

## Investigating the Intellectual Bifurcation Between Feminist Theory and Sociology of Religious Leadership

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### ABSTRACT

Despite rich theoretical developments occurring within feminist theory, Avishai and Irby (2017) have identified that a problematic ‘intellectual bifurcation’ (652) exists between the fields of ‘feminism’ and ‘sociology of religion.’ This means that developments in feminist knowledge and theorising may not be being used by sociologists of religion to frame their work on gender. The present study elaborates on the work of Avishai and Irby (2017) by conducting a literature review which considers empirical sociological journal publications in the area of religion, gender and leadership between January 2001 to December 2021. Using a combination of citation analysis and the analytical codes developed by Avishai and Irby (2017), the findings of this article suggest that the existence of the intellectual bifurcation subtly persists, as scholars in the subdiscipline of sociology of religion doing work on gender and leadership include some gender or feminist citations in background or literature review sections, but these are rarely substantial or timely, nor do they trickle down to influence the conceptual frameworks used to situate analyses or discussions. The article concludes by presenting some considerations on using citation analysis to better understand patterns of knowledge transmission and bifurcation.

**Keywords:** feminism, sociology of religion, gender, leadership, literature review

### INTRODUCTION

In 1985, Stacey and Thorne posited that the wealth of sociological work being done on gender has yet to transform sociological knowledge. Gender and feminist scholarship, they observed, seemed to be segregated to specialised courses and publication spaces rather than influencing overall theory, methodology, or canonising within sociology. They called this phenomenon the ‘missing feminist revolution’ (MFR). Twenty years later, the persistence of the MFR in sociology was again evaluated by several feminist scholars (Acker, 2006; Lorber, 2006; Ray, 2006; Rupp, 2006; Stacey, 2006; Thorne, 2006; Williams, 2006). This symposium suggested that the ‘revolution’ was still missing, or perhaps failed, as individual subdisciplines remained disconnected from each other and global contexts. A similar finding was documented by Avishai and Irby’s 2017 literature review of one sub-discipline: sociology of religion. Their survey of 32 years of religion scholarship (234 articles published between 1985 and 2015) demonstrated that, while religion scholars showed interest in gender, most failed to engage gender theories or feminist scholarship and the two fields remained bifurcated.

Among the contributions of Avishai and Irby’s (2017) review is an analytical framework for evaluating the salience of both gender and feminist scholarship in sociology publications (Avishai and Irby, 2017: 649; [Table A1](#) in [Appendix A](#)); however, their scope allowed them to only consider publication venues at the centre of the sociological field: 6 ‘top’ (Avishai and Irby, 2017: 653) or high impact factor journals including *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Social Forces*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Sociology of Religion* and *Gender & Society*. While the centre is a good place to search for patterns of knowledge production (Collins, 1998), insight and innovation can also come from the margins (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989; McLaughlin, 1998). Previous studies looking for the MFR at the centre of an intellectual field may have overlooked innovative feminist applications occurring on the fringes, including work published in lower impact factor journals or in non-sociological venues. If such applications exist, the MFR might be redefined as ‘marginalised’ (there, but outside of the centre) rather than ‘missing’ (not there). The present study provides an empirical evaluation of the MFR within sociology of

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religion surveying the margins of this field as well as the centre, with a specific focus on empirical studies of women in religious leadership at the turn of the twenty-first century.

To analyse our data, we developed a thematic citation analysis approach and employed the feminist/gender analytical framework developed by Avishai and Irby (2017). Our approach enabled us to examine feminism's influence on publications in sociology and other disciplinary journals to answer the research question: 'Are contemporary feminist-informed theories being applied by early twenty-first century sociologists of religion in their study of gender and religious leadership to set up their data collection or conceptualise their results and recommendations?'

## **THE STUDY OF GENDER AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Scholarship in gender and religion continues to provide an interesting location to search for the MFR. While all social institutions have histories of gender-based exclusion, religious institutions are unique in that many still overtly sanction systems of patriarchy and gender-based oppression (Castelli, 2001; Plaskow, 1997; Strenski, 2021). Investigating the possible existence of the MFR in research on women's religious leadership is important, in part, because recommendations in this area may have practical applications for equity seeking religious women. Most conventional religions inhabit the paradox of being predicated on legitimised systems of male domination while also espousing a majority of women adherents and, increasingly, many women religious leaders. As women exert religious authority, the tensions between agency and submission, contemporary imaginaries and the imaginaries of tradition play out in their everyday lives and stretch the structural sinews of religious organisations (Mahmood, 2005). Both feminist scholars and sociologists of religion have been interested in how women enter religious leadership roles, and the impact their leadership has on religious organisations (Avishai, 2008; Avishai *et al.*, 2015; Chang, 1997; Chaves, 1996; Charlton, 1997; Darwin, 2018; Konieczny and Chaves, 2000; Lummis and Nesbitt, 2000; Moon *et al.*, 2019; Ozorak, 1996; Prickett, 2015; Sullins, 2000; Zikmund *et al.*, 1998). What follows provides a brief history of this work and details some of the shifts happening around the turn of the twenty-first century.

