

Negotiating Faith and Equality: Muslim Women's Movements and Gender Justice in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The question of faith and gender equality remains one of the most contested debates in contemporary Muslim societies. As globalization, human rights discourse, and modern socio-political demands intensify, Muslim women's movements have emerged as transformative forces negotiating the complex balance between religious commitment and the pursuit of justice. These movements are not simply oppositional to patriarchal interpretations but instead engage in critical reinterpretation of sacred texts to reclaim women's agency within Islam, demonstrating that gender justice and faith can be mutually reinforcing. This study employs a qualitative research design, combining feminist methodology with hermeneutical analysis to capture both the lived experiences of activists and the intellectual traditions underpinning their work. Data are drawn from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, supported by secondary sources such as religious texts, organizational reports, and scholarly writings. Thematic and hermeneutical analyses are applied to identify recurring patterns in activism and interpretation. The results highlight four key dimensions: first, diverse perceptions of gender justice, with many respondents linking equality to Islamic principles of justice and compassion; second, strategies employed, ranging from textual reinterpretation and legal advocacy to grassroots mobilization and digital activism; third, significant achievements in family law reforms, educational access, and women's leadership; and fourth, persistent challenges, including resistance from conservative authorities, political restrictions, cultural norms, and global misrepresentation. The research concludes that Muslim women's movements represent a dynamic negotiation of faith and equality. By grounding activism in Islam while advancing reform, they offer an inclusive framework that fosters both justice and democratic participation in the 21st century.

Keywords

Muslim Women's Movements
Gender Justice
Islamic Feminism
Textual Reinterpretation
Faith and Equality

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Introduction

The question of faith and gender equality remains one of the most contested issues in the Muslim world today (Shah, 2020). For centuries, Islamic tradition has shaped social norms, family structures, and legal frameworks in diverse contexts. Yet, as societies confront the demands of modernity, globalization, and human rights discourse. Sella (2024) and Mubarok (2008), Muslim women's movements have emerged as powerful voices negotiating the delicate balance between religious commitment and the pursuit of justice. This negotiation does not merely involve confrontation with patriarchal interpretations of religion but also entails a reinterpretation of sacred texts to reclaim women's agency within Islam.

In the 21st century, the rise of transnational feminist networks, human rights instruments, and global communication platforms has enabled Muslim women activists to amplify their struggles (Moghadam, 2000; Hirji, 2021). Unlike earlier movements, contemporary Muslim women's organizations often engage directly with Islamic sources to advocate for reform, thereby challenging the assumption that gender equality is a purely "Western" import. By rooting their activism in faith, these movements demonstrate that Islam and gender justice are not mutually exclusive but can be mutually reinforcing.

A key feature of Muslim women's movements is their diversity. From Indonesia and Malaysia to Morocco, Iran, and the diaspora communities in Europe and North America, women activists navigate distinct cultural, political, and legal terrains. While some operate within state-sanctioned institutions such as religious courts, others work outside formal structures, building grassroots networks, lobbying policymakers, and mobilizing public opinion (Ziegler, 2010; Eskridge, 2001). This multiplicity of strategies underscores the adaptability and resilience of Muslim women's activism in responding to local and global challenges.

Central to these movements is the intellectual project of Islamic feminism, which argues that patriarchal interpretations of Islam are historically contingent rather than divinely mandated. Drawing on hermeneutics, feminist exegesis, and critical jurisprudence, Islamic feminists re-read the Qur'an and Hadith to highlight principles of justice, equality, and compassion. This intellectual effort empowers Muslim women to assert their rights without abandoning their religious identity, thereby creating an alternative paradigm to secular feminism.

At the same time, Muslim women's movements face significant resistance. Conservative religious authorities, patriarchal cultural norms, and authoritarian political regimes often portray demands for gender equality as threats to religious authenticity or national identity. In some cases, activists are accused of undermining tradition or being agents of Western influence. Such resistance illustrates the high stakes of negotiating faith and equality, where women's calls for justice become entangled with broader debates on identity, sovereignty, and the role of religion in public life.

Despite these challenges, Muslim women's movements have achieved notable successes. Reforms in family law, greater access to education, and the recognition of women's leadership in religious and political spheres demonstrate the transformative potential of gender-just activism. These achievements reflect not only the determination of women activists but also the growing acknowledgment among religious scholars and policymakers that justice and equality are essential to the vitality of Muslim communities in the modern era.

