

Secularism and the Muslim Women Question: A Critique of Secularism as a Frame of Reference for Gender Equality

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Abstract

The study of the theories of secularization has been marked by extensive debates about the shortfalls of religion and its inability to keep up with theories of gender equality. In these debates, considerably less attention has been given to the theoretical premises associating secularism with gender equality and the implications of their interrelation. The present study seeks to undertake a re-examination of secularism as an emancipatory frame of reference for women, particularly but not exclusively Muslim ones, by defining the concept within its complex and changing contexts, and in light of recent feminist critiques of the secular narrative. It also aims to investigate the problematic positionality of Muslim women in the secular discourse as a way of shedding more light into the limitations and ideological contradictions of the premised interdependence between secularism and gender equality. The paper proposes that more effort needs to be made on recasting the secular narrative on gender equality and the place of Muslim women within it. Consequently, the study seeks to bring more scholarly attention to the gender dimensions of secularism and its renewed significance as a political, social and cultural force that impacts Muslim women's lives in the West and Muslim majority societies as well.

Keywords: secularism, gender equality, sexual difference, Muslim women, the veil, secular patriarchy.