

Book Review

The Cambridge Companion to Women and Islam (edited by Masooda Bano). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025. ISBN: 9781009206587.

<https://doi.org/10.56529/isr.v4i2.519>

Nor Ismah

Asia Research Institute

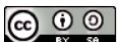
National University of Singapore, Singapore

nismah@nus.edu.sg

The Cambridge Companion to Women and Islam comes at an important moment in the scholarship on Muslim women. Over the past two decades, the field has transformed from one dominated by Orientalist misrepresentations into a robust, interdisciplinary conversation grounded in textual scholarship, ethnography, sociology, and gender theory. It also challenges the assumption that the Islamic tradition is inherently as a course of women's oppression or a marker of their backwardness.

The book comprises fifteen chapters across three sections. The first introduces the foundations of classical Islamic gender teaching and outlines a vision of women's well-being and equality distinct from Western feminist models. The second section offers cases of women navigating piety, some by following classical norms, others by reinterpreting them, demonstrating that pious agency is an active, adaptive process embedded in the Islamic legal tradition. The final section broadens the focus to women's roles in shaping states and societies, highlighting forms of agency that resonate more closely with textual and ethnographic scholarship on Muslim women has evolved in the past two decades and where further work is needed, revealing the complex interplay between faith, agency, and social context.

The introduction offers a clear account of the editorial aims. Masooda Bano positions this volume as both an examination of those developments and an



intervention that reframes the study on the relationship between women and the Islamic tradition. It aims to link two streams: feminist reinterpretation of Islamic texts and ethnographic evidence that reveals Muslim women's lived experiences and their deliberate agency within their tradition. The book largely succeeds in this aim, though it leaves some issues unresolved.

Classical Texts and the Logic of Gender

Part I, "Logic of Classical Reasoning," is the book's most provoking and arguably its strongest contribution. It pushes readers to take seriously the internal logic of classical Islamic arguments about gender, something feminist scholarship has often critiqued from the outside but less frequently explained on its own terms. This section insists that one cannot understand Muslim women's choices today without understanding the ethical and theological structure that continues to make classical norms meaningful. It also underscores that the gender justice of Islam emerges from within the tradition.

The introduction to the section makes a clear argument: many Muslim thinkers who defend Islamic gender norms, "contend that Islam promotes equity (fairness based on the roles and contexts), rather than the equality emphasized by Western feminism" (p. 34). The following chapters demonstrate this idea in diverse ways. Karen Bauer's chapter is one example. She examines Qur'an verses about women and shows that some verses affirm women's equal spiritual value while others appear to endorse male authority. Instead of seeing this as a contradiction, Bauer argues that the verses make sense when read through the Qur'an's broader moral logic. Her interpretation avoids the oversimplification that often appear in both conservative defenses of Islam and secular critiques (p. 41-62).

Another significant example is Sohail Hanif's chapter on Hanafi legal reasoning related to women's inheritance. Hanif shows that these rulings are not isolated or arbitrary; they come from a long intellectual tradition that tries to maintain consistency across different areas of Islamic law. Instead of interpreting unequal inheritance shares as simple discrimination against women, Hanif places them within the broader legal and ethical logic of classical Islamic jurisprudence. His point is not that readers must agree with these rulings, but they should understand how they fit into a coherent legal system (p. 64-83).

A strength of Part I is its commitment to intellectual honesty. Bano reminds readers that the chapters highlight a “principle of fairness, contingent upon recognizing the paramountcy of the spiritual self” (p. 34) underscoring a core ethical difference between Islamic thought and liberal feminist framework. Whereas liberal feminism prioritizes autonomy and sameness, classical Islamic ethics emphasizes moral purpose and differentiated, complementary responsibility. A limitation of Part I is that while it clearly explains classical reasoning, it pays little attention to the economic, social, and political power dynamic that shaped those interpretations. Readers seeking that context may find the discussion too textual.

Piety, Agency, and Lived Experience

Part II, “Asserting Agency in Faith,” moves from texts to lived religion. Here the authors demonstrate with ethnographic clarity that Muslim women’s piety is not passive submission but active, thoughtful engagement. This continues a scholarly trajectory pioneered by Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood, both of whom Bano cites as pivotal in demonstrating that agency exists even within conservative or pietistic movements (p. 19).

