

The Limitations of U.S. White Middle-Class Feminism in the Middle East

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Abstract

Feminist movements have long histories in the majority of the world's nations. These movements called for women's rights, but in different ways with unique ideologies. However, Western feminism, and more specifically U.S. White middle-class feminism, is the most dominant movement that affects women's identities worldwide. This paper included discussion of the hegemony of U.S. White middle-class feminism. After presenting a very brief overview of the history of U.S. feminism, this paper included further examination of seven limitations that make U.S. White middle-class feminism inapplicable in non-Western societies, and specifically in Middle Eastern countries. These limitations include (a) ignoring the cultural, historical, and political systems that shape women in the Middle East; (b) misinterpretation of some religious practices; (c) generalizing women's conditions; (d) universalizing Western values; (e) playing the role of the savior; (f) ignoring the influence of Western imperialism; and (g) ignoring women's strengths and actual needs. Finally, this paper included suggestions that can be taken into consideration to reduce the gap between U.S. White middle-class feminism and other types of feminisms in the Middle East.

Keywords: Limitations, U.S. feminism, Veil, Oppression, and Gender Segregation

1. Introduction

Women's right is a global issue, and women's movements have a long history in a majority of the world's nations. However, Western feminism is the most dominant movement around the world. The hegemony of this feminism affects women's identities not only in the West, but also worldwide. Western feminism contributes in spreading the idea of the oppression of Muslim women, and their need to be saved. Addressing this issue of women's rights, this paper will include discussion of the limitations of U.S. feminism, more specifically U.S. White middle-class feminism, in the Middle East and Third World countries in general. Feminist movements are diverse. Thus, the term Western feminism is a broad term that can include diverse feminist theories and movements, such as U.S. feminism, French feminism, Nordic feminism, European feminism, etc. Also, each one of these movements has its own history and agenda. For example, U.S. feminism is also a broad term that reflects a long history of different waves.

For the purpose of this paper and to avoid any overgeneralization, I will use the term U.S. White Middle-Class Feminism (USWMCF) to examine the limitations of U.S. feminism (in its second wave, from the 1960s to the 1990s) in Middle East. After providing a general view of the history of U.S. feminism, this paper will include seven limitations of USWMCF in the Middle East. Finally, this paper will provide suggestions to be taken into consideration to reduce the gap and build a new understanding between USWMCF feminism and other types of feminisms in the Middle East.

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2. Brief Overview of the History of U.S. Feminism

U.S. feminist movements played an important role in improving women's education and women's status in general. The presence of the feminist movement has made a significant difference in American women's lives (Gordon, 1990; Solomon, 1985). The improvement of the status of women in the United States is commonly traced by using three *waves* to describe the chronological and conceptual development of U.S. feminism. This part of the paper includes a brief view of these three waves with emphasis on the second wave, because of its relevancy to the argument in this paper. The first wave took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, and comprised women's suffrage movement who called for equal rights and power. It began at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 in New York to protest the limited social, political, and educational rights women had in the United States at this time. This wave focused on giving women the right to participate in voting and making the laws. However, it attracted mainly white middle class women, and it tended to overlook other minority women (Nicholson, 2010; Rampton, 2015).

According to Nicholson (2010) and Rampton (2015), the second wave started from the 1960s to the 1990s. It focused on family, workplace, sexuality, and reproductive rights. This phase combined with other anti-war and civil rights movements of the time. Also, this second wave is characterized as being radical. The feminists of this wave were against feminine beauty, such as make up, and high-heels because these reduce women to objects of beauty exploited by patriarchy (Rampton, 2015). In this view of feminism, sex is a desire, not marriage; the feminists of this wave called for dismantling the institution of marriage and the nuclear family (Mahmood, 2005). In addition, in this wave, "sex and gender were differentiated—the former being biological, and the later a social construct that varies culture-to-culture and over time" (Rampton, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, the second wave of feminism included a shift from domestic to global issues. Feminists of this wave called for global sisterhood and solidarity; they spoke for women as a social class who shared oppression. These feminists "work for the betterment of the entire planet" (Rampton, 2015, p. 2). They created the slogans: "sisterhood is powerful", "women's struggle is class struggle", and "the personal is political" (Rampton, 2015).

Many goals of the second wave were met. This wave gave women positions of leadership in higher education and business in the United States. Women had more control over their bodies (Nicholson, 2010; Rampton, 2015). Although this wave included many achievements to improve women's status, the wage gap between men and women did not close, and as of 2017, continues to exist (Nicholson, 2010). The most important contribution of this second wave is the creation of women's studies programs, which spread as an academic field on U.S. campuses. In addition, there was a growth of feminist journals and publishing houses (Nicholson, 2010; Rampton, 2015). Feminist approaches to research that emerged during 1960s critiqued traditional research approaches that only created knowledge, excluded women, and depended on neutrality and objectivity. Feminist research includes the characterization as being political and emancipatory. It depends on activism and creating change. Researchers' values, assumptions and struggles are important to shape their research (Lapan, Quartaroli & Riemer, 2012). By the early 1990s, the second wave of U.S. feminism started to recede. Many argued that this feminism did not die, but took a different shape as a third wave (Nicholson, 2010). However, many argued that this movement remains alive, and exists in the academic world (Rampton, 2015).

