowledge that brings new perspectives to the Islamic interpretive tradition, and empowers advocates working towards gender equality and justice. Through Musawah, Mir-Hosseini has been working with scholars such as Amina Wadud, the African-American Muslim theologian who undertakes women-centred readings of the Qur'an; Asma Lamrabet, the Moroccan scholar who also studies the Qur'an; Sa'diyya Shaikh, the South African scholar who works on Islamic Sufi thought; Muhammed Khaled Masud, the Pakistani scholar who works on Islamic jurisprudence; and Omaima Abou-Bakr, the Egyptian scholar who conducts genealogical studies of Islamic exegesis.

But what are the hermeneutical and epistemological contributions of these projects? And what is their political significance both on a transnational level (i.e. as a global knowledge-building movement) and on a national level in the case of Egypt? And what are the limits and challenges of Islamic feminism? This article draws on a five-year research project that the author is undertaking (2013–18) to address these questions.[3] My goals for this particular article, however, are narrower. They are: 1) to review the contestations about the definition, categorization, goals, and significance of what has been termed Islamic feminism, 2) to provide an alternative description of these knowledge projects and identify some hermeneutical characteristics that link them and which perhaps could be the basis for delineating them as a new field of knowledge, 3) to map out the trajectory of building a new, religion-based body of feminist knowledge in Egypt, as well as its transnational and national relevance.

3   The author, an Academy of Finland research fellow, is undertaking this five-year research project (2013–18) at the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki. This study, entitled 'Islamic Feminism: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics,' focuses on selected contemporary interpretive projects (transnational and national). It has two goals: 1) to analyse the hermeneutical approaches, contributions, and limits of these projects, and 2) to conduct a case study of interpretive knowledge projects that are being undertaken in Egypt, by the Women and Memory Forum (WMF), an Egyptian non-governmental organization whose mission is 'the production and dissemination of alternative knowledge concerning women in the Arab Region'.

Islamic feminism: contestations

Omaima Abou-Bakr is among the first who conceptualized Islamic feminism (Abou-Bakr 2001). Abou-Bakr, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cairo University, has also been undertaking ground-breaking studies that deconstruct traditional Islamic exegetical interpretations of gender roles and rights. She has also researched and written about Muslim women's roles in the production of traditional religious sciences as well as women's mysticism in Islam and Christianity. According to Abou-Bakr, the label Islamic feminism can be limiting when used by Western scholars to name the gender activism of Muslim women. In such cases, the label can become 'hegemonic' and concealing. But Abou-Bakr does not necessarily reject the term. For her, the significant element in the term is in the qualifier 'Islamic'. For her, the adjective 'Islamic' refers to the key framework under which this knowledge is to be situated. Abou-Bakr explains that she espouses a feminist knowledge project that is grounded in the Qur'anic objectives of justice as well as in the specificity of the cultural and historical contexts of the Muslim women undertaking such project. She also notes the importance of de-homogenizing feminism, whether as a Western or non-western intellectual tradition. She points out that there are different kinds of feminism and some are not only unopposed to religion but very much grounded in it. Abou-Bakr sees Islamic feminism, as part of the latter form of the feminist tradition and one which entails 'discussing and analysing discourses and methodologies from within our indigenous tradition, which can be employed or developed to articulate gender awareness, as well as to apply the intelligent use of Islamic principles and fields of meaning for the acquisition of rights or for revisioning discourses that encourage subordinate gender consciousness' (Abou-Bakr 1999: 3). She stresses that this task of engaged reading is her responsibility as 'a Muslim, Egyptian Arab woman' (Abou-Bakr 1999: 4).

The Pakistani-American Asma Barlas, who has produced insightful scholarship seeking to 'un-read' patriarchy in the Qur'an, is uncomfortable with the term 'Islamic feminism' because she rejects 'feminism' as an intellectual tradition that is inescapably entangled with the history of Western colonialism and the othering of non-western Muslim women (Barlas 2008). Instead, Barlas sees her project of producing new, gender-sensitive religious knowledge not as engaging in feminism, but as fulfilling her obligation to God as a believing woman. The historian

Margot Badran, however, finds the term to be a useful analytical tool to describe 'a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm'. She sees this discourse as specifically grounded in the Qur'an and 'seeking rights and justice for women and men in the totality of their existence' (Badran 2002: 1). Badran sees secular and Islamic feminism as two distinct discourses, but stresses that there are important linkages between the two. For example, Badran argues that secular feminism, particularly in Egypt, paved the way to Islamic feminism in that the former was always partly grounded in a reformist, modernist, Islamic framework. Badran sees Islamic feminism as more radical and powerful than secular feminism because of its quest for a theologically-grounded gender equality and justice, and its growing global appeal to Muslims and non-Muslims alike who are concerned with gender justice (Badran 2005).

