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Challenging Gender Bias: An Islamic Perspective on Equality in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the status of gender equality within the Islamic context of Pakistan. It aims to provide a detailed description of how Muslim women utilize Islam to advocate for gender equality and enhance their treatment in daily life. Drawing upon key Quranic verses and Hadiths, the research highlights how misinterpretations perpetuate gender bias, underscoring the necessity for a precise and nuanced understanding of Islamic teachings. The study delves into the concepts of gender equality and equity, recognizing the inherent differences between men and women while advocating for equal rights. The role of women in both family and society is explored, emphasizing Islam's elevation of their status. It argues that unfair treatment of women often stems from misunderstandings of Islamic teachings rather than inherent support for inequality within Islam itself. Muslim women are shown to leverage Islam to advance gender equality and enhance their lives. This research offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of gender equality within an Islamic framework, stressing the importance of a deeper understanding of religious texts to foster equitable treatment between men and women in Muslim communities.

Keywords: *Gender equality, Islamic perspective, Muslim women, Gender bias, Religious interpretation*



Introduction

Islam has given equal rights to men and women in every aspect of life. Allah (SWT) has clearly explained regarding the rights and respect of a woman in the Qur'an. Men and women both have a significant role in society to produce a new life. Throughout recorded history, women have been dehumanized, disposed of, diminished, degraded, marginalized, disenfranchised, secluded, subjugated, and silenced. In ancient India, widows were forced to be burnt alive on the pyre of their dead husbands. In pre-Islamic Arabia, female infants were burned alive. Female infanticide still occurs in many countries today. Under the Pakistani hudood ordinances enacted in 1977, a woman who brings charges of rape is asked to produce four Muslim male eyewitnesses of the incident. If she fails to produce the witnesses, she is charged and punished for the crime of adultery (Quraishi, 1997). In 2002, the Saudi religious police forced fleeing young girls back into a blazing school building in Mecca because the girls had not put on their abayas. In 2007, the Egyptian government reported that 96% of women were forced to undergo genital mutilation (Slackman, 2007). Lastly, the Taliban's near-fatal attack on a fifteen-year-old Pakistani girl for the 'crime' of championing the cause of women's education (Ahmad, 2012) has inflamed the debate about what is gender equality and whether can it be attained for Muslim women.

According to Saiful, T. (2020) the general provision in the addendum of Presidential Instruction of the Republic of Indonesia Number 9 of 2000, concerning the Guideline of Gender Mainstreaming in National Development, gender equality is defined as the parity of conditions for men and women to acquire the opportunities and rights as humans to contribute and participate in political, economy, socio-cultural, national security and defense activities as well as the parity to relish the development results. But feminism introduced several terms, among which gender equality and equity emerge as two important expressions. Equality, which comes from the root meaning 'to be equal' (Elias 2018), is synonymous with the meaning of equal or similar (Kalender 2022). Ismail et al. (2020) claim that equality means being equal in rights, status, advantages, opportunities, etc., and being, making, or becoming equal or uniform. Moreover, it is fundamentally related to human rights. On the other hand, Equity comes from the root meaning 'to distribute' (Elias 2018). It can be defined as the quality of treating individuals fairly based on their needs and requirements.

Women's position in the family plays an indirect role in society's evolution (Bakhtyar & Rezaei, 2012). Islam is the religion, which introduced the rights of a woman, at that time, when the darkness of ignorance was spread everywhere in

the world and a woman was thrown in the fire of cruelty. Her life was like insects and cattle. She could not bring her wishes and feelings on her tongue. She was forced to spend her life in critical circumstances with her husband because she had no authority to take redemption. However, it is also proved that all women were not in the worst condition, whereas some tribes of Arab had given a high position and dignity to women. When the sun of Islam rose in Arab, the darkness of ignorance disappeared and the brightness of Islam lit everywhere, hence, especially the high rank was bestowed to a woman in Islam. She became equal to a man in responsibilities and rights. She found education opportunities, as a fundamental right, got a specific part in inheritance, was free to keep her property, and got social rights, such as; rights of equality and freedom in residence, race, and caste. Islam gave her the right to select a life partner. This is Islam, which has given all the basic rights to a woman, to spend a pleasant life in society (Tedi Supriyadi et al.,2019). Four different categories have been explained in her honor and respect, as; mother, sister, wife, and daughter.

