



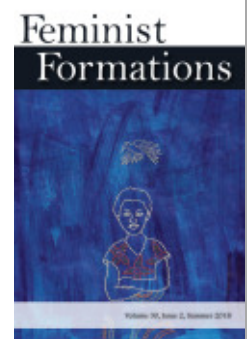
PROJECT MUSE®

In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism

Sara R. Farris (review)

Sasha A. Khan

Feminist Formations, Volume 30, Issue 2, Summer 2018, pp. 298-302 (Review)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2018.0030>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/702866>

raises questions about issues of consent that could be triggering for survivors of sexual assault. For example, when describing an alleged sexual misconduct case between a 17-year-old supervisor and a male worker, Hammad suggests that the sexual contact might have been consensual because the worker did not complain or tell anyone about what happened (169). Although her intention is to highlight the ways in which factory owners and the state policed the sexuality of working-class men, particularly when their behavior defied heteronormativity and threatened productivity, the suggestion that the worker's silence could have been a sign of consent might be triggering for someone who has been sexually assaulted and has been too afraid or ashamed to speak about it. However, if handled with care (and with a trigger warning), chapter 5 has the potential to generate excellent discussions about the possibilities and limitations of legal records for the study of sexuality. Regardless of which chapters one assigns, *Industrial Sexuality* will likely be one of students' favorite readings, and a bestseller among scholars for many years to come.

Nefertiti Takla is an assistant professor of history at Manhattan College in New York. She received her PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her primary area of expertise is modern Middle Eastern history with a sub-specialty in gender studies. She is currently working on a book about the effects of World War I on the social history and political economy of Alexandria, Egypt. Her research has been published in journals and collected volumes, including *Egypte/Monde arabe* and *Trafficking in Women 1924–1926*.

In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism by Sara R. Farris. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 258 pp., \$64.59 hardcover, \$25.95 paper.

Sasha A. Khan

A growing body of work in transnational feminism, postcolonial studies, and critical race theory addresses the ways in which people of color are marginalized in Western European countries as the perpetual "Other" regardless of citizenship status. Scholars such as Fatima El-Tayeb, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Lila Abu-Lughod have critiqued rescue narratives in Western European and North American countries. These narratives perpetually frame female and LGBTQ migrants of color as victims in need of rescue from patriarchal forms of violence committed by male migrants of color. They function to reify Western exceptionalism and perpetuate ongoing colonialism and imperialism. Particularly after the events of September 11, 2001, the quintessential migrant subjects in these rescue narratives have come to be Muslims.

Contributing to this body of scholarship, *In the Name of Women's Rights*, by sociologist Sara Farris, provides a timely and incisive analysis of the rise of what she refers to as *femonationalism* in France, Italy, and the Netherlands between 2000 and 2013. An abbreviation for feminist and femocratic nationalism, Farris coined the term “femonationalism” to describe the simultaneous invocation of women’s rights by Western European right-wing parties and neoliberals seeking to institute xenomistic¹ and racist policies, on the one hand, and prominent feminists and femocrats who pit Islam as antithetical to women’s rights, on the other. In other words, femonationalism is a form of European white saviorism that is justified through gendered, sexualized, classed, and racialized discourses of Western exceptionalism. Focusing on civic integration programs, Farris discusses femonationalism in three interconnected ways: as a convergence, as an ideological formation, and as a neoliberal political economy. She writes, “I suggest that femonationalism must be understood as an ideology that springs from a specific mode of encounter, or what I prefer to call a convergence, among different political projects, and that is produced by, and productive of, a specifically economic logic” (5). Ultimately, Farris contributes an understanding of an underlying economic rationale for the femonationalist narrative of Muslim and non-Western migrant men as perpetrators of violence against Muslim and non-Western migrant women in Western European national imaginaries.

Utilizing a diverse set of methods, including interviews, participant observation, content and discourse analysis, and statistical analysis, Farris surveys feminists, women’s organizations, femocrats, and the most prominent right-wing nationalist groups in each of the three countries.² She demonstrates that the common denominator between these converging (rather than explicitly allied) groups is their shared belief in the superiority of Western values, including “emancipation, individual rights, and secularism” (55). Situating populism as “a political style or a rhetorical device whose conceptual signifier lies in nationalism and its historical (racist) institutions” (58; original emphasis) rather than an underlying explanation, Farris draws on postcolonial feminist and critical race theory in order to illustrate that femonationalism is a reenactment of unresolved Western European colonial and nationalistic fantasies.

Examining civic integration programs in France, Italy, and the Netherlands, Farris argues that the nationalist and liberal invocation of women’s rights buttresses colonial, gendered, and racialized ideologies of migrant women. On the one hand, non-Western migrant women are incorporated into the nation “as victims to be rescued, injured and exotic subjects lacking autonomy to whom western countries promise shelter and liberation” (102). On the other hand, non-Western migrant women are excluded from the nation as “the main carriers of the non-western migrant culture itself, the depositaries and reproducers par excellence of its codes, especially on account of their roles as mothers” (102). Thus, civic integration programs are geared toward “the *de*-nationalization and *re*-nationalization” (103) of non-Western migrant women, especially Muslims.

