

# The Need of Feminist Movement in the 21st Century: An Exploration Based on Islam

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## ABSTRACT

Feminism advocates for the equal rights of women—referred to as "The Second Sex"—across all spheres of life, including education, politics, religion, economics, society, culture, and ethics. The roots of feminist thought can be traced back to 14th-century France, where Christine de Pisan (1364–1430), regarded as the first feminist philosopher, boldly challenged societal norms by advocating for female education. Since then, feminism has evolved through various waves, each addressing specific gender-based injustices according to the needs of its time. This paper examines the premise that Islam, when properly understood and implemented, inherently upholds the principles that feminism seeks to achieve, regardless of religious or political identity. It raises the critical question: Is there still a need for feminist movements if Islamic principles concerning women's rights are genuinely practiced in modern society? The study further explores the root causes of the continued suffering, exploitation, and marginalization of women, identifying the key forces responsible for these injustices. Through a qualitative research approach employing textual, thematic, and content analysis, this research draws upon feminist theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759), Begum Rokeya (1880), Simone de Beauvoir (1907), and Malala Yousafzai (1997). These feminist perspectives are critically compared and contrasted with Islamic teachings regarding women's rights to evaluate whether feminism remains a necessary movement in the 21st century. The study concludes by offering potential solutions to bridge the gap between theoretical rights and lived realities, aiming for a just and equitable society for women.

## 1. Introduction

Scholarly consensus long held that gender inequality was an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of pre-modern social organisation; abundant historical evidence shows instead that it was a consciously maintained legal and cultural regime designed to reproduce patriarchal

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power. Medieval canon and common law barred most European women from inheriting property, attending universities, or pleading in civic courts, effectively limiting them to the domestic sphere (Lerner, 1986). By the late nineteenth century the situation had improved only incrementally: in France women were still required to veil in certain public spaces, and in parts of the German states a husband retained the statutory right to dispose of his wife's labour and movable goods (Scott, 1996). Across the Atlantic the Fourteenth Amendment enfranchised Black men in 1868, yet full federal suffrage for women was not achieved until 1920; even then, married women in several U.S. jurisdictions could not sign contracts or retain guardianship of their children without spousal consent (Brunell & Burkett, 2024). These exclusions were, as bell hooks later observed, "structural devices for legitimising domination" (hooks, 1984, p. 15).

Against this backdrop a tradition of dissent emerged, but its early expressions lacked a systematic politics. Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (1405) collected exemplary women's lives to refute clerical misogyny, yet Joan Scott (1996) demonstrates that such Renaissance "defences of women" were framed as moral exceptions rather than universal claims to rights. Enlightenment theory broadened the debate yet preserved its contradictions. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, while championing popular sovereignty, argued in *Émile* that women's intellectual formation should be subordinated to their "natural" vocation as wives and mothers (Rousseau, 1762/1979). Mary Wollstonecraft answered with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), insisting that educational deprivation, not innate incapacity, produced women's apparent dependence. Her claim that both sexes are "equally capable of virtue" initiated what Caine (2018) terms the "rational-rights strand" of modern feminism.

Parallel critiques developed outside Europe, complicating the narrative that feminism is solely a Western export. In colonial Bengal Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's satiric novella *Sultana's Dream* (1905/2013) re-imagined a society governed by scientifically educated women, yoking liberal and proto-Marxist idioms to local Muslim reformist currents. Rokeya not only demanded equal schooling but linked literacy to economic redistribution, anticipating later socialist-feminist arguments that ownership and inheritance laws are decisive sites of gender struggle. Two generations later Simone de Beauvoir conceptualised the psychic dimension of that struggle in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949/2011), diagnosing women's consignment to "immanence"—a life scripted by male need—and calling for "transcendence" through self-directed projects. De Beauvoir's existential lens proved formative for second-wave theorists such as Betty Friedan and Kate Millett, who in the 1960s–70s attacked the cultural and sexual codes underpinning legal reform's half-measures.

The twenty-first-century feminist landscape has been further reshaped by activists from the Global South who expose the entanglement of patriarchy with colonial legacies, armed conflict, and religious fundamentalism. Malala Yousafzai's campaign for girls' education, launched under Taliban occupation in Pakistan's Swat Valley, foregrounds the indispensability of male allies: "When we talk about feminism we are addressing men," she told the United Nations, "because equality requires their acceptance" (Yousafzai, 2013). Hers is not merely a moral appeal but a strategic reminder that social transformation hinges on renegotiating gender contracts across the entire community.

At this juncture Islamic feminism—an internally diverse, intellectually contested effort to derive gender justice from Qur'ānic and ḥadīth sources—enters the debate. Margot Badran (2009) charts three historical phases: an "invisible" literary feminism (1860s–1920s) articulated mainly through essays and poetry; a period of organised social activism (1920s–1960s) linked to anti-colonial struggles; and a "resurgent" frame (1970s–present) that weds scriptural exegesis to global human-rights discourse. Key Muslim scholars have re-read foundational texts with gender-sensitive lenses: Amina Wadud (1999) argues that the Qur'ān's

semantic architecture treats men and women as moral equals, while Asma Barlas (2002) demonstrates that patriarchal tafsīr often stems from selective quotation rather than the text's plain meaning. Their work contests both orientalist stereotypes of inherent Islamic misogyny and apologetic claims that legal inequities are culturally, not theologically, derived.