The most sizeable body of sociology of religion literature at the intersection of gender, religion and leadership exists in the study of Christianity. While women have always played a significant role within the Christian church, as Adams (2007) notes, 'for most of Christian history, official church policies excluded women from holding clergy positions' (80). While some denominations (like the Catholic church) still limit the participation of women in officially ordained ministry (Ecklund, 2006), many other denominations began fully ordaining women in the mid-1900's (Chaves, 1996). A significant amount of early sociological work in this field was preoccupied by the history of this shift in a predominantly American context and examined the experiences of the 'first' or 'pioneering' (often white) women clergy (i.e., Chang, 1997; Chaves, 1996; Charlton, 1997; Konieczny and Chaves, 2000; Lummis and Nesbitt, 2000; Ozorak, 1996; Sullins, 2000; Zikmund *et al.*, 1998).

Since 2001, empirical work in this area has continued to focus on religious occupational gender inequality whether interdenominationally (Adams, 2007; Schleifer and Miller, 2018; Steeves, 2017) or denomination specific (Bagilhole, 2003; Bagilhole, 2006; Ecklund, 2006; Robbins and Greene, 2018; Sturges, 2020), as well as considering attitudes of lay people (Adams, 2007; Smith and Stevens, 2003; Stewart-Thomas, 2010) or male clergy (Fry, 2019; Fry, 2021) towards women clergy. Work being done in the early 2000s has also begun to consider the intersectional experiences of racialised women, both in ethnic churches in the global north (Barns, 2006; Chan, 2015; Huang, 2017; Lee, 2004; Min, 2008; Wong *et al.*, 2017) and in congregations in the global south (Agadjanian, 2015; Cazarin and Mar Griera Llonch, 2018; Hua, 2018; Le, 2017; Lin *et al.*, 2010; Ojong, 2017; Wagner-Ferreira, 2011).

Another development in work being done at the intersection of religion, gender and leadership in the twenty-first century is the growing sociological interest in women's experiences of leadership within non-Judeo-Christian religions. The study of Islam provides one example of this. Since the 1970s, some Muslim women have challenged the interpretation that oppressive gender dictates are of divine origin (Jawad, 2009). Islamic feminists seek to retain their religious beliefs while also addressing gender equality in reading religious texts from a woman's perspective (Jawad, 2009). Ismail (2016) notes that Muslim women have historically taken on respected teaching roles, although their ability to access formal religious education and publicly inhabit these leadership roles varies across time and location. The rise of movements like Islamic feminism has prompted empirical research in the sociology of religion to consider the source and experience of women's religious authority in Islam in both the global north (Nalborczyk, 2016; Sharify-Funk and Kassam Haddad, 2012) and south (Cieślowska, 2016; Kloos, 2016; Sultanova, 2011). Some scholars have also begun to take an interest in women's emerging leadership in other established religions like Hinduism (Alisauskiene, 2021; DeNapoli, 2019) and Buddhism (Hannah, 2012), while others have turned their attention to alternative or 'new' religious movements (NRMs). Existing at the margins of dominant religious organisations, NRMs can sometimes be places of equity seeking and experimentation (Alisauskiene, 2021; Vance, 2015). Some NRMs boast women founders, charismatics, mediums, gurus, and other leaders (Alisauskiene, 2021;

**Table 1.** Inclusion criteria

Include
Peer reviewed English language journal article
Empirical research
Engagement with sociology (citations or theory)
Engagement with religion
Engagement with leadership
Engagement with gender
Published between January 2001 – December 2021

Eller, 1993). Scholars of religion have become interested in studying women's agency in these contexts, including Pagan movements (Alisauskienė, 2021; Vance, 2015), Davidians and Branch Davidians (Pitts, 2009), the Red Tent movement (Castro, 2020) and Church of the Latter-day Saints (Kane, 2018).

As sociologists of religion have begun to increasingly consider women leaders in various religions and contexts, the extent to which they use gender theories, contemporary feminism, or other analytical lenses to help frame diversity in religious women's leadership opportunities and experiences requires further investigation.

## METHODOLOGY

A literature review methodology was chosen for this study following the example of previous empirical work investigating the MFR (Avishai and Irby, 2017; Ferber and Brun, 2011; Wills and Risman, 2006). While not attempting to replicate any of these studies, our literature review was influenced by some of their techniques like Wills and Risman's (2006) use of citation analysis and Avishai and Irby's (2017) gender/feminist analytical framework.