The chapters in this section on Salafi women, women in political Islam, converts in Europe, Islamic feminists, and female mosque leaders in China, share a commitment to complexity. The ethnographies reveal that devotion, politics, discipline, and interpretation are intertwined. For instance, the chapter on Salafi women shows how piety movements cultivate moral agency through discipline, pedagogy, and community. The chapter on conversion illustrates how embracing Islam can be an exercise in self-making rather than assimilation into patriarchal structures.

Nina Nurmila’s chapter on Islamic feminist approaches is especially valuable for readers of Southeast Asia, presenting Indonesia not as peripheral but as one of the most dynamic sites of Muslim feminist thought. She outlines the diverse strands of Islamic feminist scholarship that shape Indonesian debates. Mernissi’s method of questioning the authenticity of problematic hadith exposes the political and historical forces behind misogynistic narratives, while Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir’s *Qirā’ah Mubādalāh* offers a re-interpretive strategy that applies ethical directives addressed to men equally to women. Together, these

approaches show that gender justice can be pursued from within Islamic scholarship itself (p. 216 and 227).

Part II effectively avoids the common tendency to either romanticize pious Muslim women or present them as victims of oppressive religious structures. Instead, the authors treat women's moral choices with respect, showing that both conservative and reformist practices often come from thoughtful and intentional engagement with their faith. However, because the sections cover a wide variety of topics, it sometimes feels uneven. For example, the experiences of European converts do not fit neatly alongside discussions about elite Indonesian feminists, making the section feel thematically stretched (p. 195-212).

Women as Makers of Society and Culture

Part III turns to socio-political life. This section broadens the frame from religious reasoning and personal piety to women's participation in politics, social activism, art, architecture, literature, and spirituality. It echoes earlier scholarship, such as Haeri's *The Unforgettable Queens of Islam: Succession, Authority, Gender* (2020), and van Doorn-Harder's *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia* (2006) but expands its geographic and thematic scope.

The chapter on art and architectural patronage, for instance, vividly illustrates how Muslim women historically shaped the built environment. Shahla Haeri's chapter on women and political authority situates contemporary female leadership within longer histories of queenship, patronage, and religious legitimacy. These chapters counter assumptions that Muslim women's influence has been confined to the private sphere (p. 296-313).

The concluding chapter, on "feminist spirituality," is an unexpected but compelling ending. Drawing from Bosnian Sufi contexts, Zilka Spahić Šiljak argues that Sufi mystical practices still matter in the lives of Muslim women today, including those who consider themselves as relatively secular (p. 360). Bano highlights how concepts like *taqwa*, *adab*, and *khidma* form the ethical backdrop for feminist praxis in Bosnia (p. 28). This chapter broadens the lens, reminding readers that feminism, spirituality, and modernity intersect differently across Muslim societies.

The strength of Part III lies in its capaciousness. It adopts a broad view of Muslim women's agency. It does not limit women to religious interpretation and piety; instead, it shows them acting as poets, activists, organizational leaders, and institution-builders. The weakness is that this capaciousness risks diffusion. The wide range of women's roles is coherent in principle, but there is no concluding essay tying together these disparate roles.

Overall Contribution and Limits

Taken as a whole, *The Cambridge Companion to Women and Islam* is a determined, multi-vocal volume that foregrounds both the intellectual structures of Islamic gender norms and the diverse ways women inhabit, contest, or reinterpret them. One of the book's main achievements is its rejection of attempts to reduce Muslim women to symbols, either of oppression or liberation. Instead, it presents them as thinking, choosing subjects whose lives are shaped by faith, social context, and personal aspiration.

The main limitations are structural rather than conceptual. Because the book covers so much ground, from 7th-century *tafsīr* to contemporary activism in Indonesia, some chapters feel more like standalone essays than components of a unified argument. Readers seeking comparative synthesis may find the volume's breadth more impressive than its integration.

Despite these limitations, *The Cambridge Companion to Women and Islam* is an excellent, timely, and thoughtful contribution. It will serve scholars, students, and general readers who want a balanced and analytically rich entry point into contemporary debates. In a scholarly landscape that still often treats Islam and gender as a problem to be solved, this book argues instead that Muslim women's lives must be approached with curiosity, seriousness, and respect.