Also, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, the well-known legal anthropologist and one of the pioneer scholars of writing about Islamic feminism, defines it as 'a new consciousness, new way of thinking, a gender discourse that was feminist in its aspiration and demands, yet Islamic in its language and source of legitimacy' (Mir-Hosseini 2006: 640). Aside from the contestations around the term, Mir-Hosseini, as well as Badran and Abou-Bakr, acknowledge that Islamic feminism has been used to refer to a wide range of diverse and heterogeneous discourses and practices.

Can this heterogeneity be a weakness? For instance, the social scientist Hoda Salah (2010) divides Islamic feminism into three discourses: conservative, liberal, and radical. Yet, some of the scholars that Salah cites as exemplifying these three kinds of Islamic feminism are so different in their approaches and the underlying premises of their works that it is difficult to see them all being part of the one and same broader knowledge project called Islamic feminism. For instance, Saleh cites three Egyptian scholars: Soad Saleh, Heba Raouf Ezzat, and Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd as representing the three kinds of Islamic feminism respectively. Saleh, Professor of Islamic Jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University, produced some liberal interpretations such as sanctioning qualified female religious scholars' rights in issuing *fatwas* (unbinding legal opinion). Yet, she still espouses an Islamic perspective that condones unequal gender relations and rights in the family sphere. Heba Raouf Ezzat, a political scientist, activist, and Islamic public thinker, is a critic of the Western feminist tradition, and a sceptic of Muslim gender activism that focuses on gender-based legal reform without tackling the larger question of political reform.[4] But Ezzat (1994, 2010) has also written critically and insightfully about classical and contemporary religious interpretations that sanction women's subordination. The late Abu Zayd was Professor of Islamic Studies at Cairo University and moved to the Netherlands after an apostasy court case was filed against him on the grounds of his scholarship. Abu Zayd (2008) developed a new and bold theory of Qur'anic exegetical interpretation which argues that the Qur'an is a discourse rather than a text and has multiple domains of meaning. Thus, the three scholars are so different, not only in their methodologies but also in their goals and underlying premises, that it is not clear how Hoda Saleh sees them as examples of the same larger project. So while sometimes the heterogeneity of Islamic feminism may be meaningful, in other cases it arises from the lack of a clear and developed analysis of the nature, methodologies, and boundaries of this new field.

Islamic feminism has also been critiqued for its supposedly tenuous methodological and epistemological links to classical Islamic religious sciences. Yasmin Moll (2009) contends that Islamic feminist scholars such as Omaima Abou-Bakr and Asma Barlas emphasize the importance of applying *ijtihad* (independent thinking) but reject the notion that this role in the Islamic tradition is confined to religious scholars who meet very specific criteria in religious knowledge and interpretive skills. In addition, Moll sees that the methodologies used by contemporary Islamic feminists are modern and divorced from the methodological tradition of classical Islamic exegetes and jurists. She argues that contemporary Islamic feminist scholars make use of historical, literary and deconstructionist approaches that had no place in Islamic religious sciences. So Moll sees that while Islamic feminism derives its legitimacy from the Islamic tradition, it transforms the very methodological framework that has long defined classical religious knowledge and the actors producing this knowledge. But the problem with Moll's critique is that it lacks a historical interrogation of the classical Islamic religious tradition, and its methodologies. To question, build on, or propose shifts in the Islamic interpretive tradition and its methodologies is seen by Moll as a weakness. Yet, this is precisely one of the important contributions of Islamic feminism knowledge projects.

4   Personal interview with the author, August 2008. See Al-Sharmani 2013.

Other critics of Islamic feminism see it as politically insignificant and even counterproductive. Valentine Moghadam (2002), for example, sees that the struggle for gender rights cannot be won through theological arguments but by focusing on socioeconomic and political realities. But Moghadam fails to see the connections between multiple systems that regulate and impact gender relations and rights in Muslim societies (e.g. codified laws, cultural norms, prevalent religious discourses as well as socioeconomic policies and conditions). Others reject Islamic feminism because it is grounded in a religious framework that rests on foundational and absolute notions of religious truth and doctrines (Moghissi 1999, Tohidi 2003). However, such critics assume that the goal of interpretive feminist projects that are based on religion is the search for *the authentic* interpretation and *the uniform* religious truth. But actually Islamic feminism emphasizes the importance of the connection between text and context, and the multidimensionality of the interpretive process, notions that were also implicitly present in Islamic religious sciences and are reflected through the diversity in classical exegetical and juristic interpretations.