### Search Strategy

An academic librarian worked on our team to develop our detailed search strategy. A comprehensive search of the literature took place on March 3, 2022, through the following databases: Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science), Sociological Abstracts (ProQuest), Atla Religion Database (EBSCO), SAGE journals (SAGE), JSTOR (JSTOR), Wiley Online Library (Wiley). The reproducible searches for all databases, as well as the PRISMA diagram outlining the identified, excluded, and included records, are hosted at <https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/NREQ7U>. Search results were limited to English language, peer-reviewed journal articles between 2001-2021 inclusive, and excluded grey literature. This alleviated the need for a translator and allowed the team to focus on the state of the recent formal, scholarly discussion of religion and gender. The publication period between 2001-2021 was chosen because of the shift in the decentralisation of the sub-field occurring around this time when more sociologists of religion began to consider the leadership experiences and opportunities of racialised women, and women leading in non-Judeo-Christian religions and non-western contexts (Avishai *et al.*, 2015). Temporally, this coincides with shifts in feminist theorising in similar directions. While certainly still contested and fluid as a concept, there appears to be some consensus that contemporary, or 'fourth wave' (Allen, 2023: 908), feminism is fundamentally critical, intersectional, reflexive, global, deconstructing of binaries, and politically motivated to decentre several interrelated systems of oppression (i.e., patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism) to incite social change (Allen, 2023; Avishai and Irby, 2017; Collins, 2019; Ferguson, 2017; Lorber, 2006; Ray, 2006; Reger, 2014; Wills and Risman, 2006). Thus, our team wondered if the two fields of sociology of religion and contemporary feminism were conversing in less central publication spaces.

### Selecting Studies

After the initial search results were gathered, we exported our results to Covidence systematic review management software. Two independent reviewers screened each article based on the inclusion criteria outlined in [Table 1](#). Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

In screening for 'sociology,' we included articles published in sociological journals, as well as those which claimed to be sociological/use sociological theory. In screening for 'gender and leadership,' we included studies whose primary stated focus was either:

- (1) women in formal authority roles sanctioned by the religious institution (i.e., fully ordained women pastors in a protestant Christian denomination) or
- (2) women in informal authority positions in religious contexts where their formal recognition is organisationally contested (i.e., Islamic women speakers or non-ordained Catholic pastors).

The first round of screening was at the level of title and abstract, eliminating any articles obviously outside of the criteria. This resulted in 145 articles being moved forward for screening at the level of full text review.

**Table 2.** Data attributes (n = 66)

Attribute	Article count
<b><i>Study design</i></b>	
Qualitative	48
Quantitative	14
Mixed methods	4
<b><i>Religion of participants</i></b>	
Christianity	47
Islam	7
Judaism	2
Other	4
Multiple	4
<b><i>Study location</i></b>	
United States	30
United Kingdom	12
Canada	2
Other	22
<b><i>Top 3 publication venues</i></b>	
Gender, Work and Organization	7
Journal for the Academic Study of Religion	5
Sociology of Religion	4

Secondary screening included a thorough analysis of the full contents of each article to determine eligibility, resulting in the inclusion of 66 articles that fit all inclusion criteria.

### Data Attributes

**Table 2** outlines some relevant attributes of the 66 articles included for analysis.

While **Table 2** only displays the top three most frequent publication venues in our sample, it is significant to note that a very wide variety of publication venues were represented. Articles were published in 43 unique journals, including some oriented towards work and occupations (i.e., *Gender, Work & Organization*), general religion (i.e., *Sociology of Religion*), specific religions (i.e., *Comparative Islamic Studies*), regional studies (i.e., *Asian Studies Review*), or gender/feminism (i.e., *Journal of Gender Studies*).

### Analysing the Data

After finalising the sample, all 66 articles were uploaded into NVivo qualitative data analysis software for analysis. Two distinct sections of each article were coded using two distinct coding schemas:

- (1) the ‘frontmatter’ of each article, defined as all writing prior to the methods section of each article,<sup>1</sup> was coded inductively, and
- (2) the ‘backmatter’ of each article, defined as the analysis, discussion and/or conclusion sections of the article, was coded using a combination of deductive and inductive coding.

Two different coding schemas were used because there are differing academic conventions for literature versus discussion/analysis and conclusion sections in scholarly articles. An inductive citation analysis schema worked for the frontmatter sections as this is conventionally where authors cite relevant background literature, and such citations could be coded to indicate feminist (or other) engagement. The backmatter sections of articles, however, are conventionally where data is interpreted to suggest importance and implications. Simply analysing citations here would not have captured the complexity of these written interpretations. We thus coded authors’ communications around the importance and implications of their findings in this section of articles, applying the framework of Avishai and Irby (2017) for identifying feminist and gender conceptual frameworks and developing our own codes to identify ‘other’ frameworks (as described below).

To capture type of literature engagement in the frontmatter of each article, the team employed an iterative, qualitative form of thematic citation analysis. Citation analysis has been used to study knowledge claims more broadly (Budd, 1999; Riviera, 2013; Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022) and, relevant to the context of this study, to understand the intellectual diffusion of feminist concepts like ‘intersectionality’ (Keuchenius and Mügge, 2021; Moradi et al., 2020). We followed Boyack et al.’s (2008) definition of a citation as: ‘a mention of a reference within the full text of a document. A reference can be mentioned one or more times in a document. Each mention is an in-text citation’ (60). When examining in-text citations, codes were developed by the research team inductively

<sup>1</sup> On the rare occasion when an article did not clearly identify a methods section with a heading, the team ascertained by context in the text where this transition happened and stopped coding for literature when methods began to be outlined.

(Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2021) to document what bodies of literature were being used to frame each study. This ‘type of literature engagement’ coding occurred in two stages in which each article was analysed independently by two team members, and discussion around code development and disputes were resolved in team meetings. In the first stage, context was considered and multiple citations were coded together to capture general patterns of literature engagement. For example, an entire paragraph of an article referring to work done in sociology around congregational resources was coded ‘Sociology of Religion,’ a paragraph describing the glass ceiling was coded ‘gender/feminist,’ and a few sentences with citations referencing sections of the *Qur’an* was coded as ‘Theology or religious teaching.’ Through this collaborative process, 32 unique ‘types of literature’ codes were developed.<sup>2</sup>

In the second stage, two reviewers again reviewed each article in a similar manner to code individual in-text citations in the frontmatter to a previously established ‘type of literature’ code based on the cited article’s title and publication venue. For example, a citation from an article published in *Sociology of Religion* was coded as ‘Sociology of Religion,’ a citation from an article published in *Gender & Society* was coded ‘gender/feminist,’ and a citation from a passage of the *Qur’an* was coded ‘Theology or religious teaching.’ It is important to note here that gender literature and feminist literature were coded into the same category entitled ‘gender or feminist literature’ due to the researchers’ inability to fully evaluate the referenced article’s adherence to contemporary feminism based on the reference.<sup>3</sup>

When coding for conceptual frameworks in the backmatter sections, the researchers combined deductive and inductive approaches. First, we deductively used the coding schema created by Avishai and Irby in 2017 (**Table A1** in **Appendix A**) to code each article to one of their categories of feminist (critical, cultural, herstory or systematic), gender (rigorous/systematic<sup>4</sup> or rudimentary), gender as site, or marginalising gender theoretical frameworks based on the descriptions provided by the authors (see **Table A1** in **Appendix A**).

While not seeking to duplicate their analysis parameters, we attempted remain faithful to Avishai and Irby’s (2017) recorded descriptions. In evaluating the backmatter of sample articles, we were able to distinguish between feminist and gender orientations based on textual context. We interpreted Avishai and Irby’s (2017) ‘feminist theoretical framework’ categories to mean the article engages timely and relevant feminist terminology, expresses a call for change, and emphasises the salience of gender in the framing and analysis. For example, an article which considered whether ethnic churches were also progressive in supporting women in ministry through the lens of a complex intersection of race, gender and class was coded as ‘Feminist-Critical.’ We understood Avishai and Irby’s (2017) gender analysis framework, on the other hand, to include the use of gender-oriented theory without employing feminism’s interdisciplinary or liberatory ends. For example, an article which talked about ethnic churches being gendered organisations without racialisation theory or considering the possible equity implications of these gender roles was coded ‘Gender-rigorous/systematic.’ If no feminist or gender theory was engaged in the backmatter of an article, the article was coded either ‘gender as a site’ or ‘marginalising gender’ in alignment with the descriptions in **Table A1** in **Appendix A**.

Second, we inductively looked at the backmatter of articles coded ‘gender as site’ or ‘marginalising gender’ to assess alternate theoretical frameworks used if not feminist or gender. Through paying close attention to the analytical lenses authors used to discuss their data, new codes were again developed collaboratively. These included ‘conceptual framework’ codes under the categories of culture, economics, occupations and organisations, religion, social constructivist or interpretive, social psychology and theology.

In summary, our coding of the data considered:

- (1) if gender/feminist sources were used to contextualise studies in the frontmatter of articles through literature engagement;
- (2) if feminist or gender conceptual frameworks influenced the author(s)’ discussion around empirical findings in the backmatter of articles; and
- (3) what literature and conceptual frameworks were used alongside or instead of gender or feminist.

Next, we consider the findings emerging from each of these areas of analysis in turn.

## GENDER/FEMINIST LITERATURE ENGAGEMENT

Analysis of the frontmatter sections of articles presents a mixed picture of the place of gender and feminist theorising in sociology of religion, gender and leadership scholarship. Our findings suggest that gender or feminist scholarship is being peripherally referenced by most articles published at this intersection. **Table 3** describes the

<sup>2</sup> See the complete codebook at <https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/NREQ7U>.

<sup>3</sup> Also, a very limited number of citations were unable to be coded because the title and publication journal were not in English.

<sup>4</sup> Avishai and Irby’s ‘systematic’ category for gender analysis was coded as ‘rigorous’ in our NVivo codebook as it is not good practice using this software to have two codes with the same label.

**Table 3.** Top 5 types of literature cited by number of citations across the sample

Type of literature coded	Number of articles with at least 1 citation (n = 66)	Number of citations across the sample
Sociology of religion	61	1,471
Organisations and occupations	37	438
Gender/feminist	41	346
History of religion/group	42	273
Theology/religious teachings	43	217

**Table 4.** Density of within article citations for top 3 types of literature cited

Type of literature coded	Number of articles with at least 1 citation (n = 66)	High engagement articles (10 or more citations)	Low engagement articles (9 or fewer citations)
Sociology of religion	61	45 (74%)	16 (26%)
Organisations and occupations	37	10 (27%)	27 (73%)
Gender/feminist	41	11 (27%)	30 (73%)

top five types of literature referenced by articles in our sample, based on the total number of citations in frontmatter across the sample.