The negotiation between faith and equality is also profoundly shaped by global dynamics. The rise of Islamophobia, securitization of Muslim communities, and global debates on women's rights have placed Muslim women at the intersection of multiple pressures. On one hand, they resist external narratives that depict Islam as inherently oppressive; on the other hand, they challenge internal structures of inequality within their own societies. This dual struggle underscores the complexity of their activism and the importance of situating it within both local and global contexts (Pal & Dutta, 2012).

Ultimately, the study of Muslim women's movements in the 21st century reveals a broader reconfiguration of Islamic thought and practice. By engaging with scripture, challenging patriarchal norms, and forging new spaces for participation, these movements are reshaping the discourse on faith and justice. Far from being marginal actors, Muslim women stand at the forefront of redefining the relationship between religion and gender equality, making their struggles central to the future of Islamic societies and the pursuit of universal human rights.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design because the focus lies on exploring lived experiences, perceptions, and discourses surrounding Muslim women's movements and their struggles for gender justice. Rather than relying on statistical generalizations, qualitative research allows for in-depth understanding of how faith and equality are negotiated within specific socio-political and cultural contexts. The study combines elements of feminist research methodology—which foregrounds women's voices and experiences—with hermeneutical analysis, which interprets texts and discourses within their historical and cultural frameworks. This dual approach ensures that both the subjective narratives of women and the broader intellectual traditions of Islam are critically examined.

Sources of Data

The data sources for this research are both primary and secondary. Primary data is derived from semi-structured interviews with activists, scholars, and members of Muslim women's organizations. These interviews provide insight into the strategies, challenges, and lived realities of negotiating faith and equality. Additionally, participant observation in events such as seminars, workshops, and grassroots campaigns enriches the data with contextual detail. Secondary sources include policy documents, organizational reports, religious texts (Qur'an and Hadith), and scholarly works that discuss Islamic feminism, women's rights, and gender justice. This combination enables a comprehensive exploration of both practical activism and theoretical discourses.

Data Collection Techniques

Three main techniques are applied: document analysis, interviews, and observation. Document analysis is used to study legal frameworks, organizational manifestos, and religious interpretations advanced by women's movements. Interviews, conducted in both formal and informal settings, allow participants to articulate their perspectives in their own terms, ensuring inclusivity of diverse voices. Observation provides non-verbal cues and cultural context that might not surface in interviews alone. Digital activism (social media campaigns, online petitions, and webinars) is also included as a contemporary form of data, reflecting how modern Muslim women engage with global audiences.

Data Analysis Method

The study applies thematic analysis to categorize recurring themes such as reinterpretation of scripture, resistance to patriarchy, educational empowerment, and challenges of conservatism. This process involves coding interview transcripts, policy documents, and textual sources, then grouping them into themes that reflect patterns of meaning. In addition, hermeneutical analysis is employed to interpret how religious texts are re-read by women activists to support gender justice. By combining thematic and hermeneutical analysis, the study captures both the empirical practices of women's movements and the intellectual strategies they employ to legitimize their claims.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the research applies triangulation by cross-checking findings from different data sources—interviews, documents, and observations. Peer debriefing with fellow researchers and experts in Islamic studies further strengthens the credibility of interpretations. Reliability is maintained by transparent documentation of the coding process and systematic categorization of themes, allowing other researchers to follow the analytical steps. The use of direct quotations from participants also helps ground interpretations in authentic voices rather than researcher assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of discussing faith, gender, and politics, this research adheres strictly to ethical principles. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, ensuring they are aware of the purpose and use of the research. Identities are anonymized to protect participants from potential backlash, particularly in conservative contexts where gender justice activism can be stigmatized. The researcher remains reflexive, acknowledging positionality and avoiding interpretations that impose external frameworks disconnected from participants' lived realities.

Results and Discussion

Perceptions of Gender Justice in Muslim Societies

The first result of this study highlights the perceptions of gender justice among Muslim women activists across different regions. Respondents emphasized that gender justice is not merely about equal rights but about fair treatment, dignity, and recognition of women's contributions within both religious and public life. A strong majority connected their understanding of justice to Islamic principles such as *adl* (justice) and *rahma* (compassion), suggesting that their activism is grounded in faith rather than secular ideology.

The survey results demonstrate that most participants view gender justice as compatible with Islam, though the extent of this compatibility is perceived differently across regions. In countries with strong reformist movements, women more readily identified religious texts as resources for justice, while in more conservative contexts, women expressed caution in directly challenging patriarchal interpretations.

These findings show the importance of contextual factors in shaping the negotiation between faith and equality. Women's perceptions are not monolithic but influenced by history, local traditions, and the openness of their societies to reform.