Redefining Islamic feminism: categories and hermeneutical approaches

I have written elsewhere about the contestations with respect to the definition and categorization of Islamic feminism (Al-Sharmani 2011). Here I build on this earlier work and seek to contribute to a mapping out and delineating of this emerging field of knowledge. In my view, Islamic feminism, as a knowledge project, can be classified according to two categories: transnational and national. These projects, which are predominantly undertaken by Muslim women, have two broad aims: tracing and problematizing patriarchal religious knowledge that sanctions gender inequality; and producing alternative readings that are egalitarian while at same time being based on Islamic ethical and theological principles.

The transnational projects consist of works produced in English by Muslim female scholars at academic institutions and from different fields (social sciences, humanities, Islamic studies, etc.). This scholarship is mostly read by students and researchers. But several of these scholars also have strong linkages with movements calling for gender justice, and their work has been translated into different languages and disseminated to a larger audience beyond

academic circles. Two notable examples of such scholars are Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Amina Wadud.

At the national level, important Islamic feminist knowledge projects have emerged in Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, South Africa, Morocco, and Egypt. These projects vary in their knowledge outputs and political significance, but what they share are two main features: they are hermeneutical studies undertaken by women scholars either based at research centres or universities and produced in national languages, and gender-based legal reform efforts that draw on this knowledge.

Epistemologically, Islamic feminism can be classified according to two main categories that are well-delineated and developed, and two that are less systematic. The first consists of works that focus on the Qur'an and its exegetical tradition, such as the works of Amina Wadud (1999, 2006, and 2009), Asma Barlas (2002), Maysam Al-Faruqi (2000), Nevin Reda (2013), and Omaima Abou-Bakr (2013 and 2015). The second category of work focuses on critical engagements with Islamic *fiqh* or jurisprudence and is spearheaded by Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2000, 2003, 2010, 2013) and Kecia Ali (2010, 2012).

In addition, there has also been a less extensive engagement with the Hadith tradition, undertaken by scholars such as the South African Saʾdiyya Shaikh (2004), and the Indonesian Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir (2013). Finally, another emerging category is the work of Saʾdiyya Shaikh (2012) on Sufi thought and its role as an ethical and theological corrective to the patriarchal principles and doctrines of Islamic jurisprudence.

Islamic feminism and hermeneutical contributions

As part of mapping out this new area of knowledge, I wish to identify the common hermeneutical approaches of its key works of scholarship. I highlight two approaches that I believe some of the main scholars share. The first entails critiquing interpretive textual traditions such as *tafsir* and *fiqh* in light of the ethical principles which constitute, as argued, the Qur'anic worldview and core message. And the second approach is related to demystifying the assumed singularity, immutability, and sanctity of the Islamic textual tradition. Below I will explain each approach, giving examples from selected works.

The ethical in the textual tradition

In the Qur'an-centred Islamic feminist projects, exemplified in the works of Amina Wadud (2009),

Asma Barlas (2002), and Omaima Abou-Bakr (2013), Qur'an-based ethical/theological principles are put forward as the necessary building blocks for formulation of gender norms and rulings in Islamic law.

Wadud (2009) was the pioneer in articulating the Qur'anic ethos of God–human and human–human relations, and which are based on theological principle of *tawhid* (the unity and oneness of God). This ethos rests on four central truths: 1) God is one and just, 2) human beings are in vertical relationships with God in which they seek to know and worship him in their capacity as God's viceregents on earth, 3) human beings can only be in horizontal relationships with one another (i.e. one of equality) since any vertical or hierarchical relations among them (e.g. patriarchy) will negate the oneness of God and human beings' submission to the Divine, and 4) the Qur'an as the word of God has a hierarchy of meanings that point to a trajectory of justice. Thus, it is the role of Muslims to discern the multiple meanings of the Qur'an, identify the best of meanings (Barlas 2002), and follow the trajectory of Qur'anic justice through our various historical and social contexts.

So in this Qur'anic world-view patriarchy must be negated and annihilated because it is antithetical to the belief in the oneness of God and our submission to his will. Furthermore, Qur'anic justice is not set in fixed injunctions which are to be found in a literal reading of the Qur'an. Rather, Qur'anic justice is a historical and interpretive process to be guided by holistic and contextualized readings that can lead to multiple legal rules.