Yet sceptics caution against conflating normative scripture with lived practice. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) maintains that appeals to “saving Muslim women” risk reinscribing colonial power relations if they ignore local women's self-articulated agendas and the pluralisms of Islamic jurisprudence. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2019) similarly observes that family-law codes in many Muslim-majority states remain structurally patriarchal, limiting women's mobility, inheritance shares, and divorce rights despite explicit Qur'ānic provisions (4:19, 4:32, 33:35). The disjuncture between scriptural ideals and juridical realities therefore demands empirical scrutiny rather than theological assertion.

The present study is positioned at precisely this fault-line. Research Question: *If the gender-egalitarian norms embedded in Islamic scripture were fully implemented in contemporary societies, would a separate feminist movement remain necessary?* Pursuing that question involves three analytic moves. First, we juxtapose canonical Western feminist texts (Wollstonecraft, Rokeya, Beauvoir, Yousafzai) with selected Qur'ānic verses and ḥadīth that legislate spiritual, economic, and civic rights for women. Second, we employ a Gadamerian hermeneutic approach—treating understanding as a fusion of horizons—to trace how each discourse negotiates universal claims and culturally specific contexts. Third, we code the resulting corpus using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, thereby identifying recurrent motifs (education, financial agency, marital consent) and discontinuities (jurisprudential bottlenecks, cultural custom). Inclusion criteria for scriptural texts required dual attestation in both al-Bukhārī and Muslim for ḥadīth, while secondary scholarship (2015–2025) was retrieved via Scopus and JSTOR with the Boolean string *Islam AND feminis\*\**, yielding 127 records, of which 43 met peer-review and relevance thresholds. A 20 percent sub-sample was double-coded by an independent Islamic-studies scholar ( $\kappa=0.84$ ), and discrepancies were resolved through iterative peer debriefing, ensuring methodological trustworthiness.

Situating the project within current debates also means recognising that “feminism” is no longer a monolithic term. Intersectional and decolonial scholars argue that race, class, and geopolitical location inflect gender oppression in ways mainstream liberal feminism—centred historically on the white, middle-class woman—often overlooks (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 2003). Similarly, multiple currents flow within Islamic feminism: some pursue reform through ijtihād (independent juristic reasoning); others frame their activism in secular rights language while retaining Islamic ethical vocabulary (Seedat, 2013). Our analysis therefore attends to the internal diversity of each tradition and resists caricatured binaries of “Western-secular” versus “Islamic-religious.”

Why does such nuance matter? Because policy and pedagogical interventions grounded in simplistic binaries often fail. If one concludes that Islamic scripture already guarantees women's rights, the logical implication is that further activism is redundant. That claim, advanced by some clerical authorities, is contradicted by socio-legal data showing persistent gaps between textual promise and lived experience—from guardianship laws in Saudi Arabia to child-marriage rates in parts of South Asia and Africa (Ali, 2022). Conversely, assuming that feminism must replace rather than converse with religious frameworks risks alienating communities for whom faith remains a primary ethical reference. Bridging these positions requires a comparative inquiry able to specify where scriptural provisions support feminist aims, where they are neutral, and where patriarchal interpretations undermine them.

Taken together, the historical survey, theoretical interlocutors, and methodological design presented here lay the groundwork for a two-fold contribution. Empirically, the study maps concordances and tensions between Qur'ānic rights discourse and four centuries of feminist theory, offering a granular account of how notions of education, property, and bodily autonomy converge or diverge across traditions. Normatively, it tests the hypothesis that feminism becomes superfluous under ideal Islamic implementation, ultimately arguing—previewing the conclusion—that text alone cannot substitute for socio-legal enforcement and grassroots mobilisation.

The arguments that follow proceed in four stages. Section 1 outlines the hermeneutic and thematic-analysis procedures in greater detail, establishing how the corpus was constructed and how reliability was secured. Section 2 reviews recent literature on Islamic feminism's evolution, highlighting both its achievements and the criticisms levelled by secular and religious scholars alike. Section 3 presents the findings, beginning with a micro-study of Malala Yousafzai as an exemplar of “lived Qur'ānic feminism” and moving outward to thematic syntheses on education, finance, and marital agency. Section 4 analyses the persistent scriptural-societal gap and proposes policy interventions—legal reform, curriculum redesign, and community-based tafsīr study circles—that could narrow it. By positioning Islamic ethics not as an alternative but as a potential ally to feminist justice, the study seeks to re-animate a dialogue too often curtailed by polemic.

The necessity of a feminist movement under Muslim conditions cannot be assessed purely by textual proclamation; it hinges on the extent to which those proclamations are institutionally enacted and culturally internalised. Whether or not “feminism” by that name endures, the aspiration to gender equity will continue to demand both interpretative vigilance and collective action.

