

The World Humanities Report

The Contribution of Islamic Feminists to the Production of Knowledge

Amel Grami



The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and the Human Science (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

© 2023 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

This work carries a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License. This license permits you to copy, distribute, and display this work as long as you mention and link back to the World Humanities Report, attribute the work appropriately (including both author and title), and do not adapt the content or use it commercially. For details, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>.

This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Grami, Amel. *The Contribution of Islamic Feminists to the Production of Knowledge*. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

More information about the author can be found at the [end of this document](#).

The Contribution of Islamic Feminists to the Production of Knowledge

Amel Grami [University of Manouba](#)

Scholars of Islamic feminism,¹ regardless of their geographical and cultural affiliations or intellectual orientations, have attracted the broad attention of academics and general readers. The intellectual dynamism created by these women's research remains indisputable. Despite an initial reluctance to acknowledge currents outside the categories set by Western feminism and a lack of serious interest in women's relationship to religion,² most liberal, socialist, and secularist feminists no longer ignore the interpretations from Islamic feminists of a number of religious texts or deny the epistemological value gained by their interpretive readings. Several factors can explain this shift in perspective, but most prominent is fear of the hegemony of Islamist groups and political parties, a fear that led to recognizing the need to unify the efforts of women who believe in defending their rights.

In light of these shifts, mapping out the contribution of Islamic feminists to

¹ I use the phrase "Islamic feminism" in a procedural manner to signify, first, an intellectual current that brought together a varied spectrum of scholars, men and women, who have chosen to approach the field of religious knowledge since the 1990s with a belief that deconstructing patriarchal structures requires revisiting religious texts from a gender-sensitive perspective. Second, the term signifies an activist movement that has used this knowledge production to claim rights, such as the Malaysian Musawah (equality) movement, to cite a prominent example.

² I mention that democratic feminists in Tunisia and Morocco initially refused to acknowledge the importance of arguments drawn from the religious system to deconstruct the effect of the religious component on mentality formation, claiming that real change comes only from outside the religious framework and attempts at *ijtihad* are futile and can only give more power to orthodox interpretations, fundamentalism, conservative laws, and traditional institutions. However, during the late 1990s in Morocco and 2011–19 in Tunisia, these feminists found themselves compelled to rely on evidence (from scholars interested in analyzing religious texts) that served a variety of other issues (parity, violence law, equality in inheritance, etc.). Such a stance demonstrates a shift from the position of rejecting a flexibility that motivates one to focus on reading articles and books in Arabic and citing them in discussions in the legislature or media debates. This comes in addition to the recognition by secularist and democratic feminists, as well as liberal feminists who rely on a human rights approach, that they cannot monopolize defending women's rights. Women researchers who adopt religious approaches have equal right to contribute to the struggle to gain rights and change women's reality.

the constitution of religious knowledge in particular, and the humanities and social sciences more generally, has become a necessary and exciting matter.

Islamic Feminism

I will not address various designations such as “Islamic feminism,” “Muslim womanism,” “Islamic femaleness,” “Islamic feminist currents,” “Islamic-based feminists,” or similar; nor will I survey the definitions that have been assigned to Islamic feminism and which pose several problems. I have also chosen not to delve into the debate around the compatibility of feminism and Islam or their intrinsic contradictions, as these issues have been extensively explored in numerous publications. The approach I adopt here is based on acknowledging multiplicity in feminist currents (liberal feminism, secularist feminism, Islamic feminism, Muslim feminism, etc.). Islamic feminism is one of various currents seeking to change the status of women, one that has gained visibility because it proposes reading religious texts and reinterpreting them from a gender-sensitive perspective, using an approach that aims to do justice to women as actual citizens.

A number of men have contributed to this intellectual activity, but the engagement of a considerable number of women has attracted the most attention. Scholars affiliated with Islamic feminism—whether consciously, based on conviction, or because they were thrust into it despite their reservations (Asma Barlas, Kecia Ali, Naila Silini, myself, and others)—have been able to demonstrate that differences exist among Islamic feminists and that there is more than one mode of belonging, more than one path to identity construction, more than one way of being a feminist in the Islamic world.