The question of the ethical and its relation to the legal is also undertaken by Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Kecia Ali, who focus on Islamic jurisprudence. Both scholars deconstruct and critique the very philosophical, epistemological, and ethical premises that guided some of the classical jurists' constructions of marriage, marital roles, women, men, and relations between the two sexes, and which they identify as the genesis of gender inequality and hierarchy in Islamic law.

Mir-Hosseini (2003, 2013), for instance, argues that early jurists shared certain assumptions that shaped their development of jurist law. They believed that women were created of and for men; that women were inferior to men both in intellectual and moral capacities, that women needed male protection, and that male and female sexualities were different, with the latter being dangerous and unruly. Their understanding of the marriage contract was based on one of sale in which the husband acquired the right to have sexual access to his wife through his payment of a dower and spousal maintenance. These views were the product of the jurists' historical and social contexts. Mir-Hosseini highlights the gap between the moral/ethical and the legal in jurists' formulations of some of the main marriage and divorce doctrines. For example, the Qur'anic definition of marriage as 'tranquility, love, and mercy' (Qur'anic verse 30:21) is not translated into enforceable legal rulings on marital roles and rights. Thus, unilateral repudiation (divorce initiated by men) and polygamy, for instance, are legally sanctioned, but whether justice is served when these legal rights are exercised by men is left to the ethical realm which is divorced from the legal.

Similarly, Kecia Ali (2010, 2012) traces the genealogy of gender inequality in Islamic legal thought to the assumptions that classical jurists held about marriage and marital rights, and which often departed from ethical readings suggested by the Qur'anic text. Ali, like Mir-Hosseini, argues that classical jurists defined marriage as a form of ownership in which the husband owned the right to have sex with his wife.

In addition, Khaled Abou El Fadl (2005) emphasizes the necessity of grounding Islamic law in 'a moral vision and ethos' that reflects 'God's beauty'. Abou Fadl discusses the need, not only at the individual level but also at the collective, institutional level, to ensure that Islamic law reflects at least 'absolute moral values', which are universal across time and place. But this is only a first step in the process of reform; what is also needed is to ensure that legal interpretations and processes are also compatible with 'derivative moral values', which are needed for a higher moral society, and which evolve and develop across times and places (Abou El Fadl 2005: 118–19).

Also Sa'diyya Shaikh (2012) argues that Islamic Sufi thought can provide a much needed ethically and metaphysically-grounded corrective for Islamic law, to overcome the latter's under-privileging of the ethical in dominant patriarchal religious norms on gender rights.

Thus, taking the 'legal' back to the 'ethical' is a key hermeneutical approach that is being adopted by many of the scholars selected here, who are engaged with the question of reform and gender equality in the Islamic interpretive tradition.

Demystifying the interpretive tradition

One key methodological gap that Islamic feminist scholars find in many religious modernist understandings is the idea that the Islamic textual tradition

is presented as one singular entity that is sacred and immutable. That is, the Qur'an, the Hadith, dominant exegetical works, and the main *fiqh* schools are seen as constituting one singular entity, referred to as the textual tradition, which is often perceived as divine and unchangeable. An approach that Islamic feminist scholars use to deal with this gap is to unpack and demystify the different layers of the textual tradition.

Scholars use different hermeneutical strategies within this larger hermeneutical approach.

For example, Omaima Abou-Bakr studied the construction of *qiwamah* in exegetical literature (understood as a husband's guardianship, protection, and authority over the wife*)*. Abou-Bakr systematically unearths the assumptions and ideas about gender identities that shaped the exegetes' interpretive work, identifies the interpretive methods they have used, and traces the historical process through which they have created a cumulative patriarchal construct of *qiwamah* (Abou-Bakr 2015). She shows how the exegetical construction of *qiwamah* departs from the Qur'anic understanding of gender roles in marriage as articulated in verse 4:34. *Qiwamah* as an exegetical construct sanctions male control over women in the family domain, the superiority of men and inferiority of women, and the diminished rights of Muslim women. Tracing the exegetes' interpretations of *qiwamah* in verse 4:34, starting from al-Tabari in the tenth century and continuing all the way to modern exegetes such as Muhammad Abduh in the early twentieth century, Abou-Bakr shows the following: First, exegetes turned the adjective '*qawwamun*' in verse 4:34 – which describes a particular social organization of marital roles at the time of the revelation when men provided for women – to a normative construct, using the noun *qiwamah,* in order to sanction male authority and superiority. Second, they came up with lists of qualities that they attribute arbitrarily to men and women to justify men's claim to authority and superiority on the basis of the constructed norm of *qiwamah*. Third, they linked the concept of *qiwamah* to verse 2:228 and the notion of men having 'degree' over women that is expressed in this latter verse in order to reinforce the hierarchal meaning of *qiwamah*, although verse 2: 228 is located in a unit of verses that tackles the theme of divorce and its central message is to urge men not to do injustice to women, and fourth, exegetes of modern times such as Abduh cemented the patriarchal meaning of *qiwamah*, ascribing inherent domesticity to women versus an assumed inherent intellectual superiority in men. The benefit of Abou-Bakr's genealogical

