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## **Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah: Muslim Cleric and Islamic Feminist**

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**Abstract:** *Feminism is not an immutable and easily-defined concept. It is conditioned by history, culture, religion and other social factors. The secular-liberalist approach to feminism has long dominated the international discourse on women's rights and gender equality. However, in recent years Islamic feminism has gained prominence in the Middle East, serving as a tool through which pious Muslim women can reconcile their religious beliefs with their desire for social, political and economic equality. Islamic feminism has faced harsh criticism from those who believe that the Islamic system of life and governance is static and unchangeable. However, an examination of the writings of Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, a Shiite Ayotallah, and the influence these writings have had on pious Shiite women can reveal the viability of Islamic feminism.*

### **1. Introduction**

The concepts of feminism and gender equality are multi-faceted. People have differing and culturally-specific conceptions of what it means to be equal. It is important to recognize the complexity of feminism and the ambiguous nature of gender equality because what women need and desire is inextricably linked to their culture, religion and economic class. These elements spawn disparate understandings of what it means to be equal and how such equality can be achieved.

It is important to do away with the claim that religion, specifically Islam, is incompatible with feminism and by virtue of that, incompatible with modernity. This is important because many women in the Islamic world define their lives within the context of Islam, and see their rights as intricately linked to it. These women define gender equality, and the desire to achieve it, within the context of Islam.

A reinterpretation of religious texts can bring about a shift in societal norms and can significantly alter the status

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of women. In this paper, I will use the writings of Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah to show how individuals can work within the framework of their belief system, interpreting religious texts through reason in order to improve women's conditions and advocate gender equality.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that when viewed within the context of Islamic feminism, Fadlallah is a feminist.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. In Defence of Islamic Feminism

Before one can argue that Fadlallah is an Islamic feminist, one must argue that Islamic feminism is a legitimate form of feminism. Islamic feminists question orthodox Islamic teachings on the rights and duties of women. They promote women's right to equality by providing evidence of their equality under Islam. They demand women's right to *ijtehad*--independent reasoning and religious interpretation, grounding their arguments in Quranic verses. Afsaneh Najmabadi, an Iranian Islamic feminist, described this approach as "the radical de-centering of the clergy from the domain of interpretation, and the placing of woman as interpreter and her needs as grounds for interpretation" (Moghadam, 2002, 24). Islamic feminists challenge the orthodox understanding of women in the Islamic world which confines them to the domestic arena. They challenge the orthodox interpretation of Islamic law which gives men the power of arbitrary divorce and polygamy, and legitimizes disparities in inheritance (Moghadam, 2002). Nayereh Tohidi describes Islamic feminism as "a movement of women who have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female-supportive verses of the

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<sup>1</sup> As opposed to swallowing them in literal form and forcing them upon individuals.

<sup>2</sup> I will also elucidate the status of pious Shiite women in Lebanon in order to show how the meaning of gender equality differs among communities worldwide, and how some women have managed to reconcile their religion with their desire for equality. Fadlallah's influence is most noticeable among the pious Shiite community in Lebanon. I will touch upon the seminal effect that Fadlallah's views have had on gender dynamics within the pious Shiite community, highlighting the role that Islamic feminism, like secular feminism, can play in improving women's conditions (Deeb, 2006).

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Qur'an in their fight for women's rights, especially for women's access to education" (Moghadam, 2002, 27).

Critics of Islamic feminism argue that attempts to reinterpret the Quran and to restructure Sharia law are useless due to the power of orthodox interpretations of Islam. Some critics disapprove of the argument that veiling, domesticity, and dedication to Islamic principles can be interpreted as signs of free agency, self-determination and identity construction when undertaken by women who are not succumbing to societal and political pressure. These critics see no flexibility within the Islamic legal and political system, and believe that Islam unambiguously dictates the role of women, leaving no room for interpretation (Moghadam, 2002). The role that Islam prescribes to women, according to these critics, is an inferior one in marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, court witnessing, jurisprudence, and dress code (Moghadam, 2002).

