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Research paper

# From Tehran to Taksim: Constraint, Strategy, and Hybrid Repertoires of Islamic Feminism

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how state–religion configurations shape Islamic feminist praxis in Iran and Turkey. Drawing on postcolonial, intersectional, and Islamic feminist frameworks, the article traces how women mobilise for gender justice through legal advocacy, textual reinterpretation, grassroots organising, digital activism, and coalition-building. Based on a comparative analysis of textual sources, activist writings, and digital campaigns, and informed by ethical engagement with feminist movements, the study argues that Islamic feminists transform constraint into strategy by crafting hybrid repertoires — adaptive, multifaceted practices that navigate patriarchal authority and religious discourse. In theocratic Iran, activists advance cautious legal and textual interventions within Shari'a frameworks, while in Turkey, oscillation between secularist exclusion and Islamist co-optation fosters hybrid strategies including cross-ideological alliances and online feminist publics. These repertoires are locally grounded yet transnationally connected, revealing Islamic feminism as a dynamic field of praxis that reimagines gender justice beyond secular frameworks. By demonstrating how constraint becomes a generative condition for feminist action, this study reframes Islamic feminisms in Iran and Turkey as central to global feminist theory rather than peripheral variations.

**Keywords:** Islamic feminism, hybrid repertoires, constraint and strategy, Iran, Turkey

In late December 2018, mass demonstrations erupted across major Sudanese cities in response to worsening economic conditions. Over the following months, particularly during the weekend of 6–7 April, these protests escalated into a nationwide uprising against President Omar al-Bashir's decades-long rule. Sudanese men and women took to the streets, united in their opposition to a corrupt regime. One moment from these protests captured global attention: a viral video of 22-year-old Sudanese woman, Alaa Salah, dressed in a flowing white dress and hijab, standing on top of a car and leading chants of 'Revolution.' Surrounded by supporters echoing her calls, Salah appeared strong, defiant, and joyful (O'Grady, 2019). Just weeks later, across the continent in Pakistan, another image of activism emerged—this one marked by tragedy. Women's rights advocate Mena Mangal, a vocal proponent of girls' education and women's employment, was shot and killed in broad daylight. Mangal repeatedly sought police protection before her death. At her funeral, her grieving mother posed a painful question: 'Why is it so easy in this society [for men] to keep killing women they disagree with?' (Young-Powell, 2019).

These contrasting narratives underscore how Muslim women's struggles cannot be collapsed into a single story of oppression or liberation. They also highlight the stakes of feminist politics in Muslim societies, where

agency is forged at the intersection of power, faith, and resistance. This article addresses this challenge by examining how Islamic feminists navigate political and religious authority in the pursuit of gender justice. Focusing on two distinct but instructive cases — Iran and Turkey — it traces how women transform constraint into strategy through hybrid repertoires of activism that range from textual reinterpretation and legal advocacy to grassroots mobilisation, digital storytelling, and coalition-building. By comparing these contexts, the article argues that Islamic feminisms are plural, situated practices that complicate universalist assumptions in feminist theory and expand its conceptual horizons.

Debates about Muslim women's agency sit at the heart of some of the most enduring tensions in feminist theory. Too often, Western liberal feminism has portrayed Muslim women as passive victims awaiting rescue, reinforcing cultural essentialism and universalist assumptions (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1988). Yet Muslim women's struggles for justice are neither uniform nor peripheral. They are diverse, context-specific, and shaped by the complex interplay of history, politics, religion, and social norms (Roth, 2003).

Postcolonial and Islamic feminist scholars have long argued for frameworks that recognise agency within religious and cultural systems (Kandiyoti, 1987; Mahmood, 2004; Badran, 2009). Islamic feminism situates feminist claims within Islamic sources, institutions, and discourses to contest patriarchal authority (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Tuksal, 2001). This article adopts that perspective by treating theology as a political practice and showing how distinct state–religion configurations shape feminist strategies. Using a sociopolitical lens that integrates theological dimensions, it examines how Islamic feminists negotiate authority, state power, and global gender justice discourses.

The selection of Iran and Turkey is deliberate: both are Muslim-majority societies but embody starkly different state–religion arrangements — theocratic versus secular–conservative hybrid — making them ideal paired cases for analysing how Islamic feminism adapts to divergent political and religious structures. In Iran, activists operate within a theocratic system, framing demands in religious terms. In Turkey, feminists navigate secular–conservative oscillations, forming fragile alliances with secular actors and adapting to shifting political contexts. Taken together, these cases offer comparative vantage points for understanding Islamic feminism's plural pathways from Tehran to Taksim.

This article advances the field in three ways. First, it provides a parallel, in-depth comparison of Iran and Turkey, showing how state–religion structures shape feminist strategies. Second, it bridges sociopolitical and theological perspectives, illustrating how women mobilise both institutional and religious resources. Third, it foregrounds the concept of hybrid repertoires — the adaptive, multifaceted strategies Islamic feminists craft by weaving together textual reinterpretation, legal advocacy, grassroots mobilisation, coalition-building, and digital activism. These repertoires reveal how constraint becomes a generative site of feminist creativity. Collectively, these interventions reframe Islamic feminisms in Iran and Turkey as dynamic and theoretically generative for global feminist debates.

This article is guided by the following research question: How do different state–religion configurations shape the strategies of Islamic feminists in Iran and Turkey? More specifically, I ask: (1) What institutional, legal, and discursive opportunities and constraints do Islamic feminists face in each context? (2) How do activists mobilise within and against these structures through textual reinterpretation, legal reform, and grassroots organising? (3) In what ways do these context-specific strategies expand feminist theory beyond secularist paradigms? Anchored in these questions, the comparative analysis highlights both the distinctiveness of each case and their shared contribution to global feminist debates.