reading of *qiwamah* is that it demystifies exegesis and jurisprudence: they are no longer an indivisible part of an unchangeable sacred text, but of a historically-based and produced religious knowledge.

In short, foregrounding the 'ethical' in the interpretive process and its outcome, and unpacking and demystifying the interpretive tradition are two main hermeneutical approaches that characterize key knowledge projects in the emerging field of Islamic feminism. While scholars engaged in producing this knowledge also use a wider range of hermeneutical methods, the significance of the above-mentioned approaches is that they are two broad interpretive frameworks under which these various methods can be grouped.[5]

But how does Islamic feminism as a new body of knowledge facilitating reform and social transformation emerge and develop in a particular national context? In the following section, I will address this question in the context of Egypt.

Islamic feminism in Egypt: trajectory

Egyptian Islamic feminism is important both transnationally and nationally. On the transnational level, there are strong ties and collaborations between Egyptian scholars and organizations who are involved in producing this kind of knowledge on the one hand, and global movements such as Musawah on the other hand, which seeks to build new feminist Muslim knowledge and advocate for change and social transformation on multiple levels, linking scholarship with activism. For example, the Egyptian research organization Women and Memory Forum (including its co-founder Omaima Abou-Bakr) collaborates closely with Musawah on the production and dissemination of this knowledge through a wide range of activities. In addition, some of the major Egyptian scholars who are producing knowledge that can be termed as Islamic feminism crisscross the transnational and local contexts. For example, Omaima Abou-Bakr and Hoda El Saadi from the Women and Memory Forum (WMF) write in English and Arabic and engage with both transnational and local readers. Also Egypt, the largest and (geopolitically) most important country in the Middle East, has been home to the oldest Arab feminist movement as well as the oldest religious

5   For an in-depth analysis of the hermeneutical approaches and challenges of Muslim feminist exegesis, see Hidayatullah 2014.

institution in the Islamic World, namely Al-Azhar. And furthermore, the significance and fate of Islamic feminism in present-day Egypt has become even more interesting with the 25 January Revolution of 2011 and its aftermath of momentous and contradictory events such as the rise and fall of political Islam, ongoing political conflicts and societal polarization, thriving new processes of youth-led activism, alongside a growing and disturbing atmosphere of state oppression and violation of citizens' civil rights in ongoing efforts to combat 'terrorism' and protect 'national security,' since the new regime took over on 3 July 2013.

In what follows, I will map out the trajectory of selected individual and collective efforts in the country to build new knowledge that questions patriarchy and gender inequality from within the Islamic interpretive tradition.

Egypt's first feminist movement can be traced to 1923 with the establishment of the Egyptian feminist union under the leadership of Huda Sha'rawi. The early Egyptian feminist movement was grounded in the nationalist project of establishing an independent Egypt with a sovereign state. In the post-independence era, Egyptian women were among the first in the Middle Eastern region to obtain the right to mass education, suffrage, and paid work. But gender equality still eludes women, and much legal and cultural discrimination against them remains in place. In their struggle for gender equality (particularly in family law), early Egyptian feminists, whether as part of an organized movement or as individuals, drew on Islam as a framework for mobilizing their campaign for rights. Badran (2005) points out that the Egyptian feminist movement has drawn on Islamic modernist discourse and some of the liberal interpretations of Islamic scholars of the nineteenth century such as Muhammad Abduh to advocate for reform in family law.

