



Islamic Women's Activism in the Arab World

Islamic women's activism may appear as a contradiction in terms to Western audiences used to presentations of Islam as counterproductive to women's empowerment. Yet many different activists work to empower women based on Islamic arguments and references. They constitute potentially important future partners for external actors

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As Islamic actors are gaining grounds in the context of the 'Arab spring', Islamic women's activists are becoming more important than ever. They work as scholars, as charity and welfare providers, and as religious or political activists throughout the Arab world and their activism complements secular approaches as it reaches out to other audiences and often enjoys a wider local legitimacy.

Accordingly, Islamic women's activists constitute potentially important future partners for external actors such as bilateral and multilateral aid agencies or women's organisations who wish to contribute to Arab women's empowerment, participation, agency and authority.

How are they to be addressed? And what are the potentials - and challenges - of such collaboration?

WHAT IS ISLAMIC WOMEN'S ACTIVISM?

Islamic women's activism refers to activities that are explicitly based on an Islamic frame of reference and which aim at empowering women and advancing their situation - by increasing their participation, their agency and/or their authority in various ways. It includes a very wide range of different activities and actors throughout the Arab world.

Most Islamic women's activists share a number of key guiding ideas and aspirations. They notably agree on the fundamental idea that Islam

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EXTERNAL ACTORS WORKING TO EMPOWER ARAB WOMEN

- Include Islamic women's activists just like any other potential partners - on the basis of mutual interest, relevance and competence
- Base all collaboration on prior in-depth empirical analysis
- Base collaboration on broad consultation and genuine partnership
- Avoid controversial discourse
- Apply an open and dynamic approach to Islam
- Approach women's issues gradually and as an integral part of other challenges
- Collaborate on issues of common interest and mutual benefit

See overleaf for detailed recommendations.

does not constitute a problem for women. Rather, *Islam provides women with rights and privileges*. Accordingly, their objective is to disseminate knowledge of these rights - and to ensure that



they are respected and implemented in practice. In fact, many activists directly highlight that Islam is what motivates them to actively engage in society. But this participation must take place within a religiously appropriate framework. Here, many point to the importance of the Islamic headscarf as protecting them and allowing them to participate in a safe and respectful way.

Characteristic of the rights that Islam bestows on women is that they are viewed as equal to, but different from the rights given to men. Rather than seeing men and women as similar, most Islamic women's activists see them as *complementary*, as having different roles, possibilities and obligations. For instance, the husband supports his family financially – and the wife has the main responsibility for

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

Include Islamic women's activists just like any other potential partner – on the basis of mutual interest, relevance and competence

Islamic women's activists are not to be singled out specifically, nor to be the object of specifically designed 'Islamic' projects. Nor should the bar be raised higher or set in a different manner when it comes to Islamic women's activists. Rather, they are to be included just like any other potential partner. That is, when they wish to engage in partnership and collaboration with external partners – and when they have specific competences or other comparative advantages vis-à-vis a given issue or challenge.

Base all collaboration on prior in-depth empirical analysis

As for any sound international collaboration, partnership with local Islamic women's activists must be based on solid empirical analysis of the local context, dynamics and actors.

Base all collaboration on broad consultations and genuine partnership

The strong association between foreign interference and women's issues in the Arab world means that many potential local partners among Islamic women's activists are reluctant to engage and collaborate with foreign partners, especially with regard to women's issues. Overcoming this local reticence demands that external partners manage to communicate and demonstrate in practice that they genuinely strive towards partnership and mutual respect.

Avoid controversial discourse

Many Islamic women's activists are wary of concepts such as 'equality' (as opposed to

'equity' or 'complementarity'), 'feminism' and 'gender'. They perceive these concepts to be loaded with negative associations of cultural imperialism and neo-colonial interference as well as with an implicit threat to Islam and indigenous ways and traditions. Therefore, local relevance and trust may be enhanced if external actors strive to avoid terms that accentuate (perceived) differences.

Apply an open and dynamic approach to Islam

Islam is a living religion with millions of adherents who interpret and practice their faith in multiple and evolving ways. Accordingly, external actors should apply an open and dynamic approach. What matters is not an essentialised construct of 'Islam' – but rather the ongoing interpretation and practice of local partners.

Approach women's issues gradually and as an integral part of other challenges

It may in many instances prove fruitful to apply a long-term and incremental approach. This can both take the form of collaboration with local partners that do not only work to promote women's situation, and the form of initial collaboration mainly with local faith-based partners on projects and issues that do not explicitly or primarily target women's situation.

Collaborate on issues of common interest and mutual benefit

One such potentially fruitful field for initial collaboration is that of issues related to women's work-life balance (quality child care, maternity leave etc.) It is not too controversial, it concerns issues of common interest and may provide important mutual learning experiences.



bringing up their children. This complementarity is also reflected in the complex inheritance laws. Accordingly, rather than 'equality', most of these activists strive towards *equity*. Furthermore, the rights that Islam bestows on women are *complemented by obligations*: religious obligations, the obligation to take care of their families and (if they have the necessary energy) also the obligation to participate in and contribute to society.

