



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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### Political Social Movements: Feminist: United States

2005 EWIC Volume II

“Family, Law and Politics”

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The multiple challenges and issues confronting Muslim women in their own communities, as well as in their relations and interactions with mainstream American society, have facilitated a spirit of activism and engagement in public life. Across the United States a number of community-based and national Muslim women's organizations and initiatives have formed, prompted by efforts to advance Muslim women's education and women's rights, to address women's social and economic concerns and to promote scholarship and activism on issues of jurisprudence, theory, and hermeneutics (Webb 2000). Although many of these initiatives relate to and have engaged in national and international feminist campaigns and discussions, strategic alliances and efforts at coalition building between American Muslim women and the broader feminist movement have remained limited.

According to Fernea (1998) the word “feminism” to many Muslim women in the United States evokes an exclusively Western, almost imperialist movement that does not affirm or validate faith-centered identities and realities. A vast majority of Muslim women have largely disengaged from the feminist movement because they feel not only that their diverse narratives and experiences as Muslim women are silenced, but that the movement typically directs, defines, and prioritizes needs and issues on behalf of Muslim women (Fernea 1998, Haddad and Smith 1996, Webb 2000, Ahmed 1992). Ahmed (1992) points to a neocolonial legacy embedded within the dominant feminist movement that seeks to rescue the typical downtrodden oppressed Muslim woman. Contemporary feminist campaigns in the United States addressing the “Muslim woman” issue, notably the campaign to end gender apartheid in Afghanistan, echo this critique. As Chishti (2003) indicates, the highly visible and politically charged campaign to “emancipate” Afghan women successfully influenced United States foreign policy toward Afghanistan. The political campaign alienated many American Muslim women not in terms of the actual goals, but because of the dichotomized simplicity of pitting secularism against religion and Western liberal freedom against “backward” Islamic tradition. In doing so, the feminist campaign not only heightened Islamophobia and reinforced stereotypes of Islam and Muslim women in the United States, but simultaneously undermined the complex historical, political, and economic factors that contributed to the conditions of women in Afghanistan.

Despite these challenges, a growing number of Muslim women's initiatives in the United States emerged or were cemented preceding the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women. Organizations such as the Muslim Women's League, based in California, drafted position papers on the United Nations Platform for Action, and a number of discussions took place across the country gearing up for the conference among Muslim women scholars, activists, and lawyers (Webb 2000). In particular, the 1994 conference in Washington on “Religion, Culture and Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World,” co-sponsored by the Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI), brought to light the work of existing research and activist Muslim women's organizations in the United States such as Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, founded by

12/20/13 The EWIC Public Outreach Project is funded by the generous support of the Henry Luce Foundation

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Azizah al-Hibri, and the North American Council for Muslim Women (NACMW) founded by Sharifa Alkhateeb. The latter organization, in addition to the Muslim Women's Georgetown Study Project, worked extensively on analyzing the connections between CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and the Qur'ān and ḥadīth, leading to their participation on five panel discussions at the World Conference in Beijing (Abu Gideiri 2001). The national advocacy work of Karamah and NACMW continues, as both organizations actively address the issues and concerns of Muslim women and the American Muslim communities nationwide, particularly at the White House and on Capitol Hill. NACMW has been encouraging the greater involvement of Muslim women in public life and addressing key social justice issues, such as violence against women, loans for economic ventures, health care, and female genital mutilation. Similar national efforts by Karamah include acting as consultants in legal cases (such as divorce) to American courts on issues related to women and Muslim Sharī'a law. As a networking organization, Karamah engages in writing and education on numerous issues such as domestic violence, women's rights in Islam, and legal education. These two organizations in particular have paved new roads for the scholarly and activist contributions of American Muslim women at the national and international level.

The majority of Muslim women's community-based organizations across the United States are working for women's rights and education and addressing the social, economic, and political concerns of American Muslim women. Muslim women's organizations have formed or have increased their public activities to address the needs of Muslim women, largely bypassed by both mainstream feminist organizations and mainstream Muslim organizations. The former typically do not recognize the complexity of the American Muslim women's experience and the latter exclude women from senior decision-making bodies and are largely informed by patriarchal attitudes and practices (Ali 2003, Abu Gideiri 2001). In this regard, Abu Gideiri writes, "Muslim women are sustaining, resisting, adjusting or changing their historical roles within contemporary American circles" (2001, 1). Dozens of national Muslim women's organizations have been formed in the United States, a great majority of them promoting women's empowerment through education. The Muslim Women's League, the United States chapter of Sisters in Islam and the International Union of Muslim Women are some examples of national organizations that promote comprehensive and critical Islamic education for women, alongside addressing misconceptions and common misunderstanding of gender in Islam in the broader community. In researching the challenges faced by American Muslim women, Haddad and Smith (2003) comment that Muslim women in America have a history of activism, helping to create institutions, social structures, and support groups across the country. Although they have suffered a setback due to the backlash and profiling as a result of 11 September 2001, there is a new kind of activism emerging among American Muslim women, mainly to reach out to mainstream society in efforts to inform the public about Islam and dispel popular myths and stereotypes, particularly about Muslim women.

There is undoubtedly a growing community of Muslim women activists and organizations in the United States addressing critical concerns faced by American Muslim women. Although few Muslim women's organizations identify themselves as feminist, their work is addressing the immediate and strategic needs and concerns of Muslim American women and their families. Thus many Muslim women activists, scholars, and organizations are increasingly finding themselves engaged in feminist discussions and interacting with the broader feminist movement (Haddad and Smith 1996, Webb 2000). In her study of Muslim women's identity in North America, Khan (2000) identifies the critical need for Muslim women living in North America to engage in feminist discourse in order to explore how gender, capitalism, and patriarchy implicate their lived realities at various levels, and to carve their own niche in feminist organizing, which she argues is vital for progressive alternatives and collective strategies. Coalition building among Muslim women and the larger feminist movement in the United States holds great potential, not only to build an inclusive movement but also to promote collective analyses and work toward achieving mutually defined goals.

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