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Women

What is 'femonationalism'?

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Sara Farris recently published a provocative book entitled [*In the name of women's rights: the rise of femonationalism*](#). In it, she examines how right-wing nationalists, neoliberals, and some feminists and women's equality agencies, all invoke women's rights to stigmatise Muslim men and advance their own political objectives. She argues that there is an important political-economic dimension to this seemingly paradoxical intersection.

It's a timely – but complex – book including case studies from France, Italy and the Netherlands. I called Farris, who is currently senior lecturer in sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London, to dig further into some of the questions that her book raises. This is an edited transcript of our conversation.

NSS: In your book, you talk about feminists and 'femocrats' (female bureaucrats) "betraying their emancipatory politics" and "invoking women's rights to stigmatise Muslim men" to advance their political objectives. Is this a knowing betrayal, or is the work of these women being exploited?

SF: On one hand we have right-wing nationalists exploiting and mobilising issues of gender equality, particularly in campaigns against Muslims. These are right-wing leaders like France's Front National leader Marine Le Pen – she doesn't really care about women's rights, it's obviously just a way to stigmatise Muslims. This is one of the faces of 'femonationalism': nationalists instrumentalising feminism. On the other hand, it also describes how some feminists – and I really want to stress some feminists, a minority – are increasingly attacking Islam as a religion, claiming that it is a religion that oppresses women.

NSS: Let's take the example of the 'burkini ban' in France, which your book considers. Who were the feminists that supported that ban, and do you see them as 'femonationalist' figures?

SF: Several feminists supported the veil bans, and the burkini ban – I'm thinking of very well-known feminist intellectuals like Elizabeth Badinter, as well as the ex-minister for women's affairs, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem. She was a representative of the centre-left, a socialist, and she even suggested that the ban go further than public schools, that they might have to look at the workplace too. Many prominent feminists and 'femocrats' have supported these laws, and this has strengthened anti-Islam positions in the name of women's rights.

NSS: You ask whether there is a "new unholy alliance" between right-wing nationalists, feminists, 'femocrats,' and neoliberals. But the story of white women 'saving' brown women from brown men is not new. How do you see the history of these trends?

SF: I should clarify: I question in the book whether this is really an "unholy alliance" and I choose instead to use the term "convergence" as it better describes the fluidity, the fact that people and political figures from very different political projects are converging in this space, and there are a lot of contradictions in this space.

NSS: "Alliance" would suggest that this is a conscious re-grouping?

SF: Exactly, and I don't think it is.

There is also nothing particularly 'new' about what's going on. We have plenty of examples of imperialists and

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colonialists claiming that they were bringing 'civilisation' to 'uncivilised countries', including women's rights. In Algeria in the 1950s the French military developed this obsession with unveiling Muslim women. Some feminists also supported these colonial enterprises in the name of women's rights. What has been remarkable since 9/11, is the increased popularity of the idea that women's rights are at stake when it comes to Muslim communities in particular.

NSS: But, without generalising, women in many Muslim countries face limits and threats to their rights. Not to mention, in today's context, the rise of ISIS. Couldn't this explain the increasing focus on these areas?

SF: I'm not convinced. One of the justifications for invading Afghanistan was precisely to liberate women, and that was before ISIS and the events unfolding after 9/11.

NSS: Is there a relationship between your book and Terrorist assemblages: homonationalism in queer times by academic Jaspir Puar? It argued a decade ago that dynamics of sexuality, race, gender, nation, class, and ethnicity are realigning in relation to contemporary forces of securitisation, counterterrorism, and nationalism.

SF: Puar's book was a source of inspiration. She was very acute in portraying this phenomenon of some representatives of the LGBT community in the US supporting American nationalism, especially after 9/11, and supporting anti-Islam campaigns, under the idea that Muslims are against gay rights. I'm not looking at gay rights, I'm focused on women's rights, but Puar opened up a very important conversation. I'm also putting emphasis on the political-economic foundations of femonationalism.

NSS: Indeed, your book looks at increasing demand in the west for feminised labour – childcare, elderly care, cleaning, domestic labour – and how this relates to the treatment of Muslim women migrants in particular.

SF: This is one of the main contributions I tried to make, to shed light on the economic aspects of this femonationalist ideology, and of Islamophobia. The idea of migrants being job-stealers is very male. I have in mind the poster by UKIP, for example – the British white man who is begging in the street. My question was: where are the women migrants? They're not really represented in the media as job-stealers, but as obedient passive victims of their own supposedly backward cultures.

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In Italy, the former leader of the very racist party Northern League, Roberto Maroni, said: "There cannot be regularisation for those [migrants] who entered illegally, for those who rape women or rob a villa, but certainly we will take into account for regularisation all those situations that have a strong social impact, as in the case of migrant caregivers". These caregivers, of course, are mostly women. This is the sexualisation of racism. Women are presented as victims for whom, if properly assimilated, space can be made – whereas men are the unredeemable others. Anti-Islam feminists talk about Muslim women's emancipation, but what does this emancipation look like? They are doing jobs that lots of feminists don't want to do. The struggles of the 1970s were precisely about liberating women from household chores and domestic labour.

NSS: Your book seems to suggest that all programmes to get women migrants into work are problematic as they "tacitly encourage" the adoption of "western feminists' notion of emancipation through productive labour". But many migrant women would have worked in their countries of origin too.

SF: Some people say 'at least they have a job'. Yes, of course. And caring, cleaning and other social reproductive jobs are work and should be recognised as such. But they are often low-pay, low-status and exploitative jobs, often

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without contracts. As feminists, we need to put social reproduction very high on the agenda again. In the last ten, 20 years, liberal feminism has become more mainstream. We need to go back to very important issues like free universal childcare. It's important to join the battle of women's domestic labour organisations. For example there's an ongoing struggle by cleaners at the London School of Economics, many of whom are female migrant workers, fighting for recognition, against zero hours contracts.

NSS: Your research also looks at the emphasis on motherhood in civic integration programmes, and how this relates to essentialist ideas around the woman as the bearer of culture.

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A still from a Dutch government 'integration' video in which the 'typical' mother says: "If kids come from a good family in which they've been positively stimulated...they'll be fine whatever happens."

SF: This is one of the biggest contradictions of these civic integration programmes: there's so much emphasis on teaching Muslim migrant communities women's rights, and feminist ideas, but then these programmes contain rather traditional ideas around women as fundamentally mothers. In the Netherlands, they even ask women to demonstrate that they are engaging in the process of proper motherhood – they need to take an exam, in which they answer questions about Dutch models of motherhood and parenthood. They need to bring in evidence of their efforts, for example that they went to meet their children's teacher, that they maybe did some volunteering work. There is a huge emphasis on women as the mothers of the future generation. They need to be culturally assimilated to western values in order to transmit them.

NSS: What if, for fear of demonising Muslim men, or contributing to anti-Islam agendas, things swing in the opposite direction and efforts to support and empower Muslim migrant women are rolled back? Is that a risk?

SF: This is a classical dilemma, when anti-sexism is played out against anti-racism. It's something Black feminists in the US wrote a lot about in the 1960s and 1970s and continue to debate: how can we denounce sexism in our communities, when we know that could then be used to attack Black men? There is no easy answer. We need to support in every way the possibility for women of any community to denounce sexism wherever it presents itself. The question we should ask is: are we really enabling this? How can we support the struggle of these women, in this context of incredibly harsh and rising Islamophobia? The struggle against racism and sexism must go hand in hand.

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Source [Open Democracy](#).

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