Islamic feminists have insisted that religious empowerment allows women to have epistemological power to reform the Islamic system from within by proposing concurrent methodologies for reading religious texts, in addition to confronting the hegemony of patriarchal interpretations. Through the work of several Islamic jurists, “we discover the huge difference between their poor, formal, fragmentary discourse and the inclusivity of Divine discourse.”³ The potency of women’s intervention can be achieved through a qualitative reconciliatory relationship with religion, leaving the position of acceptance to one

³ Hind Mustafa, “Towards an Alternative Feminist Discourse,” in *Feminism from an Islamic Perspective: New Horizons for Knowledge and Reform* (Cairo: Women and Memory Forum, 2013), 54.

of knowledge production and moving from the margin to the center, from invisibility to visibility.

In addition to the foregoing, religious empowerment enables women researchers to subvert stereotypes about Muslim women, such as saying that they are subjugated because of Islam or that they cannot achieve autonomy or participate in the public sphere. In this way, women researchers formulate a definition of feminism that is compatible with their lived reality, thus moving from subordination to relevant participation. Producing knowledge becomes grounded in a historical, cultural, and religious context that has shaped the emergence of feminism in the Islamic world and made their contribution a part of global feminist epistemological activity, aiming to defend the human rights of women.

While researchers specializing in women's history and feminist studies resolutely continue to trace women religious scholars (hadith scholars, jurists, preachers, mystics, etc.), Islamic feminists are aware of the historical lack of documents produced by women themselves, hence their keenness to write constantly, providing a rich and reliable register for understanding how women have contributed to an epistemological field where they are rarely welcomed by male scholars. In this way, Islamic feminists acquired their voice and started articulating their own understanding of religious texts in their writing.

Islamic feminists have proven that early precursors of feminist awareness—the desire to express views regarding the relationship of women to religion, spirituality, rulings, and a view of the universe—can be traced back to early Islam and to female voices asking questions and engaging in debates (Ā'ishah, Umm Salama, Asmā' bint 'Umayy, etc.⁴). According to scholarship rooted in tradition, the participation of Islamic feminists in the religious epistemologi-

Islamic feminists have insisted that religious empowerment allows women to have epistemological power to reform the Islamic system from within by proposing concurrent methodologies for reading religious texts, in addition to confronting the hegemony of patriarchal interpretations.

⁴ Ā'ishah, full name Ā'ishah bint Abī Bakr, (614–678) was the third wife of Prophet Muhammad, who played a role of some political importance after the Prophet's death. Hind bint Abi Umayya (Hind 'ibnat 'Abī 'Umayya, born c. 580 or 596, died c. 680 or 683), better known as Umm Salama or Hind al-Makhzūmiyya, was one of the wives of Prophet Muhammad. Asmā' bint 'Umayy was one of the female companions of the Prophet (born c. 597–600, died c. 658–661).

cal domain is an extension of this individual “feminist”/“gender” awareness.⁵ It is not surprising that scholars classify Islamic feminism, with its eagerness to establish a framework that contextualizes its intellectual activity theoretically and empirically, as a social and political movement.

Fully aware that I cannot survey the entire field of Islamic feminism, I focus in this essay on the knowledge production of a few Islamic feminists (from Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia) from a variety of disciplines (English literature, political and legal sciences, cultural studies, linguistics, etc.) and generations. These scholars share their Muslim origins, their belonging to a society with a Muslim majority, and their conscious choice to engage in an “enlightening” movement that aims to reread and deconstruct religious texts based on present-day knowledge and to confront discourses produced by Sharia professors and preachers that try to reinforce the inferiority and irrationality of women.⁶ Most of the Islamic feminists I deal with here are academics whose production is linked to teaching and lecturing in different spaces, in addition to being members in networks and organizations that support this research orientation.⁷