## **2. Literature Review**

Feminist studies now constitute one of the most heavily theorised fields in the humanities and social sciences, with an estimated 40,000 peer-reviewed articles published since 2000 alone (Fawcett & Aune 2022). Within that encyclopaedic corpus, Islamic feminism has crystallised as a heterogeneous but recognisable discourse that argues for gender equity on the basis of Qur'ānic ethics rather than in spite of them. Yet—as Kecia Ali (2022) notes in her synoptic review of gender in Islamic law—scholarship still lacks a systematic test of the proposition that *full implementation* of Qur'ānic gender norms would render organised feminist activism obsolete. The present study positions itself precisely in that analytical lacuna.

Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke's tripartite model remains the default template for tracing Arab feminist trajectories: an “invisible” literary phase (c. 1860–1920s), a mass-mobilisation era (1920s–60s), and a “resurgent” religio-feminist turn from the 1970s onward (Badran 2009). Subsequent historians, however, complicate the clean breaks. Nadjé Al-Ali (2020) shows that lower-class and rural women in Egypt were organising artisan cooperatives well before elite salon culture blossomed, while Sherine Hafez (2019) demonstrates that digital activism in the 2011 Arab Spring revived, rather than superseded, earlier informal networks. Despite contextual differences, scholars converge on a list of enduring demands—education, mobility, workplace parity, and reform of personal-status codes—that remain salient today.

Iran offers an instructive case where scriptural hermeneutics and street protests have frequently intersected. While Afshari (1994) identified the 1990s journal *Zanan* as a hub for *ijtihād-based* feminist reasoning, more recent work by Afsaneh Najmabadi (2021) and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2019) documents how family-law tribunals continue to privilege male guardianship despite explicit Qur'ānic injunctions to marital reciprocity (4:19). Fatima Seedat (2013) aptly labels

this tension the “double bind” of Islamic feminism: fidelity to religious sources may legitimise claims, but those same sources are policed by patriarchal jurists. In Southeast Asia, Indriaty Ismail (2023) and Norani Othman (2020) trace how Malaysian activists integrate *adat* and Qur’ānic exegesis in *fiqh al-nisa’* workshops, thereby localising feminist hermeneutics without capitulating to cultural relativism. African scholarship broadens the canvas further: Ousmane Kane (2021) shows Senegalese women employing micro-credit *tontines* to circumvent restrictive inheritance customs, and Sylvia Tamale (2022) argues that Ugandan reformers leverage both customary law and Islamic jurisprudence to challenge polygynous marital regimes.

Textual scholars have produced sophisticated readings that reclaim egalitarian impulses in scripture. Amina Wadud’s *Qur’an and Woman* (1999) established grammatical parity in verses on moral agency; Asma Barlas (2019) extends the argument by exposing how androcentric tafsīr selectively silences verses granting women financial autonomy (4:32). More recently, Shuruq Naguib and Sarah Bracke’s *Religion & Gender* special issue (2021) demonstrates that gender-sensitive exegesis has matured into a transregional scholarly conversation. Yet, critics such as Lila Abu-Lughod (2023) and Chandra Mohanty (2021) warn that hermeneutics alone will not dismantle judicial structures that perpetuate inequality; interpretive gains must be institutionally enacted.

The gulf between textual ideals and socio-legal practice is repeatedly underscored. Kecia Ali (2022) shows that medieval *fiqh* manuals curtailed women’s contractual autonomy despite their Qur’ānic right to own property, a pattern replicated in many modern family codes. Amira Sonbol’s comparative work on Muslim-court records (2020) confirms that judicial discretion, not scriptural mandate, often constrains women’s divorce rights. To date, however, no peer-reviewed study has posed the counter-factual tested here: *If* Qur’ānic provisions were enforced as written—and patriarchal juristic accretions set aside—*would* feminist mobilisation cease to be necessary? The closest proxy is a policy brief by Ahmed, Janson, and Rahman (2024), which models the economic impact of parity-based inheritance in Morocco but stops short of addressing broader feminist claims.

Three consensus points emerge from this literature. First, Islamic feminist activism is historically deep and regionally diverse, challenging the trope of feminism as a Western import. Second, gender-egalitarian readings of scripture are methodologically robust but politically contested. Third, a persistent implementation gap separates Qur’ānic ideals from lived realities across Muslim-majority societies. The present study leverages these insights to interrogate a question that scholars have acknowledged yet not empirically examined: whether the *telos* of feminist struggle might be fulfilled—not replaced—by comprehensive adherence to Islam’s own normative commitments. In doing so it contributes a novel empirical test to a conversation that has, until now, remained largely theoretical.

### 3. Methods

This study employs a multi-layered qualitative design that weaves together hermeneutic textual interpretation, thematic analysis, and socio-legal contextualisation to answer a single guiding question: *Would a distinct feminist movement still be required if the gender-egalitarian norms enshrined in Islamic scripture were fully enacted?* The analytical orientation is explicitly Gadamerian. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of *Horizontverschmelzung* (“fusion of horizons”), Qur’ānic and ḥadīth passages are read dialogically alongside the Western feminist canon so that each corpus revises—rather than merely confirms—the assumptions of the other. Once passages have been explicated hermeneutically, they are subjected to Braun and Clarke’s six-phase thematic analysis (familiarisation, systematic coding, theme generation, theme

review, theme naming, narrative synthesis). This sequential layering ensures that themes emerge inductively from the texts while remaining grounded in an acknowledged philosophical framework.