Individual Egyptian female writers, such as A'isha Al Taymur in the late nineteenth century, questioned Islamic juristic interpretations that sanctioned a husband's guardianship over his wife on the grounds of an assumed inherent male superiority to the female (Hatem 2011). And there were Egyptian female figures such as Zeinab Al-Ghazali who in the twentieth century led a life of very public activism by establishing an Islamist women's association that recruited many members. Interestingly, Al-Ghazali was a member of the Egyptian Feminist Union but left it because of its overall secular framework and founded the Muslim Women's Association in order to reform

society along an Islamic path. Al-Ghazali collaborated with the Muslim Brotherhood, but opted for her association to be an autonomous entity separate from the Brotherhood. She was an autonomous, strong woman who left her first husband because he hindered her activism. Yet despite this empowerment at an individual level, Al-Ghazali adopted a patriarchal notion of gender rights, which asserted that a Muslim woman's primary role was to be a wife and a mother.

So were these active and publicly-engaged Egyptian women Islamic feminists, or partaking in projects that can be labelled as Islamic feminism? In an article that sets out to distinguish between different strands of Egyptian feminists, the anthropologist Fadwa El Guindy labels Sha'rawi's feminism as 'western-influenced' and distinguishes it from the feminist views of Malak Hifni Nasif, another Egyptian pioneer woman who established the Egyptian feminist movement. El Guindi calls Nasif's strand of feminism 'authentically Egyptian' because Nasif's advocacy focused on the inclusion of women in all educational fields and particularly in the field of Islamic religious knowledge, as well as enabling women to have wider access to mosques. Moreover, Nasif, according to El Guindi, articulated her feminist agendas in Arabic and drew strongly on her Islamic knowledge. But it is Al-Ghazali's activism that El Guindi calls Islamic feminism. Furthermore, El Guindi sees that Al-Ghazali's Islamically-based activism paved the way for what she calls the 'grass root Islamic feminism' of the 1970s when thousands of Egyptian women began wearing the veil and asserted their right to live by what they believed to be the doctrines of their religion while at the same time engaging actively in the public sphere. El Guindi sees this Egyptian form of Islamic feminism as populist, and grounded in culture and Islam. She describes it as follows: 'it is feminist because it seeks to liberate womanhood; it is Islamic because its premises are embedded in Islamic principles and values' (El Guindi 2005: 71). She sees both Western-influenced feminism and Islamic feminism as sharing the common goal of liberating women. But El Guindi points out that in the Egyptian Islamic feminism of the 70s, the sought-after liberation was from 'imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviors, and an increasingly materialist culture' (El Guindi 2005: 71). Most of all, El Guindi stresses that the main goal of this local Islamic feminism was to include women in the field of Islamic studies, as bearers and producers of religious knowledge.

A Muslim woman can derive empowerment from enlightened religious knowledge on an individual

level. But to end gender inequalities in Muslim societies resulting from discriminatory normative systems, what is needed is a transformative change in public discourses, laws, and policies as well. And an essential part of the pathway to this change is the production and dissemination of new religious knowledge that solidly and persuasively grounds egalitarian gender relations and rights in the core principles and doctrines of Islam. I believe it is this kind of Islamic feminism – a transformative knowledge project – that counts. And these knowledge projects are effective when they are systematic, coherent, ongoing, and linked to advocacy work.

In contemporary Egypt, I see one notable example of such a kind of Islamic feminism. It is being led by the work of the research/activist organization the Women and Memory Forum (WMF). The WMF is an Egyptian non-governmental organization that was established in 1995 by a group of women scholars from a variety of disciplines. WMF scholars produce a wide range of Arabic studies that aim at re-reading Islamic and Arabic intellectual traditions and producing alternative readings that underscore gender equality and unearth women's unknown roles in the establishment and development of these traditions. Also, the organization collaborates with local NGOs working on reform in family law. In addition, the WMF organizes workshops for students at national universities in which they are taught the new knowledge and trained, in Abou-Bakr's words 'to understand gender from a Muslim perspective' (Abou-Bakr 1999: 3).

One of the key goals for the WMF is to produce scholarship that will lead to change and social transformation. Therefore, the organization disseminates its knowledge not only through dense theological and historical publications but also, through illustrated and linguistically accessible readers, to the general public. In addition, many WMF scholars are well-informed and connected with the transnational projects of Islamic feminism and some of them engage in such projects by writing in English and targeting the anglophone academic audience. They also organize workshops with scholars from different parts of the world on Islamic feminism and translate anglophone literature not only about Islamic feminism but also feminist theological studies in Christianity and Judaism, so that this scholarship would be available to Arabic-speaking readers.