The third wave began in the mid-1990s. Contrary to their mothers' view who belonged to the previous U.S. feminist wave, this wave readapts feminine beauty for women as subjects, not as objects dominated by patriarchy. They celebrate sexuality as a way of women's empowerment. Most of the feminists of this third wave refuse to be identified as feminists. Differences in class, race, and ethnicity are recognized. Also, this wave of feminists supports equal rights, but, unlike second wave feminists, they do not have collective objectives (Nicholson, 2010; Rampton, 2015). Today, and after a long history of struggle against inferiority, American women enjoy almost equal rights to men. Women can vote and play important roles in politics, as well as own businesses and have leadership positions. Additionally, women can wear whatever they choose (Dixon, 2011). American women's identity presented during these three generations, its views, and its struggle against inferiority, were shaped by the historical, and sociopolitical climate within the boundaries of the United States. Thus, the views and the conclusions of U.S. feminism are criticized as being applicable only in developed countries with a benefit to white middle class women (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Crowley, 2014; Dixon, 2011; Mohanty, 2006).

3. Limitations of USWMCF in the Middle East

Before discussing the limitation of USWMCF in the Middle East, it is important to mention that this feminism also includes criticism in the United States, its homeland. It is critiqued for ignoring the hardships of poverty and racial discrimination that face women of color in the United States (Sanchez, 2012). Johnson (2015) argued that white feminism always tends to overlook, and put down feminists of color. USWMCF 's claim of supporting women's issues includes representation by the focus on white and middle class women. It is one-size-fits-all feminism, where white middle class women are the model all women globally should follow.

In addition, Batley (2014) argued that, while U.S. feminism focuses mainly on women's roles in the workplace, equal wages, and issues of sexual violence, it refuses to discuss women's struggle to keep the balance between motherhood and family, and work and career demands. Batley discussed that this movement calls for women's right to have full time jobs and equal wages, while ignoring other women's choices to work part time or to call for family-friendly policies. This movement does not address the concerns of a large number of women who continue to struggle to balance the choices and opportunities they have. Actually, the goal of this paper is not to embark on a detailed analysis of the limitations of USWMCF in the United States. Therefore, this following section includes discussion of the seven limitations of USWMCF in the Middle East.

3.1 Ignoring the Cultural, Historical and Political Systems that Shape Women in the Middle East

Crowley (2014) defined culture as “the ‘filter’ through which we perceive the world around us” (p. 3). Many scholars argued that USWMCF erased the aspect of culture and does not address this dialectic in its analysis of women's issues in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Al-Sarrani & Alghamdi, 2014; Al-Sibai, 2015; Crowley, 2014; Dixon, 2011; Mohanty, 2006). USWMCF ignores the cultural, historical, economic, political, and religious systems that shape women in different parts of the world. Racial differences, geographical locations, and class position neglected by USWMCF's analysis that treats all women as if they belong to a single category (Crowley, 2014). This feminism also misses the importance of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization that affect gender division and create unique circumstances for women. Because all these different dimensions lack integration in USWMCF's analysis of women in Middle Eastern countries, it is exclusive, not applicable in non-western societies (Crowley, 2014).

The cultural constructs of each society propel certain understandings of gender roles. The United States provides a distinct cultural framework for feminism, as well as the pervasive and ongoing struggles associated with being female that may or may not translate internationally. All countries have vastly differing histories, myths, socioeconomic frameworks and evolving social expectations that impact what it means to be male or female in each society, and thus these issues may translate differently. (Dixon, 2001, para. 9)

It is not necessary that all women strive to reach the same desires because women are raised in different social and historical contexts; they belong to different communities and cultures that affect their understanding of the world (Crowley, 2014). However, as Al-Mannai (2010) pointed out, when USWMCF includes discussion of women's issues in the Middle East and in Third World countries, it looks at these issues from Western standards of women's rights. This results in assuming the oppression of these women.

Western feminist misrepresentation of Arab women forms limited categories of analysis that use a gender lens, which isolates gender from its social, political, and historical contexts. This leads to a very limited understanding of the big picture of women's lives and the dilemmas they are facing. (Al-Mannai, 2010, p. 85)

Hence, USWMCF assumes the unity of women's identities and the universalization of women's experiences all over the world. It does not acknowledge that being a female is not enough to unite all women globally.

3.2 The Misinterpretation of Some Religious Practices in the Middle East

One of the most common criticisms against Islam is that it treats women unjustly. USWMCF interprets many Islamic practices, such as wearing the veil and having no intimate relationship outside of marriage, as controlling women sexuality. In this section, the purpose is to discuss these misconceptions to dispel the myths surrounding these religious practices

3.2.1 Wearing the Veil

USWCMCF sees wearing the veil as a sign of oppression, lack of agency, male domination, ignorance, and backwardness (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahmood, 2005). Women of cover, as the former President G. W. Bush called Afghani women, were used as a way to justify the U.S. war in Afghanistan (Le Renard, 2014). After being liberated from the oppression of the Taliban who were removed from power in 2001, these women did not throw off their burqa. "Did we expect that, once free from the extremist Taliban, these women would go back to belly shirts and blue jeans or dust off their Chanel suits? We need to be more sensible about the clothing of (women of cover)" (Abu Lughod, 2013, p. 35).