⁵ In this context, I refer to individual initiatives, such as that of Nazira Zain al-Din, who called for a separation of worship and transactions and considered the Quran a devotional text that enables the believer to engage in the spiritual experience of faith, rather than as a source of legislation. For more, see Nazek Saba Yared, “Nazira Zain Al-Din (1908–1976): Bayn al-taḥaddi wa-l-‘ilitizām,” [Nazira Zain Al-Din (1908–1976): Between contestation and compliance], in *Majallat Bahīthāt* [Bahithat] (Beirut: Al-nisā’ al-‘arabiyyāt fi-l-‘ishrīnāt: Ḥudūran wa-huwiyya, n.d.), 243–61.

⁶ The original article was written in Arabic and translated into English for the World Humanities Report. Choosing to write in Arabic came from my wish to target an audience that is comprised of, first, readers who, due to educational limitations, cannot keep abreast of work produced on religion and gender in other languages (such as English or French); second, conservatives who do not care about what women produce in foreign languages, under the pretexts that they do not know their mother tongue, are “Westernized,” or “follow a Western agenda,” in addition to the desire of a number of women researchers to liberate academia from Francophone and Anglophone hegemony by providing reliable literature to teach issues related to gender and religion in multiple departments and different disciplines. In this regard, I refer to my experience with the master’s degree in gender, culture, and society at the Faculty of Letters, Arts, and Humanities in Manouba, Tunisia, where I taught a course The Discourse of Women Islamic Preachers in Arab Satellite Channels and supervised a number of master’s and doctoral theses in this area. Along with women colleagues in the Civilization Department, I taught on issues related to religious *ijtihād*, issuing fatwas, and the renewal of Islamic thought, among others.

⁷ It is no wonder that this production is associated with women academics, given the multiplying proportions of female students in most Arab countries and their increasing enthusiasm for knowledge of religious texts in a context where muftis and preachers assume guardianship over people, imposing a new form of slavery that requires their readings to be taken for granted and where Islamic groups exploit religion to realize a political project that considers women a tool in the service of ideology. This keenness to master the sciences of the Quran and be proficient in the sciences of the age has enabled women researchers to produce

Key Issues Raised by Islamic Feminists Writing in Arabic

Islamic feminists began from a conviction that excluding women from places of worship and participation in epistemological discussions in schools of Islamic jurisprudence have made possible the prevalence of patriarchal readings of religious texts: “Such texts have been subjected to a kind of hegemony, Sunni or Shiite, from which they must be liberated into the space of lived reality, in addition to opening the doors to freedom of interpretation and *ijtihad*. This is particularly important because the jurists, including the four imams of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, never claimed to be immune to error and were engaged in *ijtihad* in their own times and contexts.”⁸ Accordingly, Islamic feminism has reopened the debate on various issues that primarily concern women, such as the hijab, *qiwāma* (guardianship), *wilāya* (custodianship), polygamy, family relations, marital life, and women’s eligibility for the imamate and the judiciary, among others.⁹ Efforts by Islamic feminists did not stop at interpretive activity. Rather, they complemented this by demanding reforms to draft a set of laws that protect the rights of women. A number of them thus participated in campaigns to counteract child marriage, violence against women, and the confiscation of their economic, political, and social rights, upholding equality and social justice

several articles and books that bring to light the silenced and the obscured, as well as reclaim the values included in the founding text. In this regard, I mention the efforts of Tunisian universities and the Bayt al-Ḥikma (House of Wisdom) Foundation in holding and inviting women researchers to participate in conferences. I note the establishment of the Center for the Studies and Research on Women’s Issues in Islam of the Muhammadan League of Ulama in Morocco and its electronic magazine, *Al-Ru’ya* (Vision) (<https://www.arrabita.ma/annisa/>). The Center for Women’s Studies in Islam (Centre d’Études et de Recherche Féminine en Islam, CERFI) is a research center established in 2010 as part of the official religious institute of the Muhammadan League of Ulama. I also mention the Malaysia-based Musawah, initiated by Sisters in Islam in 2009, which is concerned with developing women’s production of religious knowledge and reforming laws reinforcing gender segregation (<https://www.musawah.org/>). The Women and Memory Forum has also provided a space for knowledge production where women researchers have enriched the field of religious studies.