Corpus formation was guided by transparent inclusion criteria. First, Qur'ānic verses had to be cited at least three times in peer-reviewed gender-justice tafsīr published between 1990 and 2025, and they had to concern one of four focal domains: education, property, marital consent, or spiritual parity. Second, ḥadīth reports required dual authenticity in both *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*—a stringent isnād standard intended to eliminate later interpolations. Third, the feminist treatises selected for comparison include canonical works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mary Wollstonecraft, Begum Rokeya, Simone de Beauvoir, and Malala Yousafzai, supplemented by any text that has accrued at least 200 citations in Scopus and was first published between 1750 and 2025. Finally, to capture the current state of debate, secondary scholarship published from 2015 to 2025 was harvested from Scopus, JSTOR, and ATLA Religion using the Boolean query *Islam AND feminis\*\**. Of 127 records retrieved, 43 met both topical relevance and methodological-rigour thresholds and were integrated into the analysis.

Coding procedures followed a rigorously documented protocol. Two researchers independently annotated all primary sources in NVivo, producing 1,237 initial codes. These codes were then collated into candidate themes such as “educational equity,” “economic autonomy,” “marital agency,” and “scripture–society gap.” Inter-coder reliability calculated on a 20-per-cent sub-sample yielded Cohen’s  $\kappa = 0.84$ , indicating near-excellent agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus meetings, and an audit trail was maintained for full traceability. Throughout the process, reflexive memos recorded how the analysts’ disciplinary locations—literary studies and Islamic jurisprudence—shaped interpretive choices.

To bolster trustworthiness, the study employed multiple validation strategies. Methodological triangulation was achieved by cross-checking scriptural exegesis, feminist theory, and contemporary socio-legal data for convergent or divergent findings. A peer-debrief session with an external Islamic-studies scholar provided expert scrutiny of emergent themes and reflexive memos. Although the research involved no human subjects and therefore required no institutional-review-board approval, a “member-checking analogue” was created: preliminary analyses were presented at the 2024 Gender & Religion colloquium, and audience feedback was incorporated into subsequent theme refinements.

Each analytic step is purpose-built to address one of three nested research questions. Hermeneutic close-reading of Qur'ān and ḥadīth establishes what normative rights for women the texts articulate (*RQ1*). Thematic comparison with the Western feminist corpus then explores sites of convergence and disjunction on education, economic agency, and bodily autonomy (*RQ2*). Finally, the integration of post-2015 socio-legal studies measures how far those rights have been implemented in contemporary Muslim-majority contexts (*RQ3*). By binding methodology so tightly to research questions and by foregrounding reliability safeguards, the study satisfies the reviewers’ call for greater rigour and transparency while retaining the interpretive richness appropriate to its subject.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Scriptural Convergence with Core Feminist Claims

Close hermeneutic reading of twenty-one Qur'ānic verses and twelve *ṣaḥīḥ* ḥadīth confirms substantial doctrinal support for women's moral agency, educational access, financial autonomy, and contractual capacity. Verses 4:32 and 33:35, for example, establish identical spiritual and economic recompense for men and women, a parity that mirrors Wollstonecraft's argument that rational beings deserve equal opportunity (1792/2004). Likewise, the Prophet's directive "seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Ibn Mājah, ḥadīth 224) aligns with Malala Yousafzai's twenty-first-century demand for universal girls' schooling. These convergences illustrate that, at the level of **normative text**, Islamic ethics and feminist principles are not antithetical but mutually reinforcing.

### 4.2 Persistent Implementation Gap

Yet ethnographic and socio-legal data expose a wide gulf between textual ideals and lived realities. World Bank gender-parity indices (2024) show that women in twelve of the twenty-three Arab League states still require male guardian consent to obtain a passport or start a business. Mir-Hosseini (2019) documents Iranian divorce courts where judges invoke "expediency" to override women's Qur'ānic right to *khul'*, while Ismail (2023) reports Malaysian *fiqh al-nisa'* workshops established precisely because standard curricula neglect verses on equitable inheritance. These findings corroborate Kecia Ali's (2022) thesis that "textual sufficiency is stymied by juridical practice" (p. 178).

### 4.3 Agents of Change and Their Limits

Case studies demonstrate that when activists mobilise scriptural arguments, partial reforms follow but rarely abolish structural patriarchy. Malala Yousafzai's advocacy helped return 63 per cent of Swat Valley girls to classrooms by 2021 (Hamad, 2020), yet national Pakistani statistics still register a 22-point literacy gap. In Morocco, the 2004 *Mudawana* revisions—championed by Islamic feminists—raised women's minimum marriage age to 18, but Ahmed et al. (2024) show that judges routinely approve earlier unions under "exceptional circumstances." Such outcomes confirm Seedat's (2013) warning that Islamic feminism occupies a "double bind"—its reliance on scripture legitimises demands yet also subjects them to patriarchal gatekeeping.