Wearing the veil takes different forms in different Islamic communities, and has different meanings. It is affected by history, class, piety, and modernism. For example, Abu-Lughod (2013) discussed some basic points about veiling in Afghanistan. She argued that the burqa was the local form of covering of Pashtun women in this community before the existence of the Taliban. In Hanna Papanek's ethnography in Pakistan in the 1970s (as cited in Abu-Lughod, 2013), Papanek discussed that wearing a burqa provided women in Pakistan and Afghanistan with freedom; they were able to move freely out of gender segregated living spaces, where gender segregation in these communities is a moral requirement. The burqa is a representation of respectable women from well-to-do families who do not need to make a living selling in the streets. Another form of veiling worn by Pashtun women is the chador (a large scarf); it is worn by students who seek professional careers, such as medicine, similar to other Muslim women from Egypt to Malaysia. Additionally, this large scarf represents the poor street sellers. However, these women who wear a burqa or chador were described as mute garbage bags by a German human rights poster (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Another example, in the Iranian Revolution in 1979 women had to be veiled as a symbol of resistance to Westernization and secularization that characterized Iran at that time. In the 1960s-1980s, the Islamic Awakening or Revival (Sahwa) influenced the Muslim world, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and made the veil a symbol of national and Islamic identity. Gender segregation and wearing a black veil in Saudi Arabia were not only symbols of national identity, but also of national distinction, differentiating Saudis from other non-national residents who constituted half of the workforce in the country in the 1970s after the discovery of oil (Le Renard, 2014).

In her ethnographic study of the women's piety movement in the mosques of Cairo, Egypt, Mahmood (2005) argued that these women wear the veil to be close to God. For them, the veil is a religious duty. They are highly critical of those women who wear the veil as a nationalistic identification or just as a symbol of Islamic identity. For them, the veil is a critical marker of piety, as well as "the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 158). Deeb's (2006) ethnographic research on public piety of Muslim women in Lebanon described the veil as not only a representation of an inner state of true piety, but also as a free choice that represents morality. The veil in this community has different forms associated with particular political parties, age groups, or trends. Wearing the veil is part of a new Islamic modernity. The importance of wearing the veil, and the importance of women's participation in the society, are both emphasized in this community. Thus, USWCMCF does not recognize that the veil has different meanings in different societies in Middle Eastern and Third World countries.

3.2.2 Women's Sexuality

Having no intimate relationship outside of marriage is considered by USWCMCF as a way of controlling women's sexuality. USWCMCF does not consider that keeping women purity is a sign of real freedom and integrity in these societies. For instance, Abu-Lughod (2013) mentioned that in some Bedouin tribes in Egypt, it is not only important for women to avoid sexuality, but also men are expected to keep a respectful distance from unrelated women. Sex outside the marriage is dishonorable for both men and women. Abu-Lughod (2013) argued that women in this community are powerful agents who defend their moral standing. In addition, Abu-Lughod (2013) mentioned that some wedding songs describe women who keep their purity as strong and free women: "They lived like falcons. The hunters of the wild couldn't touch them" (p. 118). Women who keep their purity by having no sexual relationship outside the marriage in the pre-Islamic period in Arabic tribes were described as free women who belonged to strong tribes. Having no sexual relationship outside marriage was a sign that differentiated free women from female slaves in that time. After this, Islam came to emphasize the importance of having no sex outside of marriage for men and women, and made that a religious duty.

3.2.3 Viewing Islam as the Oppressor of Women

USWMCf always accuses Islam of being the oppressor of women (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahmood, 2005). It overlooks a very important truth, which is that some cultural practices of some Islamic countries are different from the ideal teachings of Islam. For example, preventing women's education by the Taliban in Pakistan is not one of the Islamic principles. To the contrary, Islam encourages women to be educated (Abdul Azeem, 1995). However, Islam has been accused of being repressive since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and this idea has spread in the West. Unfortunately, Islam has become associated with terrorism (Le Renard, 2014).

In her ethnographic research on infertility and patriarchy in Egypt, Inhorn (1996) mentioned that Islam imposes restrictions on women and gender inequalities. She mentioned that women as daughters, wives, or mothers have an inferior position in society. Although she mentioned that "Islam is the source of infertile women's greatest consolation, providing powerful and convenient rationales for why some women are infertile while most others are not" (Inhorn, 1996, p. 82), she contradicted herself by stating: "although Islam disallows suicide as a final solution to human suffering, Islam does not provide great solace to infertile Egyptian women who seek understanding of their misfortune" (p. 76). She argued that Islam contributes in oppressing these women by permitting both divorce and polygamy, and more importantly by glorifying motherhood (Inhorn, 1996).