Paradoxically, non-Western migrant women's liberation is understood to be located in domestic and care work—what Western European feminists have often construed as a site of oppression for women. In this way, Farris contends that civic integration programs reify a “western feminist teleological notion of emancipation through productive work” (119). She links this feminist progress narrative to the erasure of colonialism in Western European national imaginaries.

Contending that the narrative of Muslim and migrant men as perpetrators of violence against Muslim and migrant women obscures political-economic structures, Farris uses a political-economic lens to examine the femonationalist rescue impulse in France, Italy, and the Netherlands. Since Muslim and migrant women fulfill social reproductive roles in the economies of these three countries, Farris sees their labor as central to Western European societies. Thus, there is an underlying political-economic rationale for portraying Muslim and migrant women as recuperable subjects within Western European national imaginaries. Farris argues that the femonationalist convergence between seemingly disparate groups should be understood as an effect of shifts in the political economy. As a result, she concludes, “Confronting femonationalism thus requires not only ideological refutation but also a concrete analysis of its political-economic foundations” (182). This work suggests, therefore, that disrupting the rise of femonationalism can only occur if we attend to its political-economic dimensions alongside its ideological underpinnings.

While not explicitly defining it, Farris appears to be using the word “feminist” to describe theorists, politicians, and activists who self-identify as and/or are commonly associated with feminism in the three locations. A major implication of *In the Name of Women's Rights* is that the femonationalist strategy adopted by these feminist scholars, politicians, and activists is contradictory, unsuccessful, and needs to be reconsidered. These femonationalist actors adopt a strategy of framing economic integration in the Netherlands, France, and Italy as essential for Muslim and migrant women on the basis of a presumed oppressive culture, religion, and/or race. Farris explains how this strategy, “while being presented as an instrument through which migrant (and Muslim) women should be enabled to *undo gender*, instead produces and intensifies both the conditions for racial discrimination and for *doing and perpetuating gender roles*” (118; original emphasis). In a way, this femonationalist strategy parallels color-blind racist rhetoric, which claims to “undo” race and racism, but has been critiqued extensively by critical race theorists for reproducing white supremacist logics. Thus, the femonationalist convergence between feminist academics, politicians, and activists, on the one hand, and right-wing parties and neoliberals, on the other, in the name of women's rights ultimately reifies racial and gender hierarchies.

There are several moments in the text when Farris seems to suggest that LGBT rights may be mobilized in a way similar to women's rights in our current

political climate. However, she does not examine these connections beyond parenthetically mentioning LGBT rights alongside women's rights. There are several parallels between Farris's work on femonationalism and Jasbir Puar's work on homonationalism. Indeed, when asked in an interview about the connections between her own work and Puar's, Farris stated,

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. (Seth-Smith 2017)

Thus, Farris makes note of how Puar's work is part of a genealogy that enabled, but is distinct from, her own project. These connections, while not expanded upon by Farris, could constitute a productive point of investigation for future researchers. *In the Name of Women's Rights* should be of interest to scholars who found *Terrorist Assemblages* useful.

Although Farris's analysis focuses upon France, the Netherlands, and Italy, it is also applicable to other contexts. I was personally struck by the timeliness of this book from my own position within the United States. Femonationalism provides an important lens for viewing US politics. For instance, President Trump's travel ban, described as a Muslim ban, was justified by invoking women's rights and gay rights. The ways in which femonationalism may play out in other contexts is another rich area for further inquiry.

Ultimately, Sara Farris provides an incisive intervention in how we understand rescue narratives of Muslim and non-Western migrant men as perpetrators of violence against Muslim and non-Western migrant women. Farris demonstrates that the seemingly paradoxical femonationalist convergence between right-wing parties, neoliberals, feminists, and femocrats requires us to consider the political economy and ideology side-by-side. A productive starting point for many future research projects, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* constitutes an important contribution to a range of fields including but not limited to critical race theory, transnational studies, gender and sexuality studies, political science, and sociology.

Sasha A. Khan is a PhD student in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Oregon State University. Their research interests include queer of color critique, transgender studies, crip theory, Two-Spirit critiques, and South Asian diaspora. They can be reached at khansas@oregonstate.edu.

Notes

1. Taking a cue from mad and neurodivergent communities on Twitter, I use the suffix -misia as an alternative to -phobia to avoid using saneist language.

2. These are the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) in the Netherlands, the Front National (FN) in France, and the Lega Nord (LN) in Italy.

References

Seth-Smith, Niki. 2017. "What Is Femonationalism?" openDemocracy. July 13. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/niki-seth-smith/what-is-femonationalism>.