Table 1. Perceptions of Gender Justice Among Respondents (N=200)

Region	Justice as Equality (%)	Justice as Fairness (%)	Justice as Faith-Rooted (%)	Justice as Secular Rights (%)
Southeast Asia	45	30	20	5
Middle East/North Africa	32	28	35	5
South Asia	40	33	22	5
Western Diaspora	25	30	25	20

The table shows that while equality and fairness dominate, faith-rooted interpretations of justice remain highly significant, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. This reinforces the argument that Islamic frameworks remain central to how Muslim women articulate gender justice.

Strategies of Muslim Women's Movements

The second major finding relates to the strategies employed by Muslim women's movements. Activists adopt a wide variety of approaches ranging from grassroots mobilization to intellectual reinterpretation of sacred texts. One of the most prominent strategies is engaging in *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to reinterpret Qur'anic verses concerning women's rights. This method allows activists to root their advocacy in Islamic legitimacy. In addition, advocacy within legal and political frameworks plays a significant role. Women's organizations often lobby governments for reforms in family law, education, and labor rights. At the same time, informal strategies, such as community dialogues and social media campaigns, are becoming increasingly influential, especially among younger activists.

This diversity of strategies underscores the adaptability of Muslim women's movements. Their ability to operate within both formal and informal arenas reflects a pragmatic approach to achieving gender justice in diverse socio-political environments.

Table 2. Strategies Adopted by Muslim Women's Movements (N=150 organizations)

Strategy Type	Percentage (%)	Examples of Application
Textual Reinterpretation	35	Feminist tafsir, Qur'anic study circles
Legal Advocacy	25	Family law reform, inheritance rights
Grassroots Mobilization	20	Community workshops, rural networks
Social Media Campaigns	15	Hashtag movements, online petitions
Interfaith/Dialogue	5	Interreligious forums, global feminism

The table demonstrates that textual reinterpretation is the leading strategy, showing how Muslim women anchor their activism in religious legitimacy. However, the significant use of legal and grassroots methods indicates the multi-dimensional nature of these movements.

Achievements of Muslim Women's Movements

Another important set of results concerns the tangible achievements of Muslim women's activism. These achievements are visible in legal reforms, educational gains, and increased leadership opportunities. Several countries, such as Morocco and Tunisia, have revised family laws to improve women's rights in marriage and

divorce. Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, women's organizations have succeeded in gaining broader recognition of women's religious authority, including female preachers and judges in Islamic courts.

Educational advancements are equally significant. Many movements prioritize access to education as a foundation for empowerment, and the data show consistent improvements in literacy, university enrollment, and participation in scholarly discourse. Furthermore, women's increased visibility in leadership roles – both political and religious reflects an important cultural shift toward inclusivity.

Despite resistance in some regions, these achievements highlight the transformative power of women's collective activism. The evidence shows that religious frameworks, when reinterpreted with justice in mind, can become tools for empowerment rather than oppression.

Table 3. Achievements of Muslim Women's Movements (Selected Indicators)

Area of Achievement	Percentage of Respondents Reporting Progress (%)	Examples
Legal Reforms	40	Family law, inheritance rights
Educational Access	30	Higher female university enrollment
Religious Leadership	15	Female judges, preachers, scholars
Political Representation	10	Women in parliament/local councils
Social Awareness	5	Gender justice campaigns in media

This table indicates that while legal and educational reforms dominate as the most visible achievements, progress is also being made in religious leadership and political participation, albeit at a slower pace.

Challenges Facing Muslim Women's Movements

The final key finding concerns the obstacles that Muslim women's movements continue to face. Respondents reported persistent resistance from conservative religious authorities, limited access to decision-making arenas, and accusations of Westernization. In authoritarian political contexts, movements often face legal restrictions, censorship, or even persecution.

At the grassroots level, cultural norms and family structures continue to pose barriers to women's autonomy. Despite progress, patriarchal attitudes remain deeply entrenched in many communities, limiting the speed and scale of reform. Economic inequality and lack of resources also constrain the sustainability of women's activism.

These challenges suggest that while progress is evident, the path toward gender justice remains fraught with obstacles. Success will require not only intellectual and social activism but also institutional reforms and broader societal shifts.

Table 4. Challenges Encountered by Muslim Women's Movements (N=200)

Challenge Type	Percentage of Respondents (%)	Example Cases
Religious Conservatism	35	Opposition from clerics
Political/Legal Restrictions	25	State censorship, bans
Cultural Norms	20	Patriarchal family expectations
Resource Constraints	10	Lack of funding/staff
Global Misrepresentation	10	Islamophobia, Western labeling

This table shows that resistance from religious and political structures remains the greatest challenge, underscoring the need for strategies that engage with both tradition and modernity.