If Islam is the oppressor of women, why would Muslim women across the world support Islam if this religion deprives them of their own rights, especially at this time when these women have more emancipatory ways available to them? (Mahmood, 2005). Actually, Islam does give women all their rights. It is an important source of power, and a weapon that Islamic feminists use to call for their rights, this point will be discussed later in this paper. Muslim women have unique challenges in different societies, but it is inappropriate to criticize Islam. Instead, one needs to shed the light on all the problems that face women, not only in the Muslim world, but around the world, from violence, sex trafficking, rape, hunger, etc. without accusing any religion of being the cause of these problems. Instead, one needs to think of who are behind this global inequality (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

3.3 Over Generalizing Women's Conditions

When USWMCf discusses women's issues in the Middle East, it tends to over generalize women's conditions in this area. The Middle East consists of many cultures, languages, and religions. Mohanty (1988) criticized Western feminist research in Third World countries. In her famous article, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse* (1988), Mohanty argued that Western feminism treated all women in the Third World as a "singular group on the basis of a shared oppression" (p. 337). For example, most Western feminists discuss the repressive systems that deprive women of their rights in Saudi Arabia and Iran in general, without specification (Al-Sarrani & Alghamdi, 2014). They ignore the big difference among these countries related to their different religious sects (Sunni or Shi'i). Even Muslim countries with the same Sunni sect can follow different Islamic schools of thought that include: Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafai, and Maliki. All these different sects and schools of thought have different interpretations of Islamic teaching related to gender. For instance, while one states that covering the face of women is compulsory, another stated that it is a choice (Al-Sarrani & Alghamdi, 2014). Consequently, the variation of Islamic practices, and the differences in history, culture and traditions among the Middle Eastern countries, is overlooked by USWMCf.

Subsequently, it is important to study women's lives in Middle Eastern countries, not as a single group, but with focus on their specific history, social class, culture, and politics. It is false to use monolithic terms, such as "Muslim", "Arab", [or] "Middle Eastern" women (Inhorn, 1996, pp. 43-44). According to Abu-Lughod (2013), there is no existence of the term "Muslim woman" or "IslamLand", because one cannot generalize that all Muslim women are the same or that all Muslim countries follow the same system. Generalizing about cultures makes us unable to understand different women's experiences. How could USWMCf generalize women's conditions in Middle Eastern countries and not pay attention to the fact that, even within one Muslim community, women's experiences are different, connected with complicated cultural and moral practices? This generalizing creates the clash of cultures between the "West" and the "Rest", and portrays Muslim women in the Rest as inferiors (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 6).

3.4 Universalizing Western Values

Feminism is not one single unified movement with universal values and principles. There are many different types of feminisms, such as: White feminism, Black feminism, Indigenous feminism, Chicana feminism, Chinese feminism (which is affected by women's roles during the Communist Revolution), and Islamic feminism (which has different forms and ideologies in different Muslim communities). They all ask for women's rights according to their cultural, traditional, religious, and historical context. However, the USWMC's supremacy tries to impose its values and beliefs when discussing women's issues in Middle Eastern and Third World countries. In this way, it contributes to oppressing women in these countries by claiming that they have no agency.

In this section, I would argue that the definition of veil, women's sexuality, freedom, modernity, family, and gender segregation are imposed from an exclusively Western mentality. I have discussed how USWMC misinterpreted wearing the veil and having no sex outside marriage in the previous part of this paper. Now, I will discuss how Muslim women in different parts of the Muslim world perceive freedom, modernity, family and gender segregation.

3.4.1 Freedom

Mahmood (2005) discussed in depth the concept of freedom as connected to feminism. The argument included that there are two types of freedom: positive freedom, which is the ability for "self-mastery and self-government", and negative freedom, which is "the absence of restraints of various kinds on one's ability to act as one wants" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 11). According to this definition, freedom indicates "the ability to autonomously (choose) one's desires, no matter how illiberal they may be" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 12). Consequently, human freedom and rights are seen differently from one society to another, according to its beliefs and culture. Freedom does not mean the same to all women around the world. What is considered freedom in the United States can be seen as humiliation in other societies, and the reverse. Here, again, I remind the reader of the issue of the veil, considered by Western feminism as a sign of oppression, male domination, and humiliation (women who wear a *burqa* as mute trash bags), while it has its own cultural and religious meanings for women who wear it in different communities, and for many women, veil is a sign of freedom.

3.4.2 Modernity

USWMC views the West as the universal example of modernity. The West is the example of technological and scientific advancement. However, does modernity mean the same for everyone? What does it mean to be modern? How do Muslim women think about being modern? Does modernity mean rejecting traditions or culture? Does modernity mean wearing shorts or miniskirts? Does modernity mean following the style of Hollywood stars? Western media tend to associate Islam with anti-modernity and represent many Islamic practices as backward. It uses the status of women as a measurement of the level of modernity.