Saba Mahmoud (2005) recognizes the problematic elements of Islamic feminism. Its advocates, she states, assert themselves in what have traditionally been male-centric arenas, but the very rhetoric they use to assert themselves stems from discourses that have traditionally justified their submission to male authority. She addresses these problematic elements by emphasizing Islamic feminists' attempts to exercise free agency within a system of subordination (Mahmoud, 2005). "Women resist the dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their "own interests and agendas""(Mahmoud, 2005, 6).

By arguing that Fadlallah is an Islamic feminist, I hope to implicitly offer a defense of Islamic feminism. Fadlallah purports to advance women's rights within the framework of Islam, and although Lebanon is not an Islamic state, members of the pious Shiite community in Lebanon adhere to Islamic principles and live by Sharia law. Fadlallah's reinterpretation of Quranic verses related to women has dramatically affected and transformed this community. By illuminating this effect, I hope to show how Islamic feminism can successfully challenge orthodox interpretations of Islam

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and leave more than a dent in what critics consider a frigid socio-political system (Deeb, 2006).

### **3. The Reformist Writings of Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah**

Fadlallah is the paramount Shiite cleric in Lebanon and one of the most salient jurisconsults in the Shiite world (Sankari, 2005). He is an advocate of Dynamic *fiqh*, a modernist system of jurisprudence grounded in the belief that a perpetual process of Quranic reinterpretation and contextual rereading is necessary for the betterment of society. Fadlallah's loyalty to this system is evident in his views on women, and largely informs them. He emphasizes the need to contextualize Islamic texts and to interpret them while bearing in mind prevalent political, economic and social factors (Sankari, 2005). This is reminiscent of Gisela Bock's assertion that gender is socially constructed and shaped by other social factors such as economic class.

Fadlallah views women and men as equal in humanity, as well as in religious responsibilities and rights. Women--like men, he asserts, have the capacity to reason. He believes both men and women have the right to exercise their reason in the public realm. Here it is important to elucidate Fadlallah's progressive views on *ijtehad*. Most Shiites believe that only members of the clergy have the skills necessary for an engagement in the interpretation of Islamic texts and therefore, would disapprove of both non-clerical men and women partaking in such interpretation. Fadlallah on the other hand, advocates individual *ijtehad*. Fadlallah asserts that upon having mastered theology and Shi'a law, one can interpret Islamic texts independently. Fadlallah asserts that both women and men have the right to this practice (Deeb, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Fadlallah denounces the patriarchal family system, asserting that marriage should be grounded in mutual

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<sup>1</sup> Fadlallah's views correspond to the views of Islamic feminists, who advocate women's active participation in the reinterpretation of religious texts. I will return to Fadlallah's views on *ijtehad* with respects to women in my discussion of the pious Shiite community in Lebanon.

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responsibility and respect. He condones the disparity between men and women's inheritance. However, he attributes this disparity to the greater financial obligations that men bear in Muslim societies. He agrees with the view that women are more emotional than men, and deems this trait a weakness. However, he does not believe that this inclination is innate, and asserts that women have the capacity to rid themselves of it (Fadlallah, n.d.).<sup>1</sup>