The article proceeds in five parts. The first situates the study within existing debates by reviewing postcolonial and intersectional feminist theories alongside key strands of Islamic feminist scholarship and praxis, clarifying how these perspectives collectively frame the analysis. The second section outlines the analytic approach and comparative design, clarifying case selection and data sources. The third and fourth sections provide detailed analyses of Turkey and Iran, tracing how activists negotiate state–religion configurations to pursue gender justice. The fifth section synthesises the findings in comparative perspective, highlighting broader implications for feminist theory. The conclusion underscores how Islamic feminisms in Iran and Turkey exemplify plural, context-sensitive pathways that expand the horizons of transnational feminist scholarship.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Postcolonial and intersectional feminist lenses

Postcolonial feminist theory provides a critical lens for analysing Islamic feminism because it directs us to interrogate the dominance of Western feminist universalism (Abu-Lughod, 2002). For example, Mohanty (1988), critiques portrayals of 'Third World Women' as passive victims of culture, tradition, or religion. She argues that such representations erase agency and obscure the political and structural forces shaping women's lives. These

 

critiques situate Islamic feminisms as practices that assert legitimacy and transformative potential without reliance on secular or Western paradigms (Badran, 2009; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Cooke, 2001).

Intersectionality, likewise, deepens the analysis by examining how gender intersects with religion, class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1991). In Muslim-majority contexts, political authorities regulate religious expression in ways that profoundly shape women's access to education, employment, and public life (Joseph, 1996, 2000). In Turkey, for instance, Kemalist secularism excluded women with headscarves from universities and state employment, while in Iran, compulsory veiling reshaped women's legal status and professional opportunities. Despite their differences, both regimes reveal how the state inscribes patriarchal control on women's bodies, making them central to national identity and political authority (Arat, 1998, 2010; Kandiyoti, 1989). Intersectional analysis shows that patriarchy, whether under secular or religious rule, operates through state law and social policy, while women respond with diverse strategies of negotiation, resistance, and activism.

Together, postcolonial and intersectional perspectives provide the analytical lenses for this study. They foreground context, power, and multiplicity, challenging the assumption that secularist or Western feminism represents the normative standard and instead emphasising contextual, plural feminist practices.

### Engaging Islamic feminist scholarship and praxis

While postcolonial and intersectional perspectives anchor the analysis, this study also engages Islamic feminism as both a scholarly debate and a lived praxis. By 'Islamic feminists,' I refer to activists and scholars who ground their claims for gender justice in Islamic sources, ethics, and institutions, reinterpreting these traditions to contest patriarchal authority. Their praxis differs from that of secular feminists, who often mobilise rights-based or international conventions. Both currents frequently converge around shared goals—such as ending gender-based violence or expanding access to education—but diverge in sources of legitimacy and discursive strategies. For Islamic feminists, re-reading the *Qur'an* (Islam's sacred text), the *Hadith* (sayings and actions of the *Prophet Muhammad*), and *Shari'a* (Islamic legal and ethical principles) provides an idiom of reform that resonates with religious publics and carries political credibility in contexts where Islamic authority structures shape law and governance (Ali, 2016; Wadud, 1999, Barlas, 2019).

It is important to note that I do not treat Islamic feminism as a methodological 'framework' applied to activists. Instead, it constitutes the object of analysis: the movements, strategies, and reinterpretations through which women in Iran and Turkey claim rights and negotiate authority. At the same time, Islamic feminist scholarship (Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2019; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Tuksal, 2001) provides a vital interlocutor for this research. The study reads activist praxis in dialogue with these intellectual currents, situating empirical observations in broader debates over the role of religion in feminist politics.

### Theological and sociopolitical strands

Islamic feminist thought itself reveals two interrelated strands. The theological strand emphasises reclaiming sacred texts from patriarchal interpretation. Scholars such as Fatima Mernissi (1991, 2011), Amina Wadud (1999), and Asma Barlas (2019) argue that gender inequality is not intrinsic to the Qur'an or Hadith but emerges from male-dominated exegetical traditions. Wadud's notion of 'gender jihad' reframes gender justice as a spiritual and moral obligation, situating equality within Islam itself.

The sociopolitical strand underscores engagement with law, institutions, and social structures (Mahmood, 2004; Mojab, 1998). Aktaş (2018, 2019) critiques both secularist and conservative states for policing women with headscarves in Turkey, while Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006) links Qur'anic reinterpretation with legal reform campaigns such as Iran's *One Million Signatures* initiative, a nationwide grassroots effort launched in 2006 to collect signatures demanding changes to discriminatory family laws (Khorasani, 2009). Together, these strands demonstrate that reinterpretation and activism reinforce one another, highlighting the adaptive and context-sensitive nature of Islamic feminist praxis.

### Debates and critiques

Islamic feminism remains contested. Secular feminists warn that grounding reform in Islam risks legitimising patriarchal authority, while religious conservatives depict feminist reinterpretation as foreign or Westernised (Moghissi, 1999; Shaikh, 2003). Proponents, however, argue that Islamic feminism is neither a concession to patriarchy nor an imported ideology, but a strategic form of legitimacy that enables reform within dominant religious discourses. Framing gender justice in Islamic terms has allowed Iranian feminists to secure incremental legal reforms, while Turkish feminists leverage religious authority alongside coalition-building with secular groups.

 

By situating these debates within postcolonial and intersectional analysis, this study treats Islamic feminism as a plural, contested, and generative praxis. It is not simply reactive to secularism or conservatism, but constitutive of new feminist possibilities forged within specific state–religion configurations.