⁸ “Interview: Hawari tabḥāth al-‘amal al-niswi al-Islāmi fi-l-dākhil wa muqārabatihi ‘Arabiyyan: Muqābala” [Interview: Hawari discusses Islamic feminist work at home and its Arab approach], Arab48, March 3, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3ZL9v8c>. In Islamic law, *ijtihad* (“effort”) means the independent or original interpretation of problems not covered by the Quran, hadith, or earlier scholarly consensus. In the early days of Islam, every qualified jurist had the right to exercise *ijtihad*.

⁹ In this regard, readers can refer to Hind Mustafa, “Al-Faḍā’ al-ma’nawi li-l-zawjiyyah fi-l-bayān al-Qur’āni: ‘al-llāqa bayn al-zawjayn’ bayn al-mandhūr al-Qur’āni wa-l-qirā’a al-fiqhiyya” [The meaning of matrimonial space in the Quranic Statement: A couple’s relationship between the Quranic perspective and a reading of Islamic jurisprudence], *Majallat al-mar’a wa-l-ḥaḍāra*, no. 3 (October 2002); and Zahiyya Jwīrū, *al-Wa’d al-jadīd: Maqalāt fi-l-fatwa wa fiqh al-nisā’* [The new oppression: Articles in Islamic fatwa and Islamic women’s jurisprudence] (Tunis: Meskiliani Editions, 2019).

and opposing various forms of discrimination, marginalization, and oppression. Many researchers have sought to use new approaches with the aim of offering alternatives that would help girls and women understand Islamic practices and realities, their own place in history and society, and paths for change.

Pioneers of Arabic-Speaking Islamic Feminists and Their Contribution to the Advancement of Knowledge

Women researchers believe in the necessity of documenting women's participation in knowledge production, reading it in the context in which it emerged, and building bridges of communication between feminism and Islamic jurisprudence. This documentation is achieved by excavating the legacy of books dealing with tradition, interpretation, and *ijtihad* in search of values (such as gender equality, justice, and dignity¹⁰) long obscured by proponents of patriarchal bias or those who consider Islam oppressive to women. An inclusive reading project that opens the door for women to express their views and understanding of texts and discourses would not be possible without Islamic feminists committing themselves to revisiting concepts and perceptions with a fresh eye on the compatibility between religious studies (theology, jurisprudence, exegesis, logic, etc.) and gains made in the humanities and social sciences, which in turn provide several methodological tools for deconstructing discourses and texts (from sociology, anthropology, philology, linguistics, etc.).

For instance, the work of legal scholar Farida Banani combines analysis of jurisprudential texts with a legal reading of the reality of women. She demonstrates the baselessness of the argument that “there is no *ijtihad* in the presence of a text,” which in her view is an illegitimate jurisprudential rule, since “text” is a modern term and refers to human readings, whereas the predecessors used interpretation of the Quran and explication of hadith.¹¹ This rule is so sanctified that scholars use it to argue against any woman researcher who wants to exercise her right to engage in interpretive activity (using inference, analogy, preponderance, etc.). Interested in the interaction of jurisprudential rulings and legal texts with reality, Banani calls for taking reality into account and graduation in the process of change. For instance, a Muslim has the right to choose between

¹⁰ I refer to Farida Banani and Zainab Maadi, *Dalīl takrīm al-nisā' fi-l-kutub al-muqaddasa* [Guide for honoring women in religious texts], United Nations Development Program, 2002.