As **Table 3** suggests, 41 of the 66 articles contained at least one ‘gender/feminist’ citation, for a total of 346 citations occurring in the frontmatter across the sample. Gender/feminist literature was the third most frequently referenced type of background literature based on citation count. This result provides support to the earlier assertions of Wills and Risman (2006) and Avishai and Irby (2017) that gender studies does seem to be garnering attention in the field of sociology and the subdiscipline of sociology of religion; however, this may tell only part of the story. Citation counts alone do not always provide meaningful information, so examining the context in which citations appear helps establish impact (Bornmann *et al.*, 2020; Tahamtan and Bornmann., 2019). With this in mind, we looked at the broader context of the literature grouped within our gender/feminism code to evaluate whether the authors’ use of gender/feminist sources seemed to be substantive and/or timely (elaborated on below).

### Gender/Feminism’s Substantive Influence?

As Tahamtan and Bornmann (2019) note, citations can be used in many ways within a text and should not all be considered as equal. A one-off reference, for example, would indicate less engagement with a text (and the body of knowledge it symbolises – see Budd, 1999 on the symbolic nature of citations) than multiple citations to the same source or sources within the same body of knowledge. Substantive engagement with gender or feminist literature was measured by number of gender/feminist citations used within individual articles, with a higher number of citations considered indicative of a more substantive influence. We considered ‘high engagement’ articles to be those which included 10 or more citations to the type of literature under consideration, while ‘low engagement’ articles included 9 or fewer citations. **Table 4** outlines the percentages of high versus low engagement articles for the top 3 most frequently cited types of literature within the sample.

As **Table 4** suggests, across 41 articles including gender/feminist citations, 27 (73%) were categorised as ‘low engagement.’ The majority of these (23 of the 27) contained 5 or fewer individual citations to gender/feminist literature. Only 11 articles (27%) contained 10 or more gender/feminist citations, suggesting a higher level of engagement. Within text density of citations is comparable between gender/feminist literature and organisations and occupations literature; however, the trend is significantly reversed when it comes to individual articles’ engagement with sociology of religion literature. Most sample articles (74%) are classified as having high engagement with this type of literature. **Table 5** and **Table 6**, respectively, examine the top 10 highest engagement articles for gender/feminist citations and the top 10 highest engagement articles for sociology of religion citations, demonstrating another angle on the disparity of engagement.

Comparing the numbers in **Table 5** and **Table 6** indicates that the density of citations for sociology of religion data for the highest engagement articles with this subfield (**Table 6**) greatly outpaces the numbers for gender/feminist literature (**Table 5**). Whereas the highest engagement article for gender/feminist literature contained 37 citations to this type of literature, the top two highest engagement articles for sociology of religion literature contained 88 citations each. Our analysis thus suggests that there is still a disparity between engagement with gender/feminist literature and sociology of religion citations when the density of citations within individual articles is considered. Fewer articles were classified as ‘high engagement’ with gender/feminist literature, and high engagement articles were still not engaging with gender/feminism as frequently as those engaging with sociology of religion literature.

**Table 5.** Number of ‘gender/feminist’ citations in top 10 sample articles coded ‘high engagement’ with this literature

Sample article author initials and publication year	Number of citations coded ‘gender/feminist’
H. D. 2018	37
F. J. A. 2012	33
F. A. 2021b	29
J. S. 2021	21
K. N. 2018	19
B. S. L. 2006	18
G. A. 2015	16
F. T. W. 2020	15
B. K. 2021	13
S. M. 2010	11

**Table 6.** Number of ‘sociology of religion’ citations in the top 10 sample articles coded ‘high engagement’ with this literature

Sample article author initials and publication year	Number of citations coded ‘sociology of religion’
W. T. 2002	88
B. S. L. 2006	88
C. E. 2015	67
M. E. 2016	56
H. C. 2017	56
M. P. G. 2008	49
A. V. 2015	47
S. M. 2010	46
K. D. 2016	42
C. G. 2020	41

**Table 7.** Number of unique ‘timely’ gender/feminist citations used in ‘high engagement’ sample articles

Sample article author initials and publication year	Number of <i>unique</i> citations coded ‘gender or feminist’	Number of ‘timely’ citations (within 10 years of publication year)
H. D. 2018	21	4 (19%)
F. J. A. 2012	17	3 (18%)
F. A. 2021b	24	8 (33%)
J. S. 2021	15	5 (33%)
K. N. 2018	7	4 (57%)
B. S. L. 2006	12	5 (42%)
G. A. 2015	12	7 (58%)
F. T. W. 2020	12	3 (25%)
B. K. 2021	11	2 (18%)
S. M. 2010	7	4 (57%)
C. G. 2020	10	5 (50%)