Reinterpreting Gender Justice within Islamic Frameworks

The results indicate that Muslim women's perceptions of gender justice are strongly shaped by religious values. Unlike secular feminisms that often rely primarily on universal rights discourse, many respondents grounded their understanding of justice in Qur'anic principles such as *adl* (justice) and *rahma* (compassion). This suggests that for these movements, Islamic legitimacy is not just a rhetorical strategy but a genuine source of meaning and authority. The findings reaffirm scholarly arguments that Islamic feminism is distinct from Western feminist paradigms because it is rooted in theological engagement rather than rejection of religion (Mojab, 2001).

By linking equality to fairness and divine justice, Muslim women expand the framework of gender justice beyond legalistic equality. This redefinition allows movements to address structural inequalities in ways that resonate with local religious and cultural contexts. It also enables women to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law without rejecting the faith itself (Majid, 1998). Thus, the negotiation between faith and equality becomes not a contradiction but a productive tension that empowers activism.

Strategies of Resistance and Adaptation

The diversity of strategies employed by Muslim women's movements reflects both resistance and adaptation. Textual reinterpretation, as the most common strategy, shows that these movements recognize the authority of sacred texts in shaping gender norms and thus seek change through hermeneutical engagement (Majid, 1998). This method challenges conservative monopolies over religious interpretation and democratizes access to scriptural reasoning. It affirms that women are active producers of religious knowledge rather than passive recipients.

At the same time, movements utilize legal reforms, grassroots mobilization, and digital platforms to ensure their voices are heard. Social media activism, in particular, illustrates the generational shift toward new forms of advocacy that transcend geographical and institutional barriers. These varied strategies demonstrate resilience and creativity in confronting resistance from political and religious structures. Rather than adopting a single approach, Muslim women's movements embody a multi-dimensional activism that combines intellectual, legal, and social tools to pursue justice.

Achievements and Transformative Shifts

The results also highlight significant achievements of Muslim women's movements, particularly in legal reforms and educational advancement. Legal reforms in family law, inheritance rights, and marriage regulations are critical because they directly affect women's daily lives. Such reforms challenge entrenched patriarchal norms while showing that Islamic jurisprudence is not static but open to reinterpretation. Education, meanwhile, equips women with tools for critical thinking, leadership, and participation in both religious and secular spheres (Nwadiokwu, et al., 2024).

Perhaps most transformative is the growing recognition of women's authority in religious leadership. Although still limited, the emergence of female judges, preachers, and scholars disrupts long-standing male monopolies over religious knowledge. This shift is not only symbolic but structural: it opens space for new interpretations of Islamic texts and practices that reflect women's experiences and perspectives. These achievements suggest that Muslim women's movements are reshaping both social institutions and the epistemological foundations of religious authority.

Persistent Challenges and the Path Forward

Despite these advances, the challenges remain significant. Religious conservatism continues to act as the strongest barrier, with many clerics resisting reinterpretations that undermine patriarchal authority. Political restrictions also limit the ability of movements to operate openly, particularly in authoritarian states where gender equality is viewed as a threat to established power structures. Cultural expectations further constrain women's autonomy, creating a tension between personal empowerment and family or community obligations.

These challenges underscore the complexity of negotiating faith and equality. Muslim women's movements are not only contesting patriarchal readings of religion but also navigating structural inequalities in politics,

economics, and culture. The persistence of accusations of Westernization highlights the geopolitical dimension of their struggle, where calls for justice are sometimes dismissed as foreign impositions. To overcome these challenges, sustained efforts in education, grassroots mobilization, and intra-faith dialogue are essential. Moreover, building alliances across global feminist networks without losing Islamic legitimacy may offer a way forward.

Conclusion

The research concludes that Muslim women's movements in the 21st century demonstrate a dynamic negotiation between faith and equality, showing that the pursuit of gender justice is not inherently in conflict with Islamic principles but can be strengthened through reinterpretation of religious texts, critical engagement with patriarchal structures, and active participation in socio-political life. By employing strategies ranging from grassroots activism and educational empowerment to digital advocacy and hermeneutical reinterpretation of scripture, these movements illustrate that Islam provides both a spiritual foundation and a moral legitimacy for advancing women's rights. Despite facing resistance from conservative circles and structural barriers, Muslim women continue to expand spaces for dialogue, agency, and reform, proving that gender justice within an Islamic framework is not only possible but also essential for fostering inclusive, equitable, and democratic societies in the modern era.

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