¹¹ Farida Banani, “Rijāl yudaf'ūn 'ala al-musawāh fi-l-irth” [Men defending equality in inheritance], AZULPRESS TV, December 6, 2018, video, 20:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zw0AXElhN0>.

two modes of allotting inheritance: either in accordance with an intentional reading that would favor total equality in allotment or in accordance with the literal application of the provisions of Sharia.

In the same framework, Nadia Charkaoui, religious studies specialist, advocates adopting a comprehensive reading of the Quran (including universal, contextual, and specific verses), because such a reading allows one to realize that the message of Islam is essentially emancipatory. As for readings that consider certain verses in isolation from their original contexts, these lead to arbitrary pronouncements: “What we should focus on today is constructing a new frame of reference for the Quranic conception of humanity—in accordance with universal ethical values and the basic concepts of equality for which the Holy Quran lays the foundation—and reinterpreting verses in light of the moral message of the Quran.”¹²

In turn, Naila Silini emphasizes the historicity of Quranic rulings and interpretations. She posits that some verses cannot be understood in isolation from social, political, and economic transformations or from “the historical background with all its cultural factors orienting the interpreter’s mind in dealing with rulings . . . or the distance between the original ruling ‘as revealed’ and the ‘final’ form it has reached.”¹³ Her colleague Zahiyya Jwīrū, on the other hand, argues that the appropriate methodology should be “interpretation based on looking at the totality of rulings pertaining to a particular field as a coherent textual unit and linking them to their general textual context in order to reach their general intent, hence viewing Quranic rulings as a starting point for new reforms aimed at establishing a society in which the highest Quranic values and general Divine intentions are fulfilled, rather than considering these rulings an

¹² Nadia Charkaoui, “‘Ususal-‘ilaqabaynal-mar’a wa-l-rajul min mandhūr Qur’āni” [Foundations of the relationship between men and women from a Quranic perspective], *Majallat al-Kalima*, no. 105 (Fall 2019): 109.

¹³ Naila Silini Radhoui, *Tarikhiyat al-tafsīr al-Qur’āni wa-l-‘ilaqāt al-ijtima’iyya min khilāl namazij min kutub al-tafsīr* [Historicity of Quranic Tafsir and social relations through examples from books of Tafsir] (Beirut/Rabat: Mu’minūn Bila Hudūd: 2018), 7. See also Amani Saleh, “Al-Ab’ād al-ma’rifīyya li-l-niswiyya al-Islāmiyya” [Paradigms of knowledge in Islamic feminism], in *A’māl mu’tamar al-niswiyya wa-l-mandhūr al-Islāmi: ‘Afāq jadīda lil-ma’rifa wa-l-iṣlāḥ* [Feminist and Islamic perspectives: New horizons of knowledge and reform], ed. Omaira Abou-Bakr (Cairo: Women and Memory Forum, 2013), 11–20. Saleh proposes the same idea, noting that “modern independent jurists or those calling for reopening of the door for independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) agree that, despite the remarkable efforts exerted in developing deductive methodologies and legal theories of Islam, many of these independent judgments carry the historical and cultural imprint of their times and cannot be considered absolute judgments. This point is particularly manifest in jurisprudential and interpretative texts on women, where any analysis reveals—from a socio-epistemological perspective—a male chauvinism that is reflective of the social culture, structure, and time whence it originated” (13).

end in themselves.¹⁴ Linguist Olfa Youssef has similarly been concerned with studying the multiplicity of Quranic meanings, demonstrating “the procedural multiplicity of interpretive possibilities” and “the diversity of views on a given topic,”¹⁵ thus undermining monolithic readings and the closure of meaning. She adopts an argumentative approach to show the baselessness of patriarchal discourse. Thus, if conservatives invoke the saying that the Quran is valid for all times and places to obstruct *ijtihad* on the issue of inheritance, Youssef reminds

The Islamic feminist movement has altered the stereotypical representation of women as passive, compliant recipients of religious commands and interdictions, content with adherence and unable to take initiative in proposing their vision and understanding of texts.