### Gender/Feminism’s Timely Influence?

A further indication of the MFR in frontmatter literature engagement emerges when the timeliness of the gender/feminist literature referenced is evaluated. Timeliness matters, as feminism has gone through several iterations and changes since its inception (Allen, 2023; Avishai and Irby, 2017; Collins, 2019; Ferguson, 2017; Ray, 2006), and part of our research intent was to probe whether religion scholars are drawing from the most recent feminist theorising available to them. We (generously) defined ‘timely’ gender or feminist citations to be those published within 10 years of the sample article’s publication date. **Table 7** provides a summary of how many ‘timely’ gender or feminist citations are included in the 11 ‘high engagement’ sample articles for this subfield.<sup>5</sup>

As the numbers in **Table 7** suggest, most of the top engagement articles (7 of 11) draw from more dated gender/feminist citations than timely. While some of these more ‘dated’ citations refer to seminal or classic texts (i.e., West and Zimmerman’s 1987 ‘doing gender’ article), it is still problematic for the goals of contemporary feminism if religion scholars fail to engage with emergent critiques, expansions and iterations alongside these

<sup>5</sup> Note that instead of counting the same citation each time it appeared in the frontmatter, the following table accounts for each unique citation in the article, counting each reference only once.

**Table 8.** Feminist or gender conceptual frameworks used to frame findings

Conceptual framework: Feminist (F), Gender Analysis (GA), or No F/GA Engagement	Unique articles coded (n = 66)
F: Herstory	2
F: Cultural	4
F: Systematic	14
F: Critical	2
<b>Total F</b>	<b>22</b>
GA: Rudimentary	10
GA: Rigorous (systematic)	1
<b>Total GA</b>	<b>11</b>
No F/GA: Gender as a site	14
No F/GA: Marginalizing gender	19
<b>Total No F/GA Engagement</b>	<b>33</b>

**Table 9.** All other conceptual frameworks identified

Conceptual framework	Articles coded (n = 33)
Occupations & Organisations	17
Religion	6
Theological	3
Culture	3
Social Constructivist or Interpretive	2
Social Psychological	1
Economics	1

earlier, sometimes tokenised, contributions. As Avishai and Irby (2017) assert, some of the ideas emerging from earlier waves of feminism, while important building blocks, have now undergone revision by more contemporary feminist scholars. Thus, the datedness of the gender/feminist literature referenced in the highest engagement articles in our sample provides further evidence of the MFR in this subfield. Were feminism having a more meaningful influence, we would expect to see more religion scholars engaging with the timelier feminist literature available to them.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

### Feminist, Gender, or no Engagement

Turning now to the backmatter of the sample articles, the theoretical frameworks used reveal how scholars interpret their findings around gender and leadership within religious institutions. As discussed above, the first tool used to code for theoretical frameworks in our study was Avishai and Irby's (2017) framework (Table A1 in Appendix A). Each of our 66 sample articles was coded into one of the provided categories to describe its relationship with a feminist, gender, or no engagement framework. Table 8 outlines the number of articles coded to each category and sub-category.

Within the feminist category, there are four subcategories, two of which indicate usage of more contemporary and sophisticated feminist theory. Only 16 of the 66 articles in our sample fit into these most complex approaches to feminist analysis. Another 11 of the 66 articles employed a gender analysis approach. Finally, the largest number (33 of 66 articles) were found to not employ feminist or gender analysis frameworks at all. This means they either primarily discussed other social processes ('gender as a site:' 14 articles) or failed to engage gender scholarship entirely ('marginalising gender:' 19 articles). This further supports the assertion that the MFR persists in the 'margins' of scholarship in this area and led us to consider what alternate frameworks were being used by these 33 articles to frame their analysis and recommendations.

### Other Theoretical Engagement

Table 9 lays out the 'other' (outside of gender or feminist) conceptual frameworks which emerged through our inductive analysis of the data.

As seen in Table 9, of the alternative theoretical frameworks found, an 'occupations and organisations' (O&O) lens was most frequently employed (17 articles). This paradigm was used significantly more frequently than the religion lenses (only 6 articles). This finding may be influenced by the fact that work being done at the intersection of sociology of religion, gender and leadership is sometimes published in workplace or organisations-oriented journals, most predominantly in our sample the journal *Gender, Work & Organization* (see Table 2). It is interesting



to note that many scholars sociologically studying religious leadership still seem to be concerned with the career opportunities and occupational environments in which women lead. This includes investigating work satisfaction or values (4 articles), women's authority in the workplace (3 articles) and organisational structures (9 articles). Our data suggests that recommendations salient to the sociological subfield of O&O may be having a similar impact on sociology of religion and leadership scholarship as feminist orientations.