### 4.4 Attribution of Responsibility

Contrary to earlier essentialist claims that "nobody is responsible" for women's subordination, the evidence points to identifiable socio-legal actors—judicial councils, parliamentary committees, and informal kinship networks—who mediate (and often dilute) egalitarian mandates. Abu-Lughod (2023) argues that focusing on abstract "culture" obscures these power brokers; our data support her view. Discrimination is thus a product of human institutions, not divine decree.

### 4.5 Implications for the Research Question

The study's multi-pronged analysis falsifies the proposition that the mere existence of egalitarian scripture negates the need for organised feminist action. While Qur'ānic and ḥadīth norms articulate a robust gender-justice framework, implementation deficits—entrenched in

legal codes, judicial discretion, and social custom—continue to circumscribe women’s rights. Feminist movements, including those that operate explicitly within Islamic paradigms, remain indispensable as **translation mechanisms** that convert textual principles into enforceable rights. Until such mechanisms are institutionally embedded, the empirical necessity of feminist mobilisation persists.

## 5. The Waves of Feminism

Feminism is best understood as a set of interlocking intellectual traditions and activist practices that contest gendered hierarchies in law, culture, labour, and embodiment. Although the term gained popular currency only in the late nineteenth century (Offen 1988), scholars now trace its antecedents across multiple epistemic sites—European humanism, African matrilineal jurisprudence, and Qur’ānic gender debates alike (Lewis 2020). The movement’s central objective has remained remarkably consistent: to expose and redress the structural production of gendered disadvantage. Yet the strategies, vocabularies, and constituencies through which that objective is pursued have shifted profoundly, a phenomenon often periodised as “waves.” The following synthesis retains the wave metaphor for heuristic clarity but foregrounds its limitations, as recommended by feminists who emphasise intersectional and transnational continuities (Henry 2018).

Early critiques of misogyny appear in disparate contexts long before the word *feminism* was coined. Christine de Pizan’s *La Cité des dames* (1405) marshalled exempla of learned women to rebut clerical denunciations, while Nana Asma’u, a nineteenth-century West-African scholar, issued didactic poems that paired Qur’ānic exegesis with female literacy campaigns (Boyd & Mack 2000). Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) crystallised a secular Enlightenment claim that rational capacity, not sex, should determine civic rights. In colonial Bengal, Begum Rokeya’s *Sultana’s Dream* (1905/2013) envisioned a technocratic “Ladyland” governed by female scientists, signalling that anticolonial nationalism and feminist aspiration could be mutually constitutive.

What retrospective historiography dubs “first-wave” feminism coalesced around the struggle for legal personhood—property ownership, contracted labour, and, most visibly, suffrage. Western milestones such as the Seneca Falls Declaration (1848) and the ratification of the U.S. Nineteenth Amendment (1920) are well known, but parallel campaigns unfolded elsewhere: Egyptian women petitioned the *Majlis al-Ummah* for voting rights in 1919, and New Zealand Māori women secured suffrage simultaneously with Pākehā women in 1893 (Dalziel 2019). The intellectual architecture of this wave rested on liberal-humanist assumptions of abstract citizenship, a frame later critiqued for its inattentiveness to race and empire (Bhambra 2015).

Coined by Martha Weinman Lear (1968), the “second wave” reframed gender inequality as systemic rather than merely juridical. Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949/2011) provided its existential grammar—woman as “Other”—while Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) exposed the psychic costs of domestic ideology. Radical branches (e.g., Firestone 1970) argued that patriarchy is rooted in reproductive labour, whereas socialist feminists located women’s oppression within capitalist relations of production. Crucially, this period witnessed the rise of women-of-colour critiques: Combahee River Collective (1977) insisted that race, class, and sexuality constitute inseparable axes of analysis.

Building on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality, third-wave feminists rejected universal womanhood in favour of situational politics. Transfeminism foregrounded the rights of transgender women (Stryker 2006), while postcolonial scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) deconstructed the “Third-World woman” stereotype. Ecological and cyber-feminisms also emerged, linking gender justice to environmental sustainability and

digital autonomy. As Gupta (2013) observes, sensitivity to local specificities rather than a monolithic feminist standpoint became the era's hallmark.

Hashtag activism—#MeToo, #NiUnaMenos, #MosqueMeToo—signals a fourth wave centred on sexual violence, pay equity, and representational inclusivity, amplified by social media's networked publics (Banet-Weiser 2018). The wave's epistemic core is consent culture, interrogating power asymmetries in intimate and institutional relations alike. Critics caution, however, that platform capitalism can commodify "empowerment" and reproduce racialised labour hierarchies (Gill & Orgad 2022).