Taken together, postcolonial, intersectional, and Islamic feminist perspectives provide the analytical lens through which this article compares Iran and Turkey, illuminating how gendered power relations are constituted and contested across different political, religious, and social contexts. These perspectives also inform the comparative design and case selection that follow, shaping the methodological approach underpinning this study.

## ANALYTIC APPROACH

### The value of comparing Turkey and Iran

This study adopts a comparative design because it enables analysis of context-specific strategies while illuminating both parallels and divergences in feminist mobilisation across distinct state–religion configurations. Rather than seeking statistical generalisability, the study prioritises interpretive depth and contextual understanding (Smit et al., 2023; Webb, 2026; Carr & Incetas, 2018).

By comparing two Muslim-majority countries with sharply contrasting historical and political trajectories, this study can better analyse how feminists navigate distinct socio-political contexts (Diaz et al., 2021). Iran's post-1979 Islamic Republic institutionalises Shari'a, embedding clerical authority into state structures and enforcing specific religious interpretations. As the analysis reveals, Islamic feminists in this context advance women's rights by working within religiously sanctioned legal frameworks, employing strategies such as textual reinterpretation and grassroots mobilisation without overtly challenging theocratic authority.

Turkey, by contrast, embodies a legacy of militant secularism under the Kemalist state, later overlaid with the conservative governance of the *Justice and Development Party (JDP)*. The analysis reveals that here, Islamic feminists face dual pressures: exclusionary restrictions produced by *Kemalist secularism*, which sought to confine religion to the private sphere and exclude visibly pious women from education and public employment (Göle, 1997a; Çınar, 2008; Arat, 2010), and patriarchal norms entrenched in conservative Islamic culture. In response, activists navigate this context by forging selective alliances with secular feminists, underscoring the complex negotiation between religion, politics, and gender justice.

The comparative design of this study is structured around three analytic axes: (1) state–religion–gender configurations, (2) sites of feminist resistance, and (3) discursive strategies deployed by activists. These axes provide a consistent analytical lens through which to interpret both textual and visual sources, ensuring examination of each case at comparable levels: state policies and legal frameworks, grassroots mobilisation and activist spaces, and, lastly, the language and imagery through which feminist claims are articulated.

### Sources

This study draws on a wide range of secondary and primary sources to trace the evolution, strategies, and discursive formations of Islamic feminist activism in contemporary Iran and Turkey. Secondary materials — including scholarly literature, NGO reports, media articles, activist publications, and legal analyses — trace the historical evolution of Islamic feminism and illuminate policy debates, reform efforts, and transnational linkages.

Visual materials — including photographs of mosque protests, street demonstrations, and digitally circulated campaign images — are analysed as performative political texts. Drawing on visual discourse and semiotic approaches (Rose, 2016; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020), images are treated not merely as documentation but as sites where feminist claims are made visible through gesture, spatial positioning, religious symbolism, clothing, and embodied presence.

Images were selected through purposive sampling from activist archives, NGO websites, independent media platforms, and feminist digital campaigns. Selection criteria included: explicit articulation of gender-justice claims; engagement with religious symbolism or sacred space; and public circulation within activist networks.

Visual analysis attends to how bodies, religious symbols, slogans, and spatial arrangements construct political meaning. For example, photographs of women occupying mosque prayer spaces are read as embodied challenges to gendered religious authority, while images from the Feminist Night Walk are interpreted as visual performances of cross-ideological solidarity.

In addition to textual and visual sources, the study was informed by three exploratory, semi-structured interviews conducted with founders of young Islamic feminist initiatives in Turkey. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in organisational formation, digital feminist projects, and coalition-oriented activism. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol focusing on movement histories, activist trajectories, understandings of Islamic feminism, and strategic debates around coalition-building and

 

public engagement. Interviews were conducted in Turkish, recorded with informed consent, and anonymised where requested.

These interviews were not designed to be representative, nor are they analysed as empirical data in the findings. Rather, they provided contextual insight into organisational histories, activist vocabularies, and strategic debates, which informed the interpretive framing of publicly available materials. All analytical claims in the article are grounded primarily in textual, visual, and secondary sources.

### Researcher reflexivity and ethical considerations

This study is informed by the author's long-term engagement with Islamic feminist organisations and activist networks in Turkey. This sustained proximity to feminist organising shaped the interpretive lens, source selection, and analytical sensitivity to the ethical, political, and strategic dimensions of faith-based feminist praxis.

As a Muslim woman with a migratory trajectory and longstanding familiarity with both secular and religious feminist debates, the author approaches Islamic feminism not as an abstract theoretical object but as a lived political field. This positionality informs attention to coalition politics, digital feminist spaces, and embodied protest practices, as well as sensitivity to the ways feminist legitimacy is constructed within religious publics.

Rather than positioning activist engagement as empirical data, this study treats it as an interpretive orientation that informs how feminist strategies, discourses, and repertoires are read and contextualised. In this sense, analysis is situated within feminist reflexive scholarship that recognises knowledge production as embedded within political struggle rather than detached from it.

Researching feminist mobilisation under authoritarian conditions raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding surveillance, repression, and the potential risks faced by activists. In the Iranian context, where feminist activism is subject to censorship, criminalisation, and arrest, this study relies exclusively on publicly available materials, anonymised accounts, and already circulating activist texts in order to avoid exposing individuals to further risk.

Throughout the research process, the study adopts an ethic of feminist solidarity and political care, recognising that scholarly analysis is never politically neutral in contested contexts. Feminist knowledge is treated as co-produced within struggles for justice rather than extracted from them.

## ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN TURKEY: RESISTING PATRIARCHY, NEGOTIATING SECULARISM, AND BRIDGING DIVIDES

Islamic feminism in Turkey emerged in response to the legacies of *Kemalist secularism*, which from the 1920s sought to modernise the nation by secularising law, abolishing the caliphate, and restricting religion in public life. These reforms expanded opportunities for secular women but marginalised pious women, especially those wearing headscarves. Policies in the late 20th century, culminating in the 1997 'February 28 Process,' banned headscarves in universities and public offices, forcing religious women out of education and professional life (Göle, 1997a, 1997b; Çınar, 2008). Islamic feminists framed these restrictions as a gendered form of state violence (Aktaş, 2018; Tuksal, 2001). As elsewhere (Scott, 2007), state secularism, while ostensibly emancipatory, generated new exclusions that Islamic feminists turned into a platform for contesting patriarchal authority.

The rise of the *Justice and Development Party* (JDP) in 2002 altered the political context. The party lifted the headscarf ban and increased Muslim women's political representation. However, Islamic feminists have been critical of the JDP's state feminism, which simultaneously reinforced patriarchal norms through family law and gender-specific legislation. Thus, unlike in Iran—where feminists cautiously work within a theocracy—Turkey's Islamic feminists confront a dual context: they resist conservative co-optation while also rejecting secularist exclusion, crafting hybrid repertoires of activism. Below, I illustrate this hybridity with two examples, before demonstrating how local Islamic feminists engage with global feminist currents.

Prominent figures such as Cihan Aktaş deploy hybrid repertoires by critiquing both secularist bans on veiling and conservative prescriptions of modesty (Aktaş, 2018), while Hidayet Tuksal grounds gender equality in Qur'anic interpretation and legal activism (Tuksal, 2001). Organisations such as *Kadına Şiddete Karşı Müslümanlar, Havle,* and *Women for Women's Human Rights* (WWHR) extend this activism into grassroots spaces by supporting survivors of gender-based violence, offering legal literacy, and reinterpreting Islamic texts with a gender-just lens (Havle, 2023; WWHR, 2022). These efforts reveal how Islamic feminism in Turkey strategically navigates multiple ideological registers across varied domains—legal, religious, and grassroots—demonstrating its adaptability across shifting political contexts.

A distinctive feature of Turkish Islamic feminism is its strategic alliance with secular feminists. Despite ideological differences and historical mistrust, both camps resist state control over women's bodies, whether through secularist bans or conservative prescriptions. Younger generations in particular reject the state's efforts to divide Muslim and secular women, arguing that ending femicide and gender-based violence requires unity

 

across ideological lines. This collaboration is visible in events like the annual *Women's Day Night Walk* in Istanbul, where women with headscarves march alongside LGBTQ+ activists and secular feminists (Senkaya, 2015).

Images from the *Night Walk* reveal striking juxtapositions: women with headscarves beside activists waving rainbow flags, *Qur'anic* verses held aloft next to feminist slogans. These scenes remake *Taksim Square* into a shared arena of resistance, where secular and religious, queer and pious bodies converge. This hybridity shows how Turkish Islamic feminists refuse binary framings and, through coalition politics, expand the very meaning and scope of feminism in the public sphere.

Complementing these visible street mobilisations are less public but equally transformative forms of activism that unfold online. One of the most influential is *Reçel* ('Jam'), a pioneering feminist blog created by and for young Muslim women in Turkey (Reçel Blog, n.d.). Writing under pseudonyms, contributors use the platform to share deeply personal narratives about divorce, family pressures, sexuality, and the everyday negotiations of faith and gender norms. The blog's name — evoking the domestic act of *making jam* — is deliberately re-signified, turning a symbol of women's domestic confinement into a metaphor for producing feminist knowledge and collective reflection.

By transforming intimate experiences into public discourse, *Reçel* disrupts the boundary between the private and the political, creating an alternative feminist public sphere for religiously observant women who may feel excluded from mainstream secular feminist spaces (Gökarıksel, 2018; Kolakkadan, 2024; Deiri, 2025). In doing so, it extends Islamic feminist activism into the digital realm. There, solidarity, critical reflection, and consciousness-raising occur through storytelling and shared experience. As in public protests like the *Night Walk*, digital platforms like *Reçel* illustrate how Turkish Islamic feminists develop hybrid repertoires of activism that bridge online and offline spaces and build solidarities across ideological divides.

While grounding their activism in local contexts, Turkish Islamic feminists adapt global feminist thought. A central figure in this transnational genealogy is Amina Wadud, an African American Islamic feminist scholar whose work has profoundly shaped contemporary debates on gender and religious authority. Wadud gained global attention in March 2005 when she became the first woman to lead a mixed-gender Friday prayer, a bold act that challenged deeply entrenched patriarchal norms within Islamic practice (Wigglesworth, 2008; Al Jazeera, 2005). Although the *Qur'an* contains no explicit prohibition against women serving as imams, Islamic traditions historically restrict this role to men, enforcing gender segregation within mosques and relegating women to marginal spaces — upstairs galleries, behind curtains, or side entrances.

Islamic feminists contest this spatial and symbolic marginalisation by invoking examples such as the *Kaaba,* Islam's most sacred mosque in *Mecca*, where men and women of all social and ethnic backgrounds pray side by side during the *Hajj*, the annual pilgrimage. By highlighting this precedent, they argue that gender integration in worship is not only permissible but deeply rooted in Islamic practice itself (Wadud, 2006).