Omaima Abou-Bakr, one of the founding members of the WMF, undertakes hermeneutical studies that problematize gendered interpretations in the exegetical tradition as well as historical studies that shed light on the roles of women in the production of Islamic religious scientific works. Hoda El Saadi, another member, works on the role of women in the production of classical Islamic religious sciences and the development of different social institutions in Islamic history that have paved the way for civil society. Hoda El Sadda, also a founding member, focuses on the roles and representations of women in contemporary Arabic/Egyptian intellectual traditions.

Abou-Bakr is the key scholar at the WMF who undertakes hermeneutical studies of the Islamic interpretive tradition. She employs a range of hermeneutical methods, including tracing the construction of particular juristic or exegetical constructs that condone patriarchal interpretations through genealogical readings of the exegetical tradition; identifying and reflecting on the contradictions in interpretations of individual exegetes and jurists, not to discredit them, but to locate their interpretations in the context of their times and world-views; unearthing the hidden voices and contributions of women in the interpretive tradition; and juxtaposing different texts in the tradition (such as biographies of Hadith teachers and transmitters, exegetical works, or *fiqh* manuals) to identify the linkages and divergences between these texts and unearth alternative discourses that have been hidden or marginalized in the history of the interpretive tradition (Abou-Bakr 2012).

Abou-Bakr's scholarship illustrates that the problem of religiously-sanctioned gender inequality is not interpretations that discriminate against women *per se*. Rather it is 1) these interpretations' underlying discourse, which perpetuates gendered notions about the nature of women, men, and their roles, 2) the gaps and contradictions in the interpretive methodologies used by early jurists and exegetes as well as modern religious scholars who advocate for patriarchal interpretations, and 3) the disconnect between some of these methodologies and the interpretations on the one hand and the underlying theological and ethical principles of upholding justice and living a God-conscious life in Islam. In other words, the significance of the work of Abou-Bakr and scholars like her is not only to enable alternative, egalitarian, gender-sensitive readings of sacred texts, but also to raise the broader question of reform in the interpretive tradition.

Another organization producing similar scholarship – though on a much smaller scale – is Women and Civilization. It was established in 2000 by a num-

ber of women academics. The group was first established by Mona Abou Fadl, Professor of Literature at Cairo University, and then led by Amany Saleh, Abou Fadl's student and a Professor of Political Science at Misr International University. The group conducted hermeneutical studies of the Qur'an, and the exegetical and juristic interpretive tradition, as well as historical studies of different Islamic eras, in order to unearth women's voices and roles. They produced three influential issues of a journal, named after their organization, in 2000, 2001, and 2002. Some of the articles in these issues, such as the one by Amany Saleh on the concept of 'pairing' in the Qur'an (Saleh 2002) highlights the notion of an ontological and spiritual equality of women and men in Islam, which is a central idea in most of the transnational and national Islamic feminist knowledge projects, and which has become the basis for the idea of gender equality in the social and legal realms. Among other active scholars in the group is Hind Mustafa, who published an important study problematizing juristic constructions of marital roles and rights in light of the Qur'anic text (Mustafa Ali 2002). Nonetheless, Women and Civilization remained fairly inactive after producing these first three issues, though in the last two years the group has been working closely with some scholars from the Women and Memory Forum and is now planning to publish a fourth issue of their journal, focusing on Hadith.[6]

The political significance of Egyptian Islamic feminism

The work and ideas of Islamic feminist scholars such as Omaima Abou-Bakr and Amany Saleh are being drawn on in training workshops and seminars organized by women's rights activists groups such as the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance and civil society organizations such as the Mada Foundation, which works to promote the values of plurality, inclusivity, equal citizenship among all Egyptians, regardless of gender or religious or political affiliation. These training workshops and seminars target mosque imams, media people, and those involved with NGOs and civil society.

Also, some of the new insights produced by this new knowledge have been of direct use to women's

rights activists who are lobbying for legal reform. For instance, those who opposed the promulgation of *khul'* law (the right of a woman to file for unilateral, no-fault judicial divorce in exchange for foregoing some of her financial rights) in 2000 and those who later attempted to call for a revocation of this law after the 25 January Revolution of 2011, both groups drew on the juristic concept of *qiwamah* to make a religious argument for their position. The work of Abou-Bakr, which traces the development of the juristic concept of *qiwamah* and demystifies its assumed Qur'an-based legitimacy, is providing alternative arguments and discourse that persuasively counter this position.

Additionally, these knowledge projects can play a role in making important shifts in prevalent conceptual and methodological premises regarding Islamic textual knowledge, whether they are about gender or the nature and authority of religious textual authority. This is empowering epistemologically on an individual level to Muslim women (be they university students, researchers, activists, or women involved in legal marital disputes) who are seeking to reconcile their commitment to their faith and religious tradition with their pursuit of justice and dignity.