IGNORANCE AND WRONG INTERPRETATIONS

While Islam thus bestows rights on women, most Islamic women's activists consider that these rights are not implemented in practice and that most people (including many leading Muslim legal scholars or '*ulama*') lack knowledge about the Islamic sources. They ignore the rights, privileges and protection that Islam entitles women to. Accordingly, a long-term effort is demanded to educate society about 'the true Islam' and the rights it bestows on women - and to separate these from traditional practices such as female genital mutilation or 'honour killings' that are not Islamic, though commonly believed to be so.

So for Islamic women's activists the root cause of women's suffering is not Islam but rather ignorance and wrong interpretations. The challenge is not to free women from Islam but rather to give them the rights and privileges that Islam entitles them to. In other words, for most Islamic activists the main challenge is to ensure a correct and respectful (re-)interpretation of the religious texts and religious, legal, historical and political practices that provide women (and men) with the rights and privileges conferred on them by Islam.

Most Islamic women's activists also insist on the need to address issues related to women's situation based on locally acceptable solutions. Yet they differ when it comes to their views on international norms and regulations. For some, it is possible to reconcile their 'local' approach with international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Others (among them many adhering to Islamist organisations) disagree with the 'imposition' of 'universal' concepts such as gender, equality and feminism. These concepts and the international conventi-

ons that apply them are criticised for promoting a particular Western worldview and for disregarding the differences and the complementarity between men and women.

CHALLENGES OF ISLAMIC WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

Islamic women's activism challenges inherent notions of liberalism and secularism as well as some of the key concepts applied by many Western development and women's organizations.

Furthermore, this activism also contains a number of serious risks, which again pertain to both local and external actors who seek to contribute to Arab women's empowerment. For one thing, it risks glossing over various local differences and variations in identity - along religious, political, ethnic, social or other lines. It also risks strengthening the legitimacy and authenticity (if not the monopoly) of an Islamic approach to gender and family roles - and hence also risks excluding the voices and approaches of secular actors or non-Muslim minorities. Finally, Islamic women's activism also risks exacerbating local political power games in unintended ways. For instance, it may bolster rather than challenge local patriarchal institutions, discourses and interpretations - be that of authoritarian states, of conservative religious establishments, or of Islamist organisations.

These risks and challenges need to be addressed by both local and external actors. However, they should not prevent external actors working for women's empowerment from collaborating with Islamic women's activists. On the contrary, the latter hold some very important potentials for the promotion of Arab women's empowerment, participation, authority and agency.

POTENTIALS OF ISLAMIC WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

Islamic women's activism provides an indigenous and culturally rooted approach to women's empowerment in the Arab world. For broad segments of the population it may be perceived as more socially acceptable than secular women's activism.

Accordingly, Islamic women's activism may strengthen Arab women in many ways - in both the private and the public spheres. For instance, participation in Islamic social and charity work



provides a legitimate means for many women to participate in activities beyond the private sphere, to get out of the house in an admissible manner and gain experiences and skills, to network and possibly also to earn revenues and livelihoods which may in turn enhance their voices and authority.

Islamic women's activism also provides women with new avenues to legitimate positions of authority – for instance as preachers, scholars, or politicians. In turn, these new female authority figures may become new role models and sources of inspiration for yet other women, who would otherwise continue to be disengaged in public affairs.

New interpretations of Islam may also provide arguments for local, state and international activists for more general changes, for instance of Islamic family laws. Indeed, despite its deeply divisive and controversial nature, Islamic family law reform may well constitute one of the main areas where Islamic women's activism may achieve important formal changes in women's situation in society – given the religious foundations of family law and legislative practices on family matters throughout much of the Arab world.

Furthermore, Islamic women's activism holds the potential to 'feminise Islam'. It may provide new religious scholarship and interpretations of the *Qur'an*, the *hadith* or the *fiqh* – and lead to a general rewriting of Islamic history (or her-story) which re-interprets the roles of female figures such as the female companions of the Muslim prophet Muhammad. It may also lead to an enhancement of women's possibilities and authority within the religious sphere, for instance improving women's rights to pray in non-segregated rooms in mosques, to stay close to the Kaba'a, or even to lead the prayer. More specifically, women's activists belonging

to and working within the Islamist movement hold important potential in terms of pushing their mainly male and often very conservative and patriarchal leadership towards new interpretations and positions vis-à-vis women's position and possibilities within the movement – and in society more generally. These Islamist women's activists also hold important potential in relation to the formal political sphere, a traditionally male dominated domain in many Arab countries. Given their legitimacy as veiled and respectable Muslim women, female Islamist political activists may constitute important door-openers to the formal political sphere for female voters, volunteers and candidates as well as for those holding office. These potentials are more important than ever in the current context of the 'Arab spring'.

Finally, Islamic women's activism may also contribute to a general strengthening of the women's movement in many Arab countries. Divides remain strong between secular and faith-based women's activists on their goals (equity and complementarity – or equality?) and on a number of specific issues (should men and women enjoy equal shares in inheritance? Should one retain or ban polygamy and unilateral divorce?). Yet, at the same time, these two approaches are complementary. They have the potential to reach out to different audiences and segments of society, and if some of them completely marginalizes the other, these different currents can contribute both to increasing pluralism and to strengthening the general awareness about women's situation in their societies.

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The opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the author alone.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

This DIIS Policy Brief is based on the author's *Islamic Women's Activism in the Arab World. Potentials and challenges for external actors*. DIIS Report 2012:02. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies. The report contains a comprehensive bibliography. The report can be downloaded free of charge at <http://diis.dk/sw115153.asp>

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