Some commentators identify a nascent fifth wave focused on structural power redistribution—e.g., Sophie Walker's post-2017 Women's Equality Party platform—which links feminist goals to climate justice, economic de-growth, and abolition of carceral systems (Mulvey 2018). Whether this marks a distinct epoch or an intensification of fourth-wave logics remains contested; what is clear is a renewed emphasis on cross-movement solidarity and policy-level transformation.

While the wave schema illuminates dominant concerns in Anglophone contexts, it risks marginalising continuous feminist activity in the Global South and among minoritised communities. Henry (2018) and Lewis (2020) therefore advocate a "polyphonic chronology" that tracks overlapping currents rather than discrete surges. This study adopts that advice by situating Islamic feminist activism—often sidelined in wave narratives—as a parallel, not derivative, tradition.

Across its shifting modalities, feminism has pursued a common telos: the dismantling of gendered structures that constrain human flourishing. Yet as the foregoing survey indicates, strategies have ranged from liberal petitioning for legal reform to radical re-imaginings of kinship, labour, and ecology. Recognising both continuities and ruptures is essential for evaluating the contemporary claim—central to this article—that Qur'ānic gender ethics might, if fully implemented, satisfy the emancipatory aims historically pursued by diverse feminist movements.

## **6. Types of Feminism**

Feminist thought is not a single doctrine but a constellation of theories that diagnose gendered power from different vantage points. The typology below is selective rather than exhaustive, yet it captures the schools of thought most frequently cited in contemporary scholarship. Each perspective offers analytic tools relevant to this article's interrogation of Qur'ānic gender ethics.

Articulated by Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ain't I a Woman?" speech and formalised in the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), Black feminism analyses interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Writers such as bell hooks (1981) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) critique earlier feminist waves for centring white middle-class experience while civil-rights platforms often marginalised women's issues. Core concepts—*intersectionality* (Crenshaw 1989) and the "matrix of domination" (Collins 2000)—expose how Black women's oppression cannot be reduced to additive categories but emerges from their simultaneity.

Cultural feminists—e.g., Carol Gilligan (1982) and Mary Daly (1978)—argue that women's socialisation produces ethical orientations (care, relationality) undervalued in patriarchal cultures. Their programme seeks to re-value these traits in law, education, and aesthetics. Critics such as hooks (2000) caution that celebrating a "female essence" can reinforce biological determinism and exclude trans and non-binary identities.

Ecofeminists—from Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974) to Vandana Shiva (1988) and Greta Gaard (2015)—contend that the logics that subordinate women mirror those that degrade ecosystems: instrumental rationality, commodification, and militarised extraction. Theorists differentiate between spiritual ecofeminism, which posits an ontological kinship between women and nature, and materialist ecofeminism, which analyses how global capitalism disproportionately burdens women with environmental harm.

Rooted in Enlightenment individualism, liberal feminism seeks incremental reform—property rights, suffrage, anti-discrimination statutes—within existing political frameworks. Canonical voices include John Stuart Mill (1869) and, more recently, Susan Moller Okin (1989). Critics note its tendency to universalise Western legal norms and underplay structural economic constraints (Fraser 1997).

Marxist feminists such as Alexandra Kollontai (1909) and Silvia Federici (2012) argue that women's oppression is inseparable from capitalist relations of production and reproduction. Heidi Hartmann's (1979) "unhappy marriage" thesis posits that patriarchy and capitalism are mutually reinforcing systems requiring joint dismantling. Socialist feminists add a global-political-economy lens, foregrounding unpaid care labour and the feminisation of poverty.

Building on Black feminist analytics, multiracial and postcolonial theorists—Chandra Mohanty (2003), Sara Ahmed (2017), Amina Mama (2020)—foreground the colonial and racial genealogy of gender hierarchies. They critique both liberal-universalist and radical paradigms for erasing geopolitical power asymmetries, insisting that feminism must be geographically and culturally situated.

Radical feminists—Shulamith Firestone (1970), Andrea Dworkin (1981)—locate women's oppression in the patriarchal control of sexuality and reproduction, calling for a wholesale reorganisation of kinship and economic systems. While their critique of pornography and compulsory heterosexuality sparked transformative legal debates, detractors argue that some radical positions homogenise male experience and insufficiently account for race and class diversity (Brown-Miller 1999).

These theoretical strands share a commitment to dismantling gendered domination but diverge in diagnosing its root causes and prescribing remedies—liberal inclusion, structural overhaul, cultural re-valuation, or ecological re-alignment. Recognising this plurality is essential for assessing whether Qur'ānic gender ethics, as interpreted in this study, converge with, diverge from, or transcend any single feminist paradigm.

## **7. Why Feminist Movements Have Proliferated**

Feminism has flourished wherever gender hierarchy has been institutionalised—and that has been virtually everywhere. Throughout the twentieth century, sociologists, historians, and legal scholars documented how patriarchy shaped labour markets, property regimes, family law, theology, and knowledge production (Walby 1990; Lerner 1986). In most societies male guardianship or its functional equivalent restricted women's mobility, contractual capacity, and bodily autonomy, generating what Kate Manne (2017) later theorised as "misogynistic enforcement mechanisms." The consequence was a pervasive sense of *ontological enclosure*: women were denied not only resources but also full social personhood. Feminist movements arose as analytic frameworks and political coalitions to dismantle these multilayered constraints.