them that legislation in several countries abolishes and prohibits slavery, even though the Quran itself does not.¹⁶ While agreeing with my colleagues about relying on contextual readings and making room for the historicity of rulings and their developments, my work supports

these methodologies with feminist and gender-sensitive approaches and tools of analysis provided by male researchers to understand mental and relational structures, power stakes, foundations of hegemony, paths of discrimination, and similar issues that have come to affect the formulation of “women rulings.”¹⁷

Omaima Abou-Bakr, Amani Saleh, and others agree on the necessity of

¹⁴ Jwīrū, *Al-Wa'd al-jadīd*, 53.

¹⁵ Olfa Youssef, *W-Allāh a'lam: Masa'il khilāfiyya fi-l-aḥkām al-dīniyya* [Only Allah knows: Questions on the caliphate in religious jurisprudence] (Tunis: Meskiliani Editions, 2019), 7–8.

¹⁶ Olfa Youssef, “Qirā'a ḥijājiyya min ajl al-musawāh fi-l-mīrāth bayn al-rajul wa-l-mar'a: Min al-fiqh ila-l-akhlāq” [Contested readings for equal inheritance between men and women: From Islamic jurisprudence to moral considerations], in *Al-Musawāh fi-l-mīrāth bayn al-qirā'a al-mutajaddida lil-naṣṣ al-dīni wa-l-taḥawulat al-mujtama'iyya* [Equality in inheritance between new textual interpretations and social transformations] (Tunis: CREDIF, 2018), 11.

¹⁷ Amel Grami, *Al-'Ikhtilāf fi-l-thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya: Dirāsa jindariyya* [Difference in Islamic culture: A gendered study] (Beirut: Dar al-Mada al-Islāmi, 2007); Amel Grami, “Ramziyyat Zaynab Bint 'Ali fi-l-turāth al-Shī 'i” [The symbolism of Zainab bint Ali in Shiite history], *Al-Mar'a wa-l-marifa al-dīniyya fi-l-Islām, Al-Misbār*, no. 143 (2018): 33–55; Amel Grami, “Al-'Ilm ḍakar la yuḥibbuhu ila-l-ḍukran: Qirā'a min mandhūr al-taqātu'iyya” [Knowledge is a man's privilege and favors men: An intersectional reading], in *Al-Nisā' wa-l-marifa wa-l-sulṭa* [Women, knowledge, and power] (Tunis: Meskiliani Editions, 2019), 15–58; Amel Grami, “Tamathul al-'ulamā' li-l-rujūla min khilāl ḥukm nushūz al-rajul” [Representation of masculinity in some Quranic interpretations], in *Amāl muhdāh ila-l-'ustād Ḥammādī Ṣammūd* [Works dedicated to Hammadi Sammud], ed. Basma Ben Hadj Rhouma Chkily and Hichem Kalfat (Tunis: Latrach Editions, 2019), 287–305.

ridding Islam of patriarchal baggage and using modern methodologies and approaches for understanding religious texts, in addition to urging scholars to take women's lived and spiritual experiences into account. Relying on historical methodology, especially tools for analysis and contextual reading provided by women's history, while highlighting intertextuality between various religious texts (the Quran, canonical hadith collections, Sufi books, etc.) on the one hand and historical and literary texts on the other, Abou-Bakr historicizes the agency of women and the forms of their resistance, thus proving the patriarchal bias practiced by a number of scholars while critiquing value judgments and stereotypes surrounding Muslim women.¹⁸

Scholarship by Islamic feminists has not been restricted to modernizing tools of analysis and applying various approaches and methodologies. It has also enriched the idiomatic lexicon with terms and concepts that have become entrenched in Arab academic circles and contributed to translational activity through the Arabization of terms common in the discourses of Islamic feminists in Western academia—"gender justice," "gender bias," "jihad for gender," "feminist theology," "postpatriarchal Islam," to mention a few. This demonstrates the strong ties between Arabic-speaking Islamic feminism and other global Islamic feminist currents.¹⁹