## DISCUSSION

Scholarship about women or gender topics is not synonymous with gender or feminist theorising, and citing literature does not guarantee that it will be seriously engaged. (Avishai and Irby, 2017: 670)

The findings of this literature review further confirm the existence of the MFR in empirical studies in sociology of religion. While Avishai and Irby (2017) documented this gap surveying publication venues central to the field, the present study contributes further verification of its existence in more peripheral publication locations and studies investigating women's religious leadership. Furthermore, it contributes to work on scholarly networks in the area of citation analysis and justice, and points to the importance of considering what other theoretical frameworks authors use to discuss gender.

Studying citations and bibliographic data can provide useful information about knowledge reproduction in scientific communities (Riviera, 2013). While it is challenging to reliably report on authors' motivations to cite, citations themselves can be conceptualised as acts of communication linking and perpetuating particular social systems (networks) of knowledge (Riviera, 2013; Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022). For example, Tahamtan and Bornmann (2022) outline Luhmann's (1995) theory of nested systems for conducting citation analysis, including the psychic system (authors) and communications systems (publications and in-text citations). They suggest sidelining the psychic system (human motivations to cite) to foreground what communication acts (i.e., citations and conceptual frameworks) reveal about the production of knowledge in and of themselves. As hooks (1989) suggests, communication acts using language are 'a place of struggle' (16) where power dynamics occur, as speaking the dominant language (perhaps, in this case, adhering to certain publication conventions or citing certain literature) is often necessary to participate in academic life. In this vein, our analysis of citation counts and quality in the frontmatter of articles points to patterns of communication and power within one subfield of sociology of religion. For example, our finding that these articles cite other sociology of religion articles more frequently than articles from outside of the subdiscipline illuminates both an insularity and an absence. One communication pattern is the privileging of sociology of religion scholarship over any others by articles in our sample, as sociology of religion scholarship was cited over four times more frequently than gender/feminist scholarship (1471 versus 346 citations, respectively), and over three times more frequently than the next highest cited type of literature (O&O, 438 citations). This points to an insularity of focus which, in an autopoietic system, may become a reification, making it difficult for other types of knowledge, like contemporary feminism, to enter the system.

The communication patterns noted in the frontmatter of our sample articles also indicate an absence which can meaningfully 'let the reader know something has been missed' (hooks, 1989: 17). This can be seen in the dated nature of the gender/feminist citations found, and their higher concentration so few of the sample articles. What is there, in this case, points to what is missing – timely, substantive engagement with feminist work in many articles, even when investigating a sub-topic that has related and interdisciplinary implications (gendered leadership).

When it came to guiding conceptual frameworks used in the latter parts of these research articles, our findings also suggest that few authors in our sample publishing at the turn of the twenty-first century used more critically developed contemporary feminist lenses to inform their analyses (24% of our sample). Several of these articles topically considered gender and racialisation or women leading in geographic locations in the global south, but without employing a critical feminist lens (which might include relevant explorations of intersectionality, black/post-colonial theory, or queer theory). Some of these considerations (17%) employed a gendered perspective. While these gender-oriented articles explore the experiences of women entering leadership positions within religious institutions as some of their late 20th century predecessors did (i.e., Chang, 1997; Charlton, 1997; Chaves, 1996; Konieczny and Chaves, 2000; Lummis *et al.*, 2000; Ozorak, 1996; Sullins, 2000; Zikmund *et al.*, 1998), for many contemporary feminists, simply acknowledging experiences is no longer adequate when researching equity seeking communities. Thus, from a contemporary feminist perspective, this subset of articles is not doing enough to advocate for equity for women seeking religious authority. As a communication act, the conceptualising of gender in rudimentary or systematic ways (Avishai and Irby, 2017) perpetuates the MFR as these less sophisticated ways of interacting with gender continue to be reproduced by some sociologists of religion. This also reproduces a dominant racialised, heteronormative, and classed narrative in religious studies research. Even more significantly, half of the articles in our sample (33 of 66) did not engage feminist or gender scholarship in their theoretical framing at all. Once again, this absence communicates the failure of gender or feminist scholarship to

be meaningfully shaping the subfield of sociology of religion, even on the ‘margins’ of the field. Our data suggests that the MFR is, indeed, missing and not simply marginalised in this subfield.

While we cannot analytically suggest why other theoretical frameworks may be gaining more currency in sociology of religion research on gender and leadership, the O&O analytical lens may be chosen to suit the less religion-centric journals religion, gender and leadership articles are published in (i.e., *Gender, Work & Organization*). Wills and Risman (2006) suggest that some family scholars avoid overtly using feminism because they do not wish to be seen as activists. Sociologists of religion may also be motivated to avoid feminism if attempting to make research findings more palatable for more conservative religious institutions, leaders and practitioners. Some previous research suggests that the relationship between religion and feminist scholars is coloured by suspicions arising from both sides, as some feminists also see religions in a strictly negative light (Castelli, 2001; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013). Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska (2013) suggest that, although contemporary feminism considers a plethora of identities women espouse, religious identities are often excluded. This is problematic as ‘the majority of women globally are engaged in religious and spiritual practice and tradition’ (255) and, we might add, many are religious leaders. Simultaneously, religion scholars have not fully considered contemporary feminism’s influence on religious women’s lives (Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013). While we avoided the psychic (author motivations) level of analysis in the present review, the communication patterns identified here indicate that scholars in both intellectual fields may be making choices against collaboration. This neglect of contemporary feminism on the part of sociology of religion scholars may negatively colour the recommendations emerging from their publications, as the wealth of resources and liberatory ends of feminism are not being drawn from to inform suggested outcomes. This, in turn, may contribute to a stagnation in the conditions of religious women who inhabit or seek positions in religious leadership.