Historical testimony underscores that this inequity was never "natural" but manufactured. In the Anglo-American world Sarah Grimké's 1837 *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* indicted

men for “selfish gratification” at women’s expense; Catherine Macaulay’s earlier *Letters on Education* (1790) argued that women’s perceived inferiority stemmed from enforced ignorance, not biology. Similar critiques emerged outside Europe: Begum Rokeya’s Bengali polemics (1905) exposed how colonial patriarchy coupled with indigenous customs to deny Muslim girls schooling, while Nana Asma’u’s West-African pedagogy linked Qur’ānic literacy to civic participation (Boyd & Mack 2000). These voices reveal that feminist consciousness did not require a single geographic epicentre; it materialised wherever patriarchal institutions foreclosed women’s aspirations.

Philosophical canons themselves propagated misogyny, providing ideological ballast for gender hierarchy. Aristotle’s characterisation of women as “defective males,” Schopenhauer’s dictum that women are “by nature meant to obey,” and Nietzsche’s quip that woman was “God’s second mistake” normalised subordination in ostensibly universal reflections on virtue and politics. Religious jurisprudence likewise codified asymmetry: *Manusmriti* located female autonomy firmly under male tutelage, and medieval *fiqh* manuals treated a woman’s legal testimony as half that of a man’s in certain civil matters (Ali 2022). The cumulative weight of these discourses rendered patriarchy a taken-for-granted social ontology, prompting feminist theorists from Mary Astell (1700) to Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) to expose their socio-historical contingency.

Economic transformations intensified the contradiction between women’s productive labour and their civic exclusion. Industrial capitalism drew women into factories while denying them property or parental rights; colonial plantation economies relied on enslaved or indentured female labour without extending political voice (Lewis 2020). Marxist feminists therefore located women’s oppression in capitalist relations of production, while liberal feminists targeted the coverture laws that merged married women’s legal identities with those of their husbands. Across ideological divides, the shared insight was that gender inequity is structurally reproduced, not individually willed.

By the late twentieth century, the cumulative force of these critiques produced a global, if heterogeneous, feminist insurgency. The UN Decade for Women (1975-85) codified gender equality as a human-rights norm; Black, Indigenous, postcolonial, and Islamic feminists complicated Eurocentric assumptions, insisting that race, empire, and theology mediate patriarchy’s local forms. Together, thinkers such as bell hooks, Andrea Dworkin, Audre Lorde, Nancy Fraser, and Malala Yousafzai reformulated feminism as a pluriversal project—simultaneously liberal, socialist, radical, ecological, and theological—dedicated to dismantling intersecting structures of domination.

In short, feminist movements did not blossom because women wished to imitate men, nor because of an abstract “battle of the sexes.” They proliferated because tangible legal, economic, and epistemic architectures relegated half of humanity to secondary status. If those architectures had not existed—or if they were wholly dismantled by alternative normative systems such as a rigorously applied Qur’ānic gender ethic—organised feminism would indeed lose its *raison d’être*. The persistence of feminist mobilisation across cultures is therefore empirical evidence that structural gender inequities endure, making the evaluative question posed by this study—whether full implementation of Islamic gender principles could render feminism unnecessary—both urgent and consequential.

## **8. What Islam Has Laid Down About the Women in General?**

The argument that Islam possesses an intrinsic gender-justice framework rests on two premises. First, the Qur’ān self-identifies as a guide “for all people” (*li-n-nās*) rather than a community-specific charter (2 : 185). Second, pre-Islamic Arabia, like most societies of the era,

entrenched female infanticide, marital commodification, and absolute male guardianship—practices the Qur’ān and the Prophet Muhammad explicitly moved to abolish. Below, each doctrinal right is summarised with its scriptural warrant and its point of convergence with major feminist claims.

### **8.1 Freedom of Conscience**

*“There is no compulsion in religion; truth stands out from error” (2 : 256).*

Women, like men, may choose or reject any faith tradition. This principle anticipates liberal-feminist demands for bodily and intellectual autonomy.

### **8.2 Spiritual and Moral Parity**

*“Muslim men **and** women, believing men **and** women ... for all of them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward” (33 : 35).*

Accountability and reward are gender-neutral, refuting notions of innate female moral deficiency found in Aristotle or Augustine. The verse echoes Wollstonecraft’s argument that virtue is a human, not a male, capacity.

### **8.3 Right to Knowledge**

Prophetic maxim: *“Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim”* (Ibn Mājah 224). Early authorities record female jurists such as ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr issuing legal opinions, paralleling contemporary feminist insistence on educational access as the pre-condition for civic agency.

### **8.4 Economic Agency and Inheritance**

*“To men is a portion of what they earn and to women a portion of what they earn” (4 : 32).*

Women may own, inherit, and manage property independently; husbands remain financially accountable regardless of wives’ wealth. Materialist feminists locate economic autonomy at the core of liberation, a claim Qur’ānic verse already codifies.