Fadlallah believes that in order to understand women, scholars should observe their everyday behavior and use observations as the basis from which to interpret Quranic verses on women.<sup>2</sup> Fadlallah believes that differences do exist between the sexes, but he asserts that "the difference in sex does not hinder the ability of being strong on the levels of thinking, giving, having a strong willpower and the ability to take the right decision and the right position after studying all options, once the circumstances that favor creativity and rational thinking are available" (Fadlallah, n.d.).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although I believe that his claim that women are more emotional than men is ill-founded, what I find to be important about the statement is his refutation of the inherent nature of this trait. Through this refutation, Fadlallah challenges the orthodox conception of women in Islamic society (Fadlallah, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Fadlallah does not find it equally necessary to clarify what men are, and this has to do with the reasons underlying his scholarly interest in women. Fadlallah asserts that men are favored under orthodox interpretations of Islam, and women are disadvantaged. He actively seeks to redefine the traditional conception of women in order to eradicate the justifications that orthodox Islamists have used for the maltreatment of women. However, when discussing issues such as the *hijab*, which reveals a disparity between the restrictions imposed on men and women, Fadlallah brings the subject of men into the discourse in order to illuminate the rationale behind such restrictions. Fadlallah does not stop at explaining the purpose of the *Hijab* in reasonable terms, but goes a step further and explains that Islam places an equal set of restrictions on men's dress. He argues that just as women must cover themselves from head to toe, men must cover themselves from neck to toe. Men may reveal their hair because it is not considered as sensual as women's. Although Fadlallah may not spend much time defining men, he takes the time to explain the reasons underlying what he considers to be the slight differences between men and women under Islam, as opposed to just attributing these differences to men's superiority (Fadlallah, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Fadlallah's writings seem to suggest that he perceives the differences between the sexes on the physical, rather than the mental and spiritual levels (Fadlallah, n.d.). This is reminiscent of the Cartesian view of women that arose during the Enlightenment, and which drew on Descartes' claim that the mind and body are separate. Proponents of the Cartesian view argued for equality in sameness,

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Fadlallah asserts that in Islam, women and men are equally entitled to education. He asserts that woman's role as mother should not be used against her and should not deprive her of acquiring an education in matters that go beyond her immediate maternal duties. He believes that men and women are meant to complement and complete one another in life, but that they are responsible for themselves individually before God. Women are therefore entitled to the same education as men, because they are equal to men in their spiritual obligations and duties, and cannot fully comprehend these obligations and duties without an education.<sup>1</sup> He argues that women, like men, should not be prohibited from pursuing non-religious education, so long as that education does not result in moral deviation (Fadlallah, n.d).

According to Fadlallah, Islam does not assign separate roles to men and women. He states that women and men's roles are only distinct in relation to parenthood.<sup>2</sup> In all other areas of life, he argues, men and women are capable of performing the same duties. He states that Islam does not relegate women to the domestic sphere, and that women may pursue careers in the public sphere. Should women request formal wages in exchange for domestic housework, he claims, they should be granted those wages (Fadlallah, n.d.).

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claiming that one's sex had no bearing on one's mind (Goodman, 1998). I didn't come across any of Fadlallah's writings on the body, but in light of his other views, it is clear that he doesn't find women's physical nature to be in impediment to their intellect (Fadlallah, n.d.).

<sup>1</sup> Fadlallah cites the following Quranic verses on the value of knowledge in support of this claim: 39:9: Are those who know and those who do not know equal?; 13:9: It is those who are endowed with understanding that receive admonition (Fadlallah, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Fadlallah does not explicitly state the differences between motherhood and fatherhood, but it is likely that he believes a woman has more responsibilities towards the children because of the natural act of having given birth to them. Since the father is typically the breadwinner, Fadlallah probably perceives fatherhood in relation to providing for the family, and motherhood in relation to nurturing it (Fadlallah, n.d.).

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#### **4. Fadlallah's Views on Women as Compared to those of another Islamic Reformist**

Like Fadlallah, the Egyptian Hasan al-Banna <sup>1</sup> promoted women's education. However, in contrast to Fadlallah, he venerated the home as her natural arena, and stated that a woman may seek participation in other areas of society only if she's satisfied her duties in the home. This view is popular among many Islamic reformists, and it is in this difference of interpretation that Fadlallah's views really stand out. Although Fadlallah emphasizes the importance of a woman's role in the home, he also emphasizes the importance of refraining from allowing her maternal duties to serve as a hindrance to her other goals (Fadlallah, n.d.).

Unlike Fadlallah, al-Banna believed that men and women have many inherent differences. He characterized men by their ability to reason and their physical strength, and characterized women by their physical weakness, their superior emotional abilities, and their need to be dependent. Al-Banna argued that these natural qualities explain the need for women to be relegated to the home, and justify the superiority of men. Banna used Sura 4:34 from the Quran as evidence.<sup>2</sup> This is in clear contrast with Fadlallah, who asserts that it is difficult to differentiate between men and women who have been exposed to the same socio-cultural and political conditions, and that men are not better equipped to understand and deal with the socio-cultural and political conditions that affect them. Fadlallah saw the relationship between men and women as a co-dependent partnership, not as a union between care-taker and dependent (Fadlallah, n.d.). While Banna considered women equally responsible for the welfare of the state and therefore, advocated their inclusion in the political process by

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<sup>1</sup> Now deceased, but once considered by many as "the twentieth-century, Sunni revivalist incarnate" (Shehadeh, 2003, 13).