Measuring modern-ness by the status of women assumes a universal standard of measure, one that is based upon a particular liberal Western feminism notion of emancipation and liberation. That in turn is based upon the notion that modern selves are individualized selves. Stereotypes about Muslim women as backward are particularly grounded in these universalizing notions. (Deeb, 2006, p. 30)

Deeb (2006) discussed the complexity around how pious Muslim women in Lebanon understand being modern. She indicated that these women believe that being modern or civilized in this contemporary world is achieved by having both material and spiritual progress. While material progress means advancement in technology, education, health care and economy, spiritual progress means increasing public piety. According to this view, one cannot be fully modern if either the material or the spiritual was missed. Pious modern Lebanese women in this community were "demonstrating knowledge and practice of authenticated Islam, being dedicated to self-improvement and participating actively in the public life" (Deeb, 2006, p. 30). In this community, modernity is on women's shoulders. It is expressed visibly by their volunteerism (public service), their veil, and having Zaynab (Prophet Mohammed's daughter) as a model of the ideal woman.

Mahmood (2005) provided another meaning of modernity, according to Egyptian religious women. For these women, modernity means being close to God and avoiding imitating the West. They emphasized their religious distinctiveness, expressed in dress and communication. For them, modernity is not treating Islam as abstract values, but applying Islamic teachings in all aspects of life, such as the style of dress, speech, and communication with other people.

3.4.3 Family

Not all women in the world emphasize the importance of the individual such as U.S. White middle-class feminists. According to Suad Joseph, a Middle Eastern gender theorist (as cited in Inhorn, 1996), women in Egypt view society as consisting of families, not individuals. "Socialization within Arab families places a premium on connectivity, or the intensive bonding of individuals through love, involvement, and commitment" (Inhorn, 1996, p. 7). Consequently, the family patriarch considers his wife and children as extensions of himself, whose lives he is free to enter. Family members have influence on each other's lives, and prioritize family solidarity (Inhorn, 1996). The woman in this family has informal power, affecting all the decisions made by the family patriarch. She prefers living in harmony rather than focusing on equality. She does not insist on being the head of the family, but she plays an important role of being the neck that supports the head. Amy Hackett (as cited in Offen, 1988, p. 124) stated: "the American bias in scholarship on feminism is particularly evident in the frequent assumption that equality of rights is the essence of feminism".

In Middle Eastern societies, the success of *one* member of the family, in these societies, is the success of *all* the family. Unlike the individualist societies in the West, in the corporate societies such as Egypt, family comes first, the members are expected to sacrifice their own needs for the greater good of the family. In these societies, the family is the fundamental building block of the society (Inhorn, 1996). USWMCF struggles to understand the importance of family for women in such societies. Do these women consider themselves oppressed in their families? Do these women prioritize self-achievement, and seeking a profession over family solidarity? How do these women keep in balance having a family and seeking self-development and professional advancement?

Another example, while U.S. White middle-class feminists called for the dismantlement of the institution of the nuclear family in the United States in 1970s, naming as the source of women's oppression, Native and African American feminists opposed this call. They wanted to form families, "since the long history of slavery, genocide, and racism had operated precisely by broking up their communities" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 13). Subsequently, before calling for women's rights in the Middle East or elsewhere, USWMCF must understand the value and the meaning of family in these communities and the dynamic of gender in these families.

3.4.4 Gender Segregation

Gender segregation is the norm in Saudi society. Most of the social settings in the Saudi Arabia are separated by gender. This gender segregation has been discussed by Western media as a sign of oppression, and male domination (Le Renard, 2014). The anxiety concerning gender segregation that is expressed by U.S. media shows how the U.S. society evaluates gender segregation according to its own social standards. In the United States, gender mixing is the norm, and maybe a sign of modernity. USWMCF did not acknowledge the meaning and the political and social history of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia before criticizing this practice.

In her ethnographic study in Saudi Arabia, Le Renard (2014) examined the concept of gender segregation. She discussed that before establishing the Saudi state, and before the discovery of oil, women participated in agricultural work, and they did not wear the traditional black veil (abaya). Only women from rich families stayed indoors; consequently, gender segregation was a sign of high status. However, after the establishment of the Saudi state, followed by the oil boom in the 1970s, gender segregation and wearing the black abaya were a sign of Saudisation, which means national identity. At that time, Saudi families had to move from rural areas to live in the cities to get benefits from the numerous new public-sector jobs after the oil boom. Similar to wearing the veil, gender segregation was not only a sign of national identity, but also a national distinction (or even a privilege) of Saudi women, in contrast to non-Saudi residents who flowed to the country after the oil boom and made up about half of the workforce.

In addition, gender segregation was more emphasized after the Islamic Awakening (Sahwa) movement that influenced the Muslim world in the 1980s (Le Renard, 2014). Moreover, women who committed to Islam, in less segregated societies, such as Egypt, and other Arabic countries, wear the veil most of the time outside the home. By contrast, gender segregation in Saudi Arabia gives women the opportunity to wear what they want in the workspace, educational institutes, or any other women-only spaces (Le Renard, 2014).

Thus, because gender mixing is the norm in the West, USWMCF lacks the ability to comprehend the political and the social history of the gender segregation in Saudi Arabia. If USWMCF thinks that studying and working with men is the only way to create success, many Saudi women believed that sitting side-by-side with men is not necessary to succeed and participate in the society (Le Renard, 2014).