Al-Quran and Sunnah, as the resources of Islamic learning, (Supriyadi & Julia, 2019; Supriyadi et al., In Press), have elaborated the noble position of women in Islam. Women have been portrayed tenderly by Allah SWT in al-Quran, as it discusses women's rights more than men's obligations. The word 'an-nisa' is mentioned 57 times in the Al-Qur'an, two times more than the word 'rijal'. Women's physical beauty is not an important aspect of Islam, hence, beautiful women never become a character in al-Quran. However, al-Qur'an describes physical issues on the sharia implementation of women and men using good words, such as "you have contacted women" (An Nisa: 43); "...go to your wives" (Al-Baqrah: 187); "come to your place of cultivation however you wish and put forth [righteousness] for yourselves" (Al-Baqrah: 223) (Rakhmat, 2008, p. 339). Prophet Muhammad PBUH had shown his honor toward women. He sought to educate people to respect women to shift the paradigm of Jahiliyyah people who demean women (misogyny). He manifested the values through his words and behaviors towards women. Prophet Muhammad PBUH stated "If anyone has a female child and does not bury her alive, or slight her, or prefer his children (i.e. the male ones) to her, Allah will bring him into Paradise." (Dawud, 1994 No. 5146)

In addition to these hadiths, there are several stories of the Prophet showing his honor to women. At another time, a woman came to the Prophet PBUH complaining about his father asking her to marry a man he did not like. The Prophet forbade forced marriage by saying "Go, marry the person you want". However, after getting an answer from the Prophet the young woman said "In fact, I have given up my father's deeds, I only want to teach women that their

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fathers are not entitled to them at all". From this hadith, the fuqoha (the guardians of the Islamic conscience) concludes that one of the pillars of marriage is the willingness of both parties (Rakhmat, 2004).

So, the above research findings suggest the importance of gender equality in our society and Islam. This is to support the elaboration of women's position in Islam as presented in al-Quran and Muhamad's egalitarian spirit as presented in hadiths, which have significantly changed the treatment of women.

Survey of literature

An extensive stock of literature is available on the issue of Gender equality issues in Pakistan. The distressed world in which we live is characterized by extremely unequal sharing of the burden of adversities between women and men. Gender inequality doesn't only exist in the developing world but it exists in most parts of the world, from Japan to Morocco, from Uzbekistan to the United States of America (USA). The most developed countries like the USA and Japan are also entrapped with gender inequality and violence against women. For example, In the USA, 700,000 women are raped or sexually assaulted each year, with 14.8 percent of women reporting having been raped before the age of 17 (UNIFEM, 2005). Inequality between women and men can take very many different forms. Gender inequality is not a homogeneous phenomenon, but it is a collection of unrelated and interlinked problems. Let us analyze different researches that depict gender inequality.

Kiriti and Tisdell (2003) were in quest of exploring the prominent factors influencing gender inequality poverty and human development in Kenya employing descriptive methods for different periods till 2000. The empirical evidence exhibits a continued increase in Kenya's poverty and gender inequality. They examined multiple aspects of gender inequality including education, employment, and political participation. The empirical results suggest that women are highly discriminated against in education and health indicating low literacy and life expectancy.

Due to inequality, discrimination, exclusion, and some cultural and religious disparities, women are still lagging behind men. Female literacy rate in Pakistan is too low compared to other developed and developing countries. This issue still needs to be addressed. Ferdoos (2005) notes that Pakistan is a male-dominated society where women are considered as no more than secondary citizens mainly due to traditional norms prevailing in the whole society.

Also, Pervaiz et al. (2011) examined the link between gender inequality and economic growth in Pakistan for the period of 1972 to 2009. They used a composite index of gender inequality. The evidence shows that there exists a

significant negative relationship between gender inequality and economic growth in Pakistan.

The quality of female education is low, and it also has an impact on the enrolment of female education at primary and secondary levels, which results in low female labor force participation and an increased unemployment rate in Pakistan. So, Fatima (2010) has conducted a multipurpose study on the importance of female education and its role in the development of a nation. Their study identified some important barriers to female education in Pakistan from which low investment in this sector is on the top. They also examined the effects of female contributions in the labor force. They identified the existing opportunities for females in Pakistan. They applied the OLS technique for estimation, by using time series data from 1980 to 2006. Sources of data were the IFS and the Economic Survey of Pakistan. Their results postulate that Female education and GDP growth are not linked with each other.