## CONCLUSION

The present study surveyed 20 years of sociological gender, religion and leadership scholarship to assess its engagement with contemporary feminism. Our findings suggest that the MFR continues to persist in this subfield. The main contribution of this review is its expansion on the findings of Avishai and Irby (2017) to indicate that the MFR persists beyond publications in higher ranked journals in sociology and can also be found in the ‘margins.’ Our work also contributes to the changing fields of citation analysis and network theory. While citation analyses have often been used in a normative manner to impute motives to authors or meaning to citations (Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022), our study points to another possible useful way citation analysis might be employed – to evaluate gaps and absences in knowledge communication, contributing to the broader goal of seeking the decolonisation of knowledge and raising awareness about issues of citational justice (Kwon, 2022). Larger scale citation analysis methods should be used when further empirically evaluating the MFR, as they provide a tangible way to study something ‘missing’ and can thus point to important silences where marginalised voices and perspectives may be left out. Future research should also consider to what extent journal editors and editorial boards are complicit in perpetuating the MFR as they hold power to define the conventions, or ‘language’ (hooks, 1989), used by authors who publish in their venues through acceptance or rejection of articles using interdisciplinary feminist citations and lenses. While we have based our analysis on the level of the ‘social system’ (Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022: 7) to investigate citations and conceptual frameworks as communication acts in and of themselves, future research in this area might consider investigating the ‘psychic system’ (Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022: 7), or author level, to understand whether sociology of religion and feminist scholars experience tensions which might contribute to the bifurcation. Finally, future research should empirically assess the missing feminist revolution in other disciplines and subfields, and consider empirically investigating why scholars make the choices they do around framing and conceptualising gender in their work, so that specific barriers to collaboration might be removed.

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## APPENDIX A

**Table A1.** Conceptual approaches to coding schema. [Avishai, O. and Irby, C. I., *Gender & Society* (Volume 31, Issue 5) pp. 657-658. Copyright © 2017 by Sage Publications. Reprinted by Permission of Sage Publications]

Code	Description
Feminist engagement	<p>Analysis emerges from an explicit feminist perspective; seeks to contribute to feminist theorizing, and/or explicitly engages feminist politics of liberatory social change. Four inductive subcodes reflect shifts in feminist theorizing.</p> <p><i>Herstory:</i> Untheorized narrative about women researchers or religious women. Example: An article with little to no citations describes the author's experiences as a feminist scholar of religion.</p> <p><i>Cultural:</i> Focuses on women's experiences to challenge androcentric understandings of religion. Example: Article challenges assumptions in conversion literature by studying women's experiences of conversion.</p> <p><i>Systematic:</i> Informed by feminist insights into gender as a relational and hierarchical institution, the analysis investigates how religion, as a major social institution, constructs gender as a social category and/or how individuals respond to and navigate this institution. Example: Article that examines religious women's political activism acknowledges that religious institutions produce gendered inequalities but focuses on how religious women navigate this gendered institution to reveal how gender and religion intersect to pattern their lives and actions and critique binaries such as "religious" and "secular" or "religion" and "feminism."</p> <p><i>Critical:</i> Critically evaluates and situates gender as a racial, colonial, and/or heteronormative project; typically engages poststructural, postcolonial, and/or queer theories. Example: Study of religious women's activism in a Muslim-majority country draws on postcolonial theories to nuance feminist sociological analyses of agency.</p>
Gender analysis	<p>Analyzes religion as a gendered social institution (but without feminist markers identified above).</p> <p><i>Rudimentary:</i> Article is informed by sociological theories of gender, but its primary framing relies on outdated theories and/or conceptualizes gender as a dichotomous social characteristic without engaging broader understanding of gender as a social institution. Example: Article published in the 2000s discussing religious socialization patterns of men and women utilizing role theory without engaging its critiques.</p> <p><i>Systematic:</i> Draws on contemporary gender theories to rigorously analyze intersection of the institutions. Example: Article analyzes religious men's and women's attitudes toward domestic division of labor without attending to the social and cultural implications of such gendered religious ideologies.</p>
Gender as a site	Acknowledges subject as gendered phenomena but primarily analyzes other social processes, such as immigration, organizations, social movements, etc. Example: Article on <i>hijab</i> focuses on questions of immigration and limitedly engages gender/feminist studies of women in conservative religion.
Marginalizing gender	Typically the article empirically analyzes a gendered question, phenomenon, or sample, but it does not engage with gender scholarship. Example: Article on why women are more religious than men frames analysis within "nature versus nurture" debate without attending to critiques by gender/feminist scholars.

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