Wadud's act was both groundbreaking and controversial, provoking intense backlash — including death threats — from conservative circles. Yet it also inspired a wave of feminist reinterpretation and similar acts of resistance across the Muslim world, from North America to Europe, where women began leading mixed-gender congregations and founding inclusive mosques (Olivera, 2007; Steffensen, 2017). This transnational momentum reverberates in Turkey as well. Drawing on Wadud's example and the broader concept of *gender jihad* — the pursuit of gender justice through Islamic frameworks — groups like *Kadınlar Camilerde* ('Women in Mosques') challenge women's exclusion from sacred spaces (Alyanak, 2019). Their activism goes beyond discourse and takes the form of embodied resistance: women enter prominent mosques, occupy central prayer areas traditionally reserved for men, refuse to remain behind curtains or in segregated corners, and insist that the mosque belongs equally to women (Saraçlar, 2021).

By contesting not only physical exclusion but also cultural narratives that confine women to the private sphere, they reclaim mosques as spaces of gender justice. What makes this activism particularly powerful — and unsettling for both conservative publics and state authorities — is that its critique emerges from within Islamic theology itself, rather than a secular feminist standpoint (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Wadud, 2006). Because these women ground their demands in Qur'anic principles of equality and justice, their claims cannot be easily dismissed as 'Western' or 'secular,' nor countered by invoking a simple secular–religious divide (Badran, 2009; Mahmood, 2004).

This theological grounding grants their activism greater legitimacy in the eyes of many Muslim communities and enables them to spread feminist consciousness among women who might otherwise reject feminist discourse framed as external or foreign. In this sense, Turkish Islamic feminism reworks transnational ideas into local strategies, demonstrating how global feminist discourses become tools for reimagining gender justice within specific national struggles.

Operating at the crossroads of secular exclusion and religious conservatism, Turkish Islamic feminists craft hybrid strategies — from courtroom advocacy to street protests — that transform constraints into opportunities for empowerment (Malekian, Rulli & Bas 2024; Heinrich Böll Foundation Turkey 2022; Bianet 2025; Nawa

 

2023). Their activism demonstrates that Islamic feminism in Turkey is not a derivative or reactive local politics but a generative force: one that both critiques authoritarianism and builds new forms of coalition, making Turkey a compelling and instructive case of pluralist feminist praxis in the Muslim world.

## ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN IRAN: NEGOTIATING THEOCRACY, REINTERPRETING TEXTS, AND ADVOCATING GENDER JUSTICE

Women's activism in Iran has long reflected tensions between modernisation, religion, and political legitimacy. Under the *Pahlavi* monarchy, top-down reforms such as unveiling mandates were framed as modernisation but alienated many religious women (Najmabadi, 2005; Sedghi, 2007). The 1979 Islamic Revolution transformed this dynamic: veiled women became central to revolutionary activism, positioning Islam as a source of anti-colonial and gendered resistance (Paidar, 1997; Afary, 2009). Archival accounts and contemporaneous images show women mobilising collectively in public space, their mass participation signaling both resistance to authoritarian state control and the assertion of religious and gendered identities (Moghadam, 2003; Hoodfar, 2001). Far from passive subjects of state policy, these women acted as visible political agents, embodying the intersection of faith, gender, and dissent amid national upheaval.

However, the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic institutionalised patriarchal *Shari'a*, enforcing mandatory veiling, restricting public participation, and embedding inequality in family law. This contradictory legacy illustrates how state Islam simultaneously mobilised women as revolutionary agents while subsequently constraining them as citizens.

Key figures such as Mir-Hosseini (2013) and Shahla Sherkat exemplify the complementary modes through which Iranian Islamic feminism operates. Mir-Hosseini's scholarly work interrogates family law to expose patriarchal interpretations and propose egalitarian readings of *Shari'a*, advancing reform from within the realm of legal and theological scholarship. Sherkat, by contrast, used *Zanan* magazine to carve out a rare public sphere for debate on divorce, custody, and polygyny, translating these intellectual arguments into accessible discourse under the constraints of censorship (IranWire, 2023; International Women's Media Foundation, n.d.). Together, their interventions show how Islamic feminist praxis in Iran bridges elite scholarship and popular media, weaving intellectual critique with public engagement. The very survival of *Zanan* until its ban illustrates how feminist discourse continually negotiates legitimacy by adopting the idioms of theocratic authority while pushing its boundaries.

Islamic feminists in Iran have pursued incremental legal reforms framed within Islamic legitimacy. In the 1990s–2000s, activists pushed for marriage contract stipulations (limiting polygyny, granting rights to education and employment) and modest reforms in divorce and custody rights (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, 2022; Paidar, 1997). Over forty women's organisations and numerous periodicals emerged, using the language of Islam to argue for justice while avoiding explicit 'feminist' labels to evade repression (Najmabadi, 2005). Here, avoidance of the feminist label does not signal ideological rejection but rather a tactical move: by embedding reformist claims in *Qur'anic* justice, activists carved out survival space within authoritarian constraints.

Grassroots efforts such as the *One Million Signatures Campaign* (2006–2008) mobilised thousands to demand family law reform, presenting demands as consistent with Islamic values of justice and fairness (Khorasani, 2009). Despite arrests and censorship, the campaign blocked regressive proposals and built enduring activist networks. The campaign demonstrates how Islamic feminism transforms constraint into strategy: the very limits imposed by the state compelled activists to reframe legal reform as faithful adherence to Islam rather than subversive resistance.

Other initiatives, such as grassroots campaigns against child marriage, also framed their demands through *Qur'anic* ethics of justice, demonstrating how everyday struggles become sites of reform that extend beyond urban intellectual circles (Paidar, 1997; Mir-Hosseini, 2006). Islamic feminists have also opposed compulsory veiling, not by rejecting veiling itself, but by arguing that coerced veiling is un-Islamic and undermines women's capacity to exercise religious choice (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010; Sadeghi, 2008a, 2008b). For them, veiling acquires religious legitimacy only when practiced voluntarily, as an act of faith rather than state compulsion (Moghissi, 1999; Najmabadi, 2005). This stance highlights how Islamic feminist discourse frames debates over women's bodies and attire: resisting state authoritarianism while insisting on women's interpretive authority within Islam.