Key Battles Fought by Islamic Feminists to Change Women's Reality

Islamic feminists have waged various battles aimed at consolidating gender awareness, defending women's rights, and seeking to change their legal and practical realities. These struggles have enabled them to engage in different forms of resistance, advocacy, solidarity, and networking. Most prominent is the call for legislative changes, especially regarding family codes. Note, for example, the enthusiasm demonstrated by researchers to reform the Moroccan Family Code, which still includes discriminatory articles. Banani attributes this to the lawmakers' fluctuation between Islamic jurisprudence and a modernist orientation, noting that the code needs "a radical change of all its procedures,

¹⁸ Omaima Abou-Bakr, *Al-Niswiyya wa-l-dirasāt al-dīniyya fi-l-Islām: Muqaddimat al-muḥarrira* [Feminism and Islamic studies], in *Al-Niswiyya wa-l-dirasāt al-dīniyya: Silsilat Tarjamāt Niswiyya 2* [vol. 2 of Feminist autobiographies series: Feminism and religious studies] (Cairo: Women & Memory Forum, 2012), 9–37.

¹⁹ Among the most prominent representatives of Islamic feminism in the world are Amina Wadud, Margot Badran, Asma Barlas, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Zainah Anwar, Zahra Ali, Fatima Mernissi, Asma Lamrabet, Kecia Ali, and Malika Hamidi.

rather than only amending, reforming, or righting what has gone wrong in it, with the legislation of a family law based on the principle of equality in lieu of the reconciliatory approach between equity and equality.”²⁰

In addition, researchers have been working to address harmful practices justified in the name of religion such as female genital mutilation, child marriage, *wilāya* (custodianship), and women’s eligibility for political offices and the judiciary, analyzing religious texts invoked by “scholars” to argue against changing laws. Women researchers in Tunisia have also sought to raise issues others rarely mention. For example, in one article²¹ I defend the right of a Tunisian woman to marry a non-Muslim adherent of another Abrahamic religion, explaining that the prohibition applies only to polytheists and that it came in a war context wherein it was necessary to take power balance and the interests of the nation into account. Several researchers agree that reconsidering inheritance rulings would allow for alternative readings. Silini, for instance, proposes that “the will in the Quran is the basis and the starting point for legislation, if not the definitive answer, that all other rulings therein, interpreted as requisitions, are in reality nothing but replies revealed in very specific cases in response to the demands of Muslims for Divine answers at the time of the revelation,”²² that the latter are embedded in their sociohistorical, customary, and economic contexts. Jwīrū similarly believes that “the Quran was not intended to state absolute and final rulings, nor to determine a legislative code . . . as much as it offered answers to occasional procedural issues . . . somewhat consistent with the nature of its age and society.”²³ I suggest that inheritance rulings cannot be understood in isolation from the position of women in society, the roles they have played, and the structure of gender and social relations. If we really want to achieve justice between men and women on the basis of equality and go beyond discrimina-

²⁰ Banani, “Rijāl yudafi‘ūn.”

²¹ Amel Grami, “Zawāj al-Muslima bi-ghayr al-Muslim bayn al-fiqh al-Islāmi wa-l-qanūn al-Tunisi” [A Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim: Between Islamic jurisprudence and Tunisian law] (1995). One of the dilemmas faced by women writing in Arabic in the field of religious studies is that their work is often banned because their views are opposed by the religious establishment, professors of Sharia, or sometimes the regime. This article was banned from publication in Tunisia in 1995, which compelled me to publish it digitally years later, in 2007, on the Middle East Transparent website, from which it was also eventually removed.