<sup>2</sup> Sura 4:34: Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend their property [for support of women]. So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them (Shehadeh, 2003, 19).

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emphasizing the need to confer with them on political matters as citizens and wives, he felt that women's productive functions should be regulated.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Fadlallah, al-Banna refused to reinterpret Quranic verses dealing with women, and although he advocated women's education and their participation in society, he did not promote the radical alterations to women's lives that Fadlallah espouses (Shehadeh, 2003).

It is important to frame the differences between Fadlallah and al-Banna in light of the differences between the Sunnis and the Shiites. Sunnis adhere to the Quran, Sharia and the Hadith in their literal forms, and therefore refuse to reinterpret the orthodox understandings of verses like Sura 4:34. Shiites on the other hand, believe in *ijtehad*, and believe that it is the clergy's duty to offer the community reinterpretations of Islamic texts. The Sunnis adhere to the orthodox interpretation passed down from the Prophet's confidantes, and while al-Banna called for radical reform when he asserted the need for slight reinterpretations of the Quran for political and economic purposes, he did not extend this need to verses concerned with women (Shehadeh, 2003). Shiism on the other hand calls for a reinterpretation of all Islamic verses that do not correspond to common sense and reason. Fadlallah is part of this tradition. Given his assertion that women and men are equal under Islam<sup>2</sup>, he finds that Quranic verses that assign women lesser rights than men contradict common sense and therefore, warrant reinterpretation. Fadlallah's strict adherence to *ijtehad* informs his views on women. He draws on other verses that contradict Suras like Sura 4:34, in order to depict the ambiguity of Quranic verses and the vast room for interpretation. One example is his use of Sura 4:19: O

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<sup>1</sup> So, while Fadlallah echoes elements of the Cartesian view on women, al-Banna echoes elements of the Platonic view, emphasizing the equally important, but strictly different, contributions men and women were born to make to society. Al-Banna believes the importance of women lies in their ability to shape and mold the next generation. Al-Banna also echoes elements of Aristotle when he asserts that women, as a result of their innate weaknesses, should obey men for their own good (Goodman, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> He cites Sura 9:71: The Believers, men and women, are protectors of one another: they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil.



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you who believe! It is not lawful for you that you should take women as heritage against their will, and do not straiten them in order that you may take part of what you have given them, unless they are guilty of manifest indecency, and treat them kindly; then if you hate them, it may be that you dislike a thing while Allah has placed abundant good in it (Fadlallah, n.d).

## 5. The Pious Shiite Women of Lebanon and their Quest for Gender Equality

It has often been said that Islam is incompatible with modernity. An examination of the pious Shiite community in Lebanon can counter this claim. Religion is an intrinsic part of the everyday lives of pious Shiites residing in the *Dahiyya*, a poor suburb in Beirut. Religion is ubiquitous in the *Dahiyya*.

In Shiism, some religious clerics are considered *marji's*--those who should be emulated.<sup>1</sup> Fadlallah is one such cleric.<sup>2</sup> Members of the Shiite community turn to these

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of such *Marji's* is highlighted by Hajjeh Umm Ali, a Shiite woman residing in the *Dahiyya* who Deeb interviewed: "I'm not going to take information from anywhere, no, I want to go to the *marji'*. The *marji'* interprets. His work is to understand the Hadith, the Quran. The good thing is that we have the door of interpretation open, so you can continue to develop, you keep reading, the world is progressing, religion didn't come to restrict you, to say this is this and that is that...there are issues, social issues, worshiping issues, that aren't set, so these are about interpretation...Each believer looks to his own interpreter for understanding" (Deeb, 2006, 70).