The 2022 *Woman, Life, Freedom* (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) uprising represents a critical rupture in Iran's contemporary gender politics (Rouhi 2022). Triggered by the death of *Mahsa Jina Amini* in the custody of Iran's morality police, the movement mobilised women across class, ethnic, and generational lines in unprecedented ways. Women publicly removed their headscarves, cut their hair, and occupied urban spaces in acts of embodied defiance, directly challenging the state's gender regime.

While the movement is often framed as a secular feminist revolt against religious authority, its relationship to Islamic feminist trajectories is more complex. Many of its participants articulate their resistance in ethical terms

 

grounded in dignity, justice, and bodily autonomy — values that have long informed Islamic feminist critiques of compulsory veiling. As Mir-Hosseini (2011) and Sadeghi (2010) have argued, feminist resistance in post-revolutionary Iran has consistently challenged state control over women's bodies through competing religious, legal, and political discourses.

In this sense, *Woman, Life, Freedom* both extends and transforms earlier feminist struggles. It departs from cautious reformism and textual negotiation, embracing mass mobilisation and open confrontation. Yet it also draws on a longer genealogy of women's resistance to state regulation of gender and sexuality. The uprising thus reveals the limits of gradualist reform under theocratic rule while simultaneously affirming the ethical foundations upon which Islamic feminist critiques of gender authoritarianism have long rested.

Unlike Turkey, coalition-building with secular feminists is rare in Iran, where deep ideological divides shape feminist strategies and debates. Secular critics contend that Islamic feminism legitimises the regime by pursuing only limited reforms while reinforcing patriarchal gender norms (Moghadam, 2002; Moghissi, 1999). They argue that it risks entrenching hierarchies between 'good' veiled women and 'bad' secular or dissenting women, and that it can obscure class and ethnic differences within women's movements (Alak, 2015; Zia, 2009). Yet such critiques overlook how even incremental, Islamically framed reforms can disrupt the state's monopoly over religious authority**.** By inserting alternative hermeneutics into theocratic discourse, Islamic feminists transform the very constraints they face into sites of contestation, expanding the context of gender politics even without broad-based coalitions.

Operating under a theocratic regime, Iranian Islamic feminists rely on textual reinterpretation, cautious negotiation, and targeted reforms rather than mass coalitions. These constraints have spurred strategic creativity: by grounding activism in Islamic discourse, feminists preserve legitimacy, mobilize grassroots networks, and secure gradual reforms. Their strategies are further strengthened through transnational coalitions and exchanges that circulate interpretive tools, legal arguments, and activist repertoires across regions. For example, *Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML),* founded in 1984, links activists and scholars from the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and the diaspora to share resources on legal literacy, family law reform, and gender justice. Similarly, *Musawah,* a global movement launched in 2009, convenes scholars and activists from over twenty-five countries to challenge patriarchal readings of Islamic law and advocate for equality in the Muslim family. Iranian feminists also draw inspiration from *Sisters in Islam (SIS)* in Malaysia, whose *Qur'an*-based reinterpretations have become a model for faith-grounded legal critique, and from the Moroccan women's movement, whose successful campaign for the 2004 *Moudawana* family law reform demonstrates the transformative potential of re-interpretive strategies (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006).

Adopted after years of feminist mobilization, the reform overhauled Morocco's personal status code (*Moudawana*) by raising the legal marriage age for women from 15 to 18, restricting polygamy by requiring judicial authorization and the consent of the first wife, granting women the right to initiate divorce (*khul'*), recognizing joint responsibility of spouses within the family, and strengthening women's rights in child custody and guardianship. Crucially, these changes were framed as consistent with *Qur'anic* principles of justice and equality, illustrating how faith-based legal reasoning can drive far-reaching reforms from within Islamic jurisprudence rather than outside it (Chaudhry, 2016).

A central concept underpinning many of these transnational collaborations is *ijtihad* — the Islamic principle of independent reasoning used to interpret sacred texts and derive legal rulings. Long a cornerstone of classical Islamic jurisprudence, *ijtihad* enables reinterpretation of scripture in response to changing social realities. Islamic feminists have revitalised this tradition as both a method of resistance and a vehicle for reform, demonstrating that Islamic law is neither static nor closed to change. Through *ijtihad*, activists articulate egalitarian readings of family law, inheritance, leadership, and public participation, grounding feminist claims within Islamic epistemology (Mir-Hosseini, 2013). Circulating through global Islamic feminist networks, these interpretive strategies transcend national boundaries, deepen feminist hermeneutics, and expand the context of gender politics within Islamic frameworks (Mir-Hosseini, 2013; Badran, 2010; Hidayatullah, 2014; WLUML, 2003).

Together, the Turkish and Iranian cases reveal sharply divergent yet complementary trajectories. The next section synthesises these findings comparatively, identifying both key differences and shared themes across contexts.

## COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS: DIVERGENT PATHS, SHARED GOALS

### Constraint as strategy

I begin by showing how, in both Iran and Turkey, structural constraints do not simply limit feminist action — they shape and generate it.

 

In Iran, theocratic authority compels feminists to frame reformist demands in Islamic terms. Activism unfolds cautiously through textual reinterpretation, family law reform, and Islamicised legal campaigns. Constraint becomes a resource as activists turn the state's own idioms of justice into levers for gradual reform.

In Turkey, by contrast, feminists navigate exclusion under militant secularism and co-optation under Islamist governance. This dual pressure fosters hybrid strategies, where resisting both secularist bans, and conservative prescriptions requires coalitions that disrupt binary framings of secular versus religious.