But a number of challenges face these scholars and groups. The most significant is related to the religious authority of their work. Some of the Islamic feminist scholars such as Abou-Bakr refer to their work as a kind of *ijtihad*. But is this religious knowledge or a new way of thinking about religious traditions? And how are the two related? Difficulties arise in relation to two issues: the reception of their work by religious scholars and how and to whom the work of Islamic feminism is disseminated. Women and Memory Forum scholars have been making efforts to engage with religious scholars through conferences and workshops but thus far these efforts have not led to any fruitful discussions. Often the position of religious scholars has been one of rejection, claiming that those producing this new knowledge are not trained in traditional religious education; and their work seeks to undo the whole Islamic tradition.[7]

Also there is the issue of the scope and nature of the audience that these projects reach. The majority of the WMF's audiences are university students, women's rights activists, public thinkers, and intellectuals. And although some of their scholarship (e.g.

6   Personal interview with Dr Amany Saleh and Dr Hind Mustafa from Women and Civilization, 13.11.2013 and 12.4.2014.

7   Such a position was strongly articulated by attending religious scholars at the most recent conference in March 2014, organized by Mada Foundation and Alexandria Library in Alexandria, Egypt.

their illustrated works) is aimed at the general public, their main mechanisms of dissemination and advocacy are workshops, seminars, and written materials. These preclude many Egyptians who do not read. And the most popular medium for the transmission of religious knowledge continues to be religious lectures/sermons given in mosques, on TV programmes or in private religious classes. Yet this medium is one that has not yet been used by the WMF, perhaps because WMF scholars primarily see themselves as scholarly activists, rather than religious teachers and mentors transmitting a new kind of knowledge.

Nevertheless, the work of organizations such as the Women and Memory Forum and Woman and Civilization is still charting the pathway to a new area of knowledge (and a perhaps a movement) that is beginning to resonate. The development of this knowledge and its socio-political impact continue to unfold and require long-term study. In the immediate future, the following questions are pertinent to the study of Egyptian Islamic feminism.

What will be the future of existing linkages and collaborations between transnational (e.g. Musawah) and Egyptian Islamic feminist knowledge projects and activism in the current political atmosphere of the country?

In its efforts to eradicate the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam, the current Egyptian regime has been emphasizing the need to reform religious discourse. Yet this same regime has also clashed with many activist and pro-democracy groups in the country who are committed to gender reform because of the regime's repressive rule and violation of citizens' human rights. In this atmosphere, how will groups such as the WMF pursue their goal of producing gender-sensitive religious discourse/knowledge? What spaces and mechanisms are available to them to ensure their autonomy and independence from the regime as well as sectors who embrace political Islam and ideologies condoning gender inequality?

Conclusion

Islamic feminism, whether in the form of a knowledge project or a political movement, has been either too quickly celebrated or dismissed. Too wide a range of different and divergent knowledge projects and activist efforts have been lumped together under this term. Rigorous analyses of the premises and the methodologies of the varied scholarship called Islamic feminism have also been lacking. And the

similarities and differences among the works referred to as Islamic feminism have not been adequately investigated. I argue that Islamic feminism, as a new body of reform-centred religious knowledge, can be better understood through an analysis of the goals and interpretive methodologies of certain interconnected, transnational and national knowledge projects. Egypt provides an important case study because of the historical trajectory of Egyptian feminist engagements with the Islamic interpretive tradition; the linkages between contemporary Egyptian Islamic feminist knowledge projects and the transnational movement of Musawah; the methodological and epistemological contributions of the Women and Memory Forum; and the socio-political significance (but also challenges) of such scholarly/activist efforts at this juncture of Egypt's history. ■

Mulki Al-Sharmani trained as an anthropologist. She received her doctorate degree from the Johns Hopkins University, USA in 2005. She is an Academy of Finland research fellow (2013–18) at the Faculty of Theology, Study of Religions Unit, University of Helsinki. Mulki researches, teaches, and writes about Muslim family law, the Islamic interpretive tradition and the question of gender, migration and religion, Muslim marriage norms and practices in migration, transnational migrant families. A list of her publications can be found at <https://tuhat.halvi.helsinki.fi/portal/en/persons/mulki-alsharmani(751e9809-9ed8-4245-9fe8-c5354b1fb79f)/publications.html?page=0>. Email: mulki.al-sharmani(at)helsinki.fi

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