### **8.5 Marital Consent and Dissolution**

A well-attested ḥadīth narrates the Prophet annulling (at her request) a marriage arranged without the woman’s consent, then reinstating it only after she freely agreed. Forced marriage is therefore cultural, not Islamic. The Qur’ān also legitimises *khul’*, a woman-initiated divorce (2 : 229), aligning with feminist calls for symmetrical exit rights.

### **8.6 Dignity in Domestic Relations**

Multiple reports rank maternal care first in filial piety (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5971) and declare *“The best of you are those best to their wives.”* Such narrations reframe household labour as a shared ethical obligation, concordant with contemporary advocacy for care-work recognition.

### **8.7 Protection from Harm**

*“Live with them in kindness; if you dislike them, it may be that you dislike something in which God has placed much good” (4 : 19).*

Hostility toward a spouse is proscribed; emotional and physical safety are religious duties, paralleling modern campaigns against gender-based violence.

## 8.8 Eschatological Recognition

Traditions describing righteous women entering Paradise prior to men invert prevailing earthly hierarchies, signalling that spiritual status is not gender-ranked.

## 8.9 Synthesis and Relevance to the Research Question

Collectively, these provisions articulate a comprehensive gender ethic centuries before modern rights discourse. Yet, as Section 5 demonstrated, juridical and cultural accretions frequently obstruct their implementation. The existence of scriptural guarantees therefore does not automatically nullify feminist activism; rather, it supplies a normative arsenal that Islamic feminists mobilise to challenge patriarchal practice. Our empirical inquiry tests precisely this gap between textual mandate and social realisation, assessing whether full enactment of Qur'ānic rights would obviate the need for a separate feminist movement.

## 9. Is a Contemporary Feminist Movement Still Required?

Qur'ān 2 : 185 designates the Revelation as “guidance for all people,” and 21 : 107 portrays the Prophet Muḥammad as “a mercy to every world.” From these verses one might infer that rigorous adherence to Islamic norms would exhaust the agenda of gender justice, rendering feminist mobilisation superfluous. Our data, however, advise a more cautious conclusion.

First, scriptural universality has never guaranteed universal compliance. Section 5 documented robust implementation gaps—from Moroccan family-court waivers that override statutory minimum-marriage ages (Ahmed et al. 2024) to Iranian judges who restrict women's *khul'* rights under the rubric of “expediency” (Mir-Hosseini 2019). These gaps are not theological abstractions; they are socio-legal artefacts reproduced by state bureaucracies, local customs, and patriarchal jurisprudence.

Second, Islamic feminism—far from being redundant—has provided the hermeneutic and activist machinery for contesting such gaps. As Fatima Seedat (2013) argues, its “double bind” lies in simultaneously invoking and interrogating scripture, a strategy that has yielded concrete reforms (e.g., Pakistan's anti-honour-killing legislation of 2016). Dismissing Islamic feminism as ineffectual overlooks its demonstrable role as a *translation mechanism* between Qur'ānic principle and legal codification.

Third, feminist theory supplies analytic vocabularies—intersectionality, care ethics, political-economy critique—that illuminate dimensions of gendered harm insufficiently addressed by classical jurisprudence, such as marital rape or the feminisation of precarious labour. Engaging these vocabularies does not negate Islamic ethics; it extends their application to contemporary structures unknown to seventh-century Arabia.

Accordingly, the necessity of a feminist movement is an empirical, not theological, question. Wherever institutional bottlenecks, cultural practices, or economic systems curtail women's Qur'ānic rights, organised advocacy remains essential—whether it operates under a secular, Islamic, or hybrid banner.

## 10. Conclusion

This study set out to test a provocative hypothesis: Would faithfully implementing Qur'ānic gender directives render modern feminist activism unnecessary? Through hermeneutic analysis, thematic coding, and socio-legal synthesis, we reached three interlocking findings:

1. Normative Convergence. Key Qur'ānic verses and *ṣaḥīḥ* ḥadīth articulate moral, educational, economic, and marital rights that align closely with foundational feminist claims.
2. Implementation Deficit. Robust evidence demonstrates a persistent gap between those scriptural norms and their juridical or cultural realisation across Muslim-majority contexts.
3. Activist Mediation. Islamic and transnational feminist movements function as indispensable conduits, converting textual principle into enforceable rights and monitoring their uptake.

Historically, feminism in its various guises emerged whenever structural forces denied women the dignity conferred upon them *in principle*—a dynamic visible in both fourteenth-century Europe and seventh-century Arabia. The Prophet's abolition of female infanticide and endorsement of women's contractual agency can rightly be read as proto-feminist interventions, yet the later re-entrenchment of patriarchal norms confirms that textual guarantees must be actively safeguarded.

Implication: Islamic scripture offers a comprehensive ethical architecture for gender justice, but the edifice stands unfinished without the scaffolding of feminist praxis. Rather than viewing the two as mutually exclusive, the evidence supports a symbiotic model: feminist activism—especially when grounded in Qur'ānic ethics—remains necessary until, and unless, institutional mechanisms fully embody the rights already inscribed in the sacred text.

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