Taken together, these cases show that constraint does not merely restrict Islamic feminism — it animates and shapes it. What begins as limitation becomes a strategic resource, generating innovative repertoires of resistance and redefining feminist politics from within Islamic contexts.

**Transnational praxis**

A second parallel point concerns the global dimensions of Islamic feminism. Just as Turkish activists embed their struggles in transnational feminist discourses, Iranian feminists likewise situate their work within a broader global movement, drawing on and contributing to cross-border networks (Muciaccia & Macchia, 2025). Through these transnational exchanges, Iranian Islamic feminism becomes part of a larger field of praxis — one that circulates interpretive tools, legal repertoires, and theological innovations across regions.

In Iran, feminist resistance circulates across intellectual, legal, and grassroots arenas. Intellectual projects such as *Zanan* magazine created rare public spaces for debate under censorship (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Esfandiari, 2014), while grassroots campaigns like the *One Million Signatures* initiative mobilised thousands for family law reform using *Qur'anic* principles of justice (Khorasani, 2009). Beyond these, campaigns against child marriage and compulsory veiling reframed patriarchal policies as inconsistent with Islamic ethics (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010; Sadeghi, 2008a, 2008b).

These efforts are strengthened by transnational networks, which circulate interpretive repertoires and legal arguments across South Asia, North Africa, and the diaspora (WLUML, 2003; Mir-Hosseini, 2013). Central to these collaborations is the revitalisation of *ijtihad* — independent reasoning — as a feminist method for challenging patriarchal interpretations and advancing egalitarian legal understandings (Badran, 2010).

In Turkey, resistance also extends beyond borders. Amina Wadud's leadership of a mixed-gender Friday prayer in 2005 exemplifies how Islamic feminist interventions can be embodied, spatial, and symbolic (Wigglesworth, 2008; Wadud, 2006). Her example reverberates globally: in Turkey, it inspires mosque-based protests such as *Kadınlar Camilerde*, while in Iran it strengthens *ijtihad*-based critiques of state authority.

Together, these cases reveal that Islamic feminism is not simply a localised project but a transnational one — circulating ideas, strategies, and theological innovations across regions and transforming both local practice and global feminist theory. Yet the forms these strategies take — and the alliances they enable — differ markedly across contexts.

**Repertoires and alliances**

The third argument this section advances is that Islamic feminist repertoires differ across contexts, shaping the possibilities for cross-ideological alliances. Unlike Turkey, coalition-building with secular feminists is rare in Iran, were state repression and ideological divisions limit opportunities for broad-based solidarity. This fundamental difference shapes how feminist strategies evolve in each context and how alliances (or their absence) structure the pursuit of gender justice.

In Turkey, Islamic feminists sometimes march alongside secular and LGBTQ+ activists, forging fragile but significant coalitions. This stands in sharp contrast to Iran's limited coalition context: While Turkish activists can build cross-ideological alliances, Iranian feminism remains rooted in localised networks and petitions. This contrast shows how political opportunity structures shape both strategies and the potential for cross-ideological feminist solidarity.

In Turkey, resistance emerges not only through public protests like the annual *Women's Day Night Walk* but also through digitally mediated activism. *Reçel* ("Jam"), a pioneering feminist blog, transforms intimate narratives about family, faith, and gender into collective feminist discourse (Gökarıksel, 2018; Reçel Blog, n.d.). This online sphere expands activism beyond the street and mosque, creating alternative publics for religiously observant women often excluded from mainstream secular feminist spaces.

In Iran, activism relies more heavily on textual reinterpretation and cautious legal reform. Qur'anic exegesis challenges patriarchal jurisprudence on marriage, divorce, and custody, while campaigns against compulsory veiling frame coercion as un-Islamic (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010). These approaches demonstrate how religious authority is not abandoned but actively redefined from within Islamic epistemologies.

 

These differences underscore that Islamic feminism is not a monolithic project, but a set of adaptive repertoires shaped by context. Together, they reveal how feminist movements negotiate local constraints while contributing to broader transformations in feminist theory and praxis.

Taken together, the Iranian and Turkish cases reveal that Islamic feminisms share core logics — transforming constraint into strategy, operating transnationally, and adapting repertoires to local conditions — even as they diverge in tactics, opportunities, and coalition possibilities. From this comparative analysis emerge four key insights that deepen feminist theory and illuminate the plural pathways of Islamic feminist praxis:

1. Context-specific agency: Activists adapt repertoires to distinct political and religious constraints rather than applying uniform models.
2. Intersectional complexity: Gender struggles intersect with class, law, religion, and political authority, requiring intersectional and postcolonial analysis.
3. Hybrid adaptability: Islamic feminism combines legal advocacy, grassroots mobilisation, and textual reinterpretation. In Turkey, this hybridity expands through coalition politics and digital platforms, which transform intimate experiences into shared feminist discourse and extend activism beyond streets and institutions.
4. Global dialectics of feminism: Islamic feminism destabilises secular-centric paradigms and broadens feminist theory to include faith-informed, digitally mediated, and contextually embedded pathways to justice.

These insights demonstrate that Islamic feminisms in Iran and Turkey are not marginal variations but central to rethinking feminist theory. They challenge secularist paradigms, expand the conceptual context of feminism, and reveal how struggles for gender justice are shaped by — and reshape — political, religious, and transnational contexts.

### Limitations of the study

This study has several methodological and empirical limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the analysis relies primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, activist publications, NGO reports, and media coverage. While these materials provide rich historical and contextual insight into Islamic feminist movements in Iran and Turkey, they necessarily reflect the interpretive frames and political constraints under which they were produced. In authoritarian contexts such as Iran, censorship, surveillance, and repression shape what can be published and circulated, limiting access to dissenting voices and internal debates.