3.5 Calling for a Global Sisterhood and Playing the Role of the Savior

USWMCF's representations of women in Middle East countries have a long history. In the 1990s, U.S. feminism was marked by the shift from domestic to global issues, as mentioned in the history of U.S. feminism. It considered itself an international feminism. After September 11, 2001, the images of Muslim women as passive victims connected to a mission to save these women and rescue them (Abu-Lughod, 2013). In her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Abu-Lughod (2013) discussed that in the late nineteenth-century a group of Christian women devoted their lives to saving their Muslim sisters. They expressed their responsibility to make Muslim women's voices heard, to help them get out of ignorance, polygamy, and veiling. Many scholars (Freedman, 2002; Mcleer, 1998) as connected to the Western colonial discourse that try to impose sameness and homogenize all women critique this idea of global sisterhood.

USWMCF plays the role of the savior, helper and the one who civilizes and gives voice to women in Middle East and other Third World countries. It looks for the negative aspects and the worst practices in these countries and discusses them with exaggeration. For example, Bangladesh attracted the West, and more specifically an American television documentary called *Faces of Hope*, the issue of acid violence threw (acid at women). Bangladeshi feminists and some local campaigns discussed these issues for years. However, the efforts of these groups were not acknowledged in the award given to the documentary by an international rights organization. All the incidents of the problem were simplified to fit the claim that showed how those saviors (Abu-Lughod, 2013) rescued these poor women.

Abu-Lughod (2013) examined and criticized many books with personal stories, and that showed how the writers had been oppressed and humiliated by their cultures and religion. The writers of these books escaped from their cultures to the West to be saved. For instance, *Sold* (Muhsen & Crofts, 1991, as cited in Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 91-96), is a book by a Birmingham girl sold into marriage in Yemen by her father. After 13 years of suffering abuse, she was able to escape her brutal Arabic husband, the father of her seven children. In this book published in 1991, "Zana Muhsen and Andrew Crofts, a professional ghostwriter, are listed as coauthors. The book was picked by two new publishers in 1994 and reprinted almost twice a year until 2010" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 96).

Publishers in the West have warmly welcomed this book and many others, which accused Islam of being the oppressor of women, portraying Muslim males as brutal and abusive. To quote Abu-Lughod (2013) again, "These stories each use a particular situation without marking its radical specificity or lack of representativeness and without giving much context" (p. 91). These books, for example, did not mention that Islam forbids forcing marriage, and makes a woman's consent an important condition for the marriage contract. These books did not mention the importance to differentiate between cultural practices and ideal teachings of Islam regarding some issues related to women. These best-selling books lead the reader to think that violence, oppression, and absence of choice are normal for women in Muslim societies. Although there are many ethnographies written by anthropologists that show the real everyday life of women in these Muslim countries, the books that show "memories of suffering by oppressed Muslim women enjoy spectacular and strangely enduring popularity" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 95), because these books help to show that the United States saves these oppressed women from their religion and barbaric cultures.

3.6 Ignoring the Influence of Western Imperialism

In her speech in an Oxford Union debate, Francois-Cerrah (2015) argued that feminism has been hijacked by white middle-class women. According to Francois-Cerrah, White feminism's framework is not the only lens through which women can articulate their suffering and struggles.

She argued that the Western media used many stories of women who are oppressed in countries, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan to justify their ongoing wars and occupations (Fancoise-Cerrah, 2015). USWMCF ignored the Western influence that caused poverty and violence in these countries. Malala Yousafzai's example in Pakistan "serves only to validate white feminism's priorities and perceptions of otherised women, as in need of saving, as grateful recipients of foreign interventions" (Fancois-Cerrah, 2015, para. 19).

The argument here is not to say that women in Afghanistan, under the Taliban rule, were not extremely oppressed; the goal is to spotlight that USWMCF, in its attempts to expose the oppression of Muslim women, fails to notice that the regions where the practices of oppression occur are victims of Western imperialism and colonialism (Al-Sibai, 2015). The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did not liberate women; instead, they increased violence, hardship and loss. Ironically, before the war, women in Iraq had "enjoyed the highest level of education, labor force participation, and even political involvement in the Arab world" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 7).

3.7 Ignoring Women's Strengths and Real Needs

According to U.S. feminism in its second wave, activism, active participation in action movements, and taking feminist research to the street is the essence of feminism and an effective tool for social change (Mies, 1990). USWMCF does not acknowledge that not everybody comes to feminism via activism (Lykke, 2004). Therefore, USWMCF portrays women in the Middle East as voiceless victims with no power. Participating in action movements or street protests is not always the right tool to change women's conditions globally. USWMCF overlooks the reality that women in the Middle East have their own strengths, their own ways to resist, and their own strategies to change their conditions in (visible or invisible) ways that suit their needs and values rather than in activism as defined by USWMCF.