<sup>2</sup> Pious Shiites either follow Fadlallah, the late Khomeini, or Ali Al-Sistani as their *marji's*. Those who are critical of Fadlallah's views on women often argue against his support for female *ijtehad* and female participation in the public sphere, and his ban on domestic violence. However, in my research I did not come across any critical female voices. Lara Deeb (2006), in her book on pious Shiite women, only cited positive reviews of Fadlallah's work. She did however, cite criticisms like the one's mentioned above, made by male clerics and male citizens. Fadlallah has also been vastly criticized by Sunnis for the same reasons (Deeb, 2006). The difficulty of finding Shiite women who are critical of Fadlallah does not surprise me, since his views largely aim at improving their lives within the framework of their religious beliefs. However, I think that some

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clerics for inspiration. Under their guidance, Shiites have formed what Deeb (2006) refers to as a pious modern: “an ethos, a way of being in the world, and a self-presentation...an ideal, hegemonic, in a Gramscian sense, institutionalized for pious Shia as an infrastructure, a social norm, and a desired experience” (Deeb, 2006, 228). Elements of this pious modern include deriving religious practice from knowledge, participating actively in the community, the veneration of Ashoura, and the wearing of the *hijab* while simultaneously interjecting one’s self into the public arena (Deeb, 2006).

Women in the *Dahiyya* are active participants in their community. But, this was not always the case. These women had to undertake what Deeb (2006) referred to as a ‘gender *jihād*’ in order to legitimize their desire to participate in the public realm. They had to battle popular chauvinistic assumptions, for example, the assumption that women cannot act rationally. They fought against sexism and patriarchy in their community. They controversially called for men’s participation in the domestic sphere, claiming that women would not be able to enter the public sphere if men did not share in the responsibilities of the home. Many of these advocacies can be linked to Fadlallah.<sup>1</sup> Fadlallah serves as a guide for women in the community on a number of gender issues. Where Fadlallah’s views brought about the most dramatic alteration to women’s roles was in relation to *ijtehad*.<sup>2</sup> His writings gave women the power to draw on

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women who have a more orthodox and traditional understanding of Islam would be opposed to his views.

<sup>1</sup> For example, at a seminar on women’s public participation organized by Hizbullah’s Women’s Committee, the need for men’s participation in the domestic sphere was emphasized, and Fadlallah’s writings were used as support for this claim: “How is it possible to say that it is acceptable and possible for a women to work outside the home, given men’s general disinclination to help their wives with housework, considering it shameful? The source of saying that a man working inside the home is shameful is a social culture of backwardness, not Islam. Islam has no relationship to this view” (Deeb, 2006, 215).

<sup>2</sup> Like I mentioned earlier, Fadlallah asserts that both men and women who have mastered theology and Shi’a law can interpret Islamic texts independently. He states that women can then “make Islamic theology from women for women” (Deeb, 2006, 216).

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religious texts and argue that they had a right to equal participation in public discourse (Deeb, 2006).

The factors that constituted women's 'gender *jihad*' in the *Dahiyya* gave rise to an 'ideal pious modern woman', one who "was educated, outspoken, strong, and visible while also being pious and committed to her faith, family and community" (Deeb, 2006, 217). Fadlallah as *marja'* gave Shiite women the legitimacy they needed to assert their rights while grounding them in Islamic texts, allowing them to reconcile their religious beliefs with their desires for gender-related reform. This case serves as an example of Islamic feminism's viability (Deeb, 2006).

## 5. Conclusion

Like many Islamic feminists, Fadlallah advocates women's right to *ijtehad*, education and employment (Fadlallah, n.d.). His views have manifested themselves in the *Dahiyya*, and he thus serves as an example of the way in which individuals can reform a system from within, working to achieve gender equality within the bounds of their belief system by reinterpreting religious texts and law. The Shiite community in the *Dahiyya* illuminates the importance of developing an awareness of the culturally-specific elements of gender equality and feminism, and the need to consider these elements before jumping to conclusions about the status of women or the status of a community as a whole (Deeb, 2006).

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