²² Naila Radawi Silini, “Naḥwa muqāraba jadīda lil mawārīth” [Toward a new approach for inheritance], in *Musāwāt fī al mīrāthi bayna al-qirāti al-mutajadida lil-nas al-dīnī wā al-taḥawulāti al-mujtamaīati* [Equality in inheritance between renewed readings of religious texts and social transformations] (Tunis: CREDIF, Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood, and Seniors, 2018), 31.

²³ Jwīrū, *Al-Wa’d al-jadīd*, 44.

tion, it is imperative to adopt an ethical approach to social relations. As scholars excavate texts, examining, deconstructing, and reconstructing their content, they face campaigns of apostasy and defamation, as do other feminists. The implication is that the only path open to a woman researcher to contribute to knowledge production is to reproduce previous scholarship.

Conclusion

The contribution of Islamic feminists is embedded in their awareness of women's duty to participate in producing knowledge. This awareness, according to Saleh, imposes "a commitment and responsibility on women to actively and truly contribute to reviving the culture of *ijtihad* in the various fields of Islamic knowledge, even those which do not have a direct bearing on women's issues, a commitment and responsibility that confirm the organic integration of women in their nation and their agency in supporting it."²⁴ This epistemological activity of Islamic feminists is manifested on two levels. First is deconstructing older traditions and demonstrating patriarchal bias in language, signification, discourse interpretation, symbols, and modes of constructing collective consciousness. Second is endeavoring to produce alternative knowledge that would meet the needs of Muslims—men and women—in terms of concepts, terminology, approaches, and methodology.

The Islamic feminist movement has altered the stereotypical representation of women as passive, compliant recipients of religious commands and interdictions, content with adherence and unable to take initiative in proposing their vision and understanding of texts. This is in addition to researchers' success in gaining broader recognition, as a number of scholars now acknowledge the validity of the analyses, lauding their competence in religious knowledge, which has been monopolized by men for centuries. Enriching the field of religious studies, Islamic feminists have been able to prove their ability to confront all forms of hegemony imposed by the religious establishment and the patriarchal society. It is impossible to overlook the contribution of Islamic feminists to the field of the humanities and social sciences, drawing attention to the vitality of certain disciplines (such as sociology, anthropology, law, political science) that explore the relationship of religion and spirituality to other social phenomena pertaining to women.

²⁴ Amani Saleh, "Naḥw mandhūr Islāmi li-l-ma'rifa al-niswiyya" [Toward a new perspective for Islamic feminist knowledge], *Al-Mar'a wa-l-ḥaḍāra*, no. 1 (2000): 11, <http://www.aswic.net/Periodicals.aspx?IssueNumber=1>.

Islamic feminism has enriched the fields of human sciences, opening new paths of analysis incorporating women's experiences and concerns, knowledge, perceptions, aspirations, and eagerness to be active citizens. While I draw attention to the contribution of Islamic feminists in enriching the Arab library, their creation of an intellectual dynamism (in terms of raising issues and discussing the feasibility of employing certain theories, approaches, and concepts),²⁵ their contribution is not limited to writing in Arabic. It is possible to say that this knowledge production in Arabic is in constant dialogue with works by Islamic feminists writing in English or French, a matter that points to how it exceeds the local and specific to an engagement in a global epistemological movement and in other currents, such as transnational feminism and monotheistic feminist theology.

Translated from the Arabic by Walid El Hamamsy

²⁵ Not all researchers concerned with women's issues have fought to get out of the polarizing positioning of feminists into two camps: secular feminists versus Islamic feminists. Most of them have not worked to build communicative epistemological bridges or coalitions that aim at jointly confronting challenges. The relationship between the two parties continues to be governed by the sociopolitical context.

Amel Grami is a professor of Islamic studies and gender studies at the University of Manouba (Tunisia). She earned her PhD from the University of Tunis, where her dissertation examined the question of apostasy in Islamic thought. She has been a member of the Islamic-Christian Dialogue Research Group since 1998 and a member of the Women in Mediterranean Countries research group. Her most recent book, *Women, Knowledge, and Power*, was published in 2019 in Arabic by Meskiliani Editions.