Women have very different means of achieving their desired goals. Many young Muslim women choose to wear the chador, their traditional dress, to resist western sex stereotyping . . . Algerian women, during their revolution, used the chador to hide weapons, to carry guns . . . Chipko women's group in India who prevented a logging company from cutting down their local forest by hugging the trees and thus stopping the machines. If the trees were cut down, their livelihood and culture would have been threatened so they literally took the matter into their own hands. (Crowley, 2014, para. 29)

According to Nelson (1974) (as cited in Inhorn, 1996), because male ethnographers did not have the ability to access women-only spaces in the Middle East, they focused on the public social life where men have the visible authority. That made them portray women as powerless, with no voice. Then, since the mid-1970s, anthropologists focused on how women assumed power. Nelson noted that women in the Middle East have informal power that influences all the decision making. Women have a great degree of power in various spheres of social life.

As noted by ethnographers, the household is probably the primary site of power for most Middle Eastern women. The significant influence and even direct power that women assume over domestic matters is manifest in actual decision making authority and control over household resources, children's education, and marriage negotiations. (Inhorn, 1996, p. 12)

Another example of invisibility interpreted by USWMCF as lacking agency is the status of women in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a country of myths and contradictions, where one can see wealth (especially after oil boom) and a strong commitment to conservative Islam, culture and traditions. One can see the most luxurious female boutiques that sell the high end brands, but women wear black *abayas* in public. One can see the most luxurious cars, but women cannot drive them.

Saudi Arabia has never been colonized before. Also, it is not open for anyone to visit, except if he / she has a visa to work, visit a relative, or conduct a Pilgrimage or *Omrah* (a visit to the Holy Mosque in Makkah). Maybe, because of that, many people in the the United States barely knew about the existence of the country of Saudi Arabia until they heard about the September 11 attacks(Ahmad, 2014). Until today, many portray Saudi Arabia as a vast desert with camels, home of terrorism, and women's oppression(Ahmad, 2014).

Women in Saudi Arabia have important roles in many of its sectors, but in segregated settings, as discussed previously. In these women-only places, using cameras or taking photos of women is not allowed and not acceptable because, according to this culture, a woman's picture is not supposed to be seen by men who are not related to her. The West had no chance to see Saudi women in women-only places; what they know about Saudi women is women dressed in black, which they interpreted as oppression. Muslim women have Islam as a source of power to call for their rights. Muslim feminists have their own way of balancing aspects of modernity and of being true to who they are. Muslim feminists are aware of their rights granted to them by Islam. Al-Mahdi, a feminist Sudanese lawyer, states: "We know our rights; we have learned the Quran and Sharia; we know what Sharia gives us... we are standing up for our sex. We are as equal . . . as efficient . . . as educated . . . as good . . . and as great as men" (as cited in Al-Sarrani & Alghamdi, 2014, p. 10).

Unfortunately, USWMCF does not acknowledge the actual needs of Muslim women. USWMCF ignores a crucial question: Do Muslim women even want US feminists' help to get their rights? According to Al-Sibai (2015), "Muslim women don't need saving. They need enfranchisement within feminism" (para. 38). In this part of this paper, the goal is to present four ethnographic studies in the Middle East that show different examples of how Muslim women display their own strengths and their own ways to resist and change their conditions to suit their different cultures and societies. The first ethnographic study is by Abu-Lughod (2013), who examined Muslim women in Egypt. She argued that her participants were shocked when she told them that some people in the West think that Islam is the main reason behind their oppression and the hardships they have. According to Abu-Lughod, Arab women she has known, including university professors, business women, and villagers, are proud of their Muslim identity and their faith in God. These Egyptian Muslim women can claim their rights through a variety of Islamic institutions to include seeking justice by going to courts. Also, some female villagers will go to elder family members or local religious figures in their community, who have respect and admiration of all the members of the community, to ask for help to get their rights. These women do not mention seeking help from international or Western institutions to liberate themselves. Also, the existence of many religious institutions in Egyptian villages that offer courses on religious studies or teach the Qur'an provides women with a source of power to call for their rights. These women do not see themselves as controlled by their religion or by men, but instead see themselves as powerful agents who know right from wrong. They do not call for the freedom that Western women enjoy; on the other hand, they see Western women as subjects of capitalist demands, exposed to sexual violence, cut off from family, and obsessed by individual success.

Along with Abu-Lughod (2013), Mahmood's (2005) book on pious Egyptian women includes examination of their modalities of agency, and bodily practices such as wearing the veil. Mahmood's (2005) study, which spotlights on the women's mosque movement in Egypt, shows that these women used the language of Islam to empower their position and call for their rights. For them, by being close to God and by applying Islam in all aspects of life, the Islamic world will retrieve its glory and power. The third example is Deeb's (2006) ethnographic research on pious Muslim women in Lebanon. Volunteering and community service were the sources of power for these women to be able to resist and confront poverty, hardship and the loss of loved ones in Israeli attacks in 1996, 1999, and 2000. Unlike the activism encouraged by USWMCF, activism for these women took a different direction, such as "assisting the poor, running an educational center, or raising funds to support martyrs' families" (Deeb, 2009, p. 117) to improve other women's status.