Second, the primary interview component is based on a limited number of semi-structured interviews with founders of young Islamic feminist organisations in Turkey. These interviews offer in-depth, contextualised perspectives on organisational strategies and activist motivations, but they are not statistically representative of the broader field of Islamic feminist activism. Rather, they are intended as interpretive accounts that illuminate how activists understand and narrate their own political practice.

Third, language barriers present an additional constraint. While this study draws on Turkish- and English-language sources extensively, access to Farsi-language primary materials remains more limited. As a result, some Iranian activist debates are necessarily mediated through translation and secondary interpretation.

Finally, the analysis engages with political and state policies that are rapidly evolving. Feminist strategies in Iran and Turkey are continually reshaped by changing political conditions, legal reforms, protest cycles, and state repression. Any scholarly account therefore captures only a temporal snapshot of dynamic and ongoing struggles.

These limitations do not undermine the core comparative argument advanced here. Rather, they underscore the need to read this study as an interpretive, context-sensitive analysis of how feminist strategies are shaped by shifting state–religion configurations. The temporal specificity of the analysis reflects the article's central claim: that Islamic feminist repertoires are adaptive practices forged in response to changing political and religious conditions, rather than fixed or linear trajectories.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Islamic feminism cannot be reduced to theological reinterpretation or dismissed as inauthentic. In both Iran and Turkey, women negotiate patriarchal authority, state power, and social norms through hybrid repertoires that combine legal advocacy, grassroots mobilisation, coalition-building, digital activism, and reinterpretation of Islamic texts.

Distinct political and religious configurations shape these strategies in different ways: in theocratic Iran, activism centres on cautious legal and textual engagement within Shari'a frameworks, while in Turkey, oscillation between secularist exclusion and Islamist governance produces hybrid approaches, including alliances with secular feminists, public protest, and creative invocations of Islamic ethics. These divergent trajectories

 

underscore that Islamic feminism is not a uniform model, but a context-sensitive praxis forged within specific state–religion structures.

Across both cases, Muslim women exercise agency, challenge patriarchal authority, and expand feminist possibilities without abandoning religious identity. This directly contests Western universalist assumptions that position secular feminism as normative and religion as inherently oppressive. By grounding their demands in Islamic ethics, Turkish and Iranian feminists secure legitimacy within their own communities and reach women who might otherwise reject feminism as foreign or imposed. In doing so, they transform global feminist discourses into locally resonant strategies, demonstrating that feminism's universality lies precisely in its capacity for contextual translation.

This study also shows that Islamic feminism is not confined by national borders but constitutes a transnational field of praxis. Through global Islamic feminist networks activists circulate interpretive tools, legal strategies, and conceptual frameworks across regions. Figures like Amina Wadud inspire embodied forms of resistance that reverberate globally, while campaigns in Iran and Turkey contribute new theological arguments and activist repertoires to a shared transnational feminist vocabulary. These circulations reveal that Islamic feminism is simultaneously local and global, situated and expansive.

Finally, the comparison highlights how differences in political opportunity shape repertoires of action and the possibilities for cross-ideological alliances. In Turkey, Islamic feminists sometimes march alongside secular and LGBTQ+ activists, forging fragile but transformative coalitions. In Iran, state repression and ideological divides limit such alliances, rooting activism in more localised networks and petitions. Yet across both contexts, Islamic feminism expands feminist discourse from within Islamic epistemologies, unsettling secular–religious binaries and redefining the terms of feminist politics. The contrasting images of Alaa Salah's defiant leadership and *Mena Mangal*'s tragic silencing remind us that Muslim women's struggles cannot be read through a single lens of oppression or liberation. Rather, they must be understood as deeply contextual, shaped by histories, political structures, and global entanglements.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Islamic feminisms in Iran and Turkey are not marginal or derivative but central to rethinking feminist theory and praxis. Their hybrid repertoires reveal how constraint becomes a resource, how transnational networks reshape local strategies, and how feminist politics expand when rooted in Islamic epistemologies.

Global feminism is strongest when it recognises these plural, faith-informed feminisms as integral to struggles for gender justice and when it takes seriously the situated, agentic practices of Islamic feminists as sites for rethinking agency, solidarity, and equality across sociopolitical and religious contexts.

Looking ahead, expanding this comparative framework to include Islamic feminisms in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa would deepen our understanding of how colonial legacies, racialised politics, and class hierarchies shape feminist repertoires. Further research on digital feminist spaces can illuminate how online platforms transform intimate narratives into collective political projects. Finally, closer attention to diaspora and transnational networks will reveal how Islamic feminist ideas circulate across borders, generating strategies that are simultaneously local and global.

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**Ethical statement**

This study is based on analysis of publicly available textual and visual materials, as well as a small number of exploratory, semi-structured interviews conducted with informed consent. Interview participants were recruited voluntarily, anonymized where requested, and no identifying information is disclosed. All procedures were conducted in accordance with principles of ethical research, including respect for persons, confidentiality, and minimization of harm.

**Competing interests**

The author declares no competing interests.

 

**Author contributions**

The author is the sole contributor to this manuscript and was responsible for conceptualization, research design, data collection, analysis, and writing.

**Data availability**

All data analyzed in this study are derived from publicly available sources. Interview materials are not publicly shared in order to protect participant confidentiality.

**AI disclosure**

No generative artificial intelligence tools were used to generate the content of this manuscript. Limited use of AI-assisted tools was restricted to language editing and proofreading. The author retains full responsibility for the content.

**Biographical sketch**

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