Older women who devoted their lives in community service, religious clerks known for their piety, historical female figures such as Prophet Mohammed's daughter (Zaynab) and his first wife (Khadija), were the sources of inspiration for these pious women. Women's public participation and volunteering are not only considered powerful markers of modernity, but also a necessary component of their piety (Deeb, 2009). According to Deeb (2009), by wearing the veil, volunteering and public participation, these women provide the West with an example that Muslim women can be both pious and modern. Although these women appreciate how Western women participate in their society, they criticize their liberation and their call for gender equality. They link the concepts of spiritual ignorance, violence, materialism, individualism, and the collapse of the family with the West.

The last ethnographic study to mention is Le Renard's (2014) research on urban women in the Saudi capital of Riyadh. Le Renard combined historical and ethnographic analysis to inform us about different kinds of feminisms that have occurred in Saudi Arabia. The first is the Islamic feminism that occurred after the oil boom and Islamic Awakening (Sahwa) movement in the 1980s.

According to Le Renard, this feminism was promoted as a national distinction to call for women's rights in Islam, and to oppose Westernization. Although Islam does not forbid women to work, this kind of Saudi feminism is against women's exploitation by having both family responsibilities and paid work, because men are responsible for providing for their needs. From the 1990s to the 2000s, another type of feminism was promoted, which Le Renard called professional feminism. This feminism is not founded on the strict application of Islam, but on Islam as a religion of moderation. This kind of feminism accommodates with the model of the male breadwinner. Men remain responsible for their families, whereas women work for personal development and to be productive in the society. According to Le Renard (2014), these Saudi women do not question gender inequality; instead they negotiate within their families. They have their own ways to empower their position without conducting any form of contestation. They have the ability to negotiate their rights of mobility, pursuing education, and having a career by using the Quran and other religious resources.

In a conservative country such as Saudi Arabia, these women also use Qur'an and Prophet Mohammed's sayings to differentiate what is an ideal teaching of Islam and what is only a tradition or custom. These young women identify themselves as neither liberals nor conservatives. Thus, from these four ethnographic studies, one can notice that USWMCF lacked the ability to acknowledge that women in the Middle East or in the Third World countries have their own strengths, and their own ways to claim their rights that suit their own values and conditions. Also, it is obvious that there is a huge gap between the U.S. White middle-class feminists who assumes that Muslim women are voiceless victims, and feminists in the Middle East who assume that women in the United States are victims of capitalism, individualism, sexual violence, spiritual ignorance, and family collapse.

4. Suggestions

To build a new understanding between the West and the Rest, and reduce the gap between USWMCF and other types of feminisms, USWMCF must treat the seven limitations included for discussion in this paper. A critical look at research methodologies used so far to investigate women's status in the Middle East remains needed. Doing careful ethnographic research helps us to understand women's life. Through ethnographic study we can understand the life of others without stigmatizing them by examining their everyday life as lived (Abu-Lughod, 2013). It is important to think about these lives as puzzles. We need to stop taking the Western stance as the only lens of analysis, and give ourselves the chance to challenge the way we can view the world, and expand our horizons. It is essential to capture women's experiences, and carefully analyze the nature and causes of women's suffering. Women's experiences are complex and different, not only from one country to another, but even in the same community. Consequently, USWMCF needs to listen, learn and understand what it means to be a human, and what it means to be a person in a particular time and place, surrounded by specific circumstances (Crowley, 2014). USWMCF has to honor women's own interpretation of oppression, freedom, backwardness, and modernity.

It is important to combine ethnographic research with a deep knowledge of the history to be able to understand how women are shaped, and how they view the world through their culture, history, religion, and region. In addition, it is important to give women the chance to write their own autobiographies or their own individual histories to give them voice, and to understand their needs and identify their strengths. USWMCF has to celebrate differences, and do not insist on creating sameness across time and geographic location. USWMCF cannot claim a universal female identity or a global feminism exists. Different regions, different histories, and different circumstances will create different women with different strengths and mentalities. USWMCF needs to understand and respect that not all women desire to reach the same ends. USWMCF needs to rethink what "oppressive" practices just because they do not exist in its own communities. It is essential to remember that by ignoring poverty, global inequalities, international capitalism, imperialism, and blaming religion as repressive, we contribute in oppressing women because of the insult to their religion, which may be the most valuable thing they have to strive for their rights.

5. Conclusion

Women's rights are a global issue. However, feminism is not one universal movement that calls for universal rights for a singular universal female identity. Feminist movements have long histories in different parts of the world. They all call for women's rights, but differently with different ideologies and mentalities. They call for women's rights according to women's specific cultures, religions and regions.

By addressing this issue of women's rights, this paper included discussion of the hegemony of USWMC. This paper presented a very brief overview of the history of U.S. feminism to include the shortcomings of Western feminism in its homeland. Then, this paper included examination of the details within the seven limitations that make USWMC inapplicable in non-Western societies, and specifically in Middle Eastern countries. These limitations included: (a) ignoring the cultural, historical, and political systems that shape women in the Middle East; (b) misinterpretation of some religious practices; (c) generalizing women's conditions; (d) universalizing Western values; (e) playing the role of the savior; (f) ignoring the influence of Western imperialism; and (g) ignoring women's strengths and actual needs. Finally, this paper included suggestions that may help to reduce the gap, and build new understanding between USWMC and other types of feminisms.

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