On the other hand, Saiful, T., & Fendri, A. (2020) investigated and explained the principles of equality from a gender perspective and women's position in Islam. The results showed that: women and men in Islam have an equal position, as servants of God who are created through the same reproduction method. Islam introduces the concept of gender equality, referring to the verses of the Qur'an which at the same time become a general goal of sharia to realize justice and virtue (Surah An-Nahl: 90), gender equality perspective in Islam has been established in the Sharia to benefit human in the world and in the hereafter both individually and in the congregation. Thus, if there is an interpretation that is not in line with the principles of justice, then the interpretation must be reviewed both textually and contextually. In the Islamic view, women's position is equal to men, as humans who have two capacities, namely as servants ('abid) and as a representative of God or as a leader on earth without distinguishing gender, ethnicity, and skin color.

According to Whedon, J. (2006) stated in his book *Equality Now Speech* that equality is not a concept. It's not something we should be striving for. It's a necessity. Equality is like gravity. We need it to stand on this earth as men and women. Also, Wollstonecraft, M. (1792) stated in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves.

Gender equality is an important topic that has been discussed in many religions and cultures around the world. In Islam, the teachings of the Quran and the Hadees emphasize the importance of treating men and women equally and with respect. In the Hadees, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also emphasized the

importance of gender equality. So, we will further discuss gender equality in the light of the Quran and hadiths.

Men and Women Equality

Tedi Supriyadi and other researchers in 2019 said that the relationship between men and women is not superior and inferior, but rather as an equal partner. Hence, the concept of parallel partnership that reflects justice is normatively affirmed in the Qur'an. Al-Qur'an often adds genetic pronouns to the words nisa, such as nisa akum, nisa ahum, and nisa ahunna to assert women as members of a wider community. The word 'male' (mudzakkar) and the word 'women' (muannas) are mentioned together in the Qur'an, this shows no treatment difference in men or women in Islam. For example, it can be seen in An-nisa: 124, al-Mu'min: 40, An-Nahl: 97, Ali Imran: 195, Al-Ahzab: 36, At-Taubah: 71, and Al-Ahzab: 35. The repetition of the words male and female in these verses show that there is no discrimination between men and women concerning work, charity, and actions. However, the most important thing is that there is no characteristic difference between men and women. What distinguishes the two is not sex but charity.

Nasution (2002) classifies the verses of the Qur'an, which talk about the relations between women and men. These verses explain that males and females have equal relationships in various ways (Novianti, 2008).

1. General statement on equality of women and men (2:187, 2:228)
2. Equality of origin (4:1, 49:13)
3. Equality of aural rewards (3:195, 4:32, 9:72)
4. Equality to care and love one another (17:24, 30:21, 46:15)
5. Justice and equality (2:228, 16:97)
6. Alignment in social security (2:177)
7. Mutual help (9:71)
8. Opportunities for education (8:11, 39: 9)

However, ideal Islamic teachings on gender relations have not been implemented properly. The practices of the Islamic community on gender are still very distorted and biased due to the literal understanding of religious texts. Lots of religious texts on gender relations contain bias (Ma'shumah, 2012; Mulia, 2007). For example, an understanding of the creation of women and men is inseparable from the interpretation of the ulemas that tend to be biased toward men. The scholars consider Eve (Adam's wife) created from Adam's ribs as an understanding of the An-Nisa: 1 based on the Muslim hadith stating that women (Eve) are created from the male (M. Hajjaj, 1972 No. 1468).

In terms of quality, according to hadith experts, that hadith is included in the ahad category since it is sourced from only one narrator, Abi Bakrah. Therefore, the hadith category does not have a definite meaning (qath'iy) to become a basis for

determining a legal decision. This hadith is still a presumption (zhanny), then as stated by Shihab (2000), it is very possible to be reinterpreted, even to reject its applicability. Fatimah, a Moroccan feminist figure, tends to reject the application of the hadith since her research shows that the figure of the narrator of the hadith, Abi Bakrah, had personal weaknesses. Mernissi saw two weaknesses in Abi Bakrah: First, Abi Bakrah had been convicted and whipped by Umar for giving false testimony in the case of allegations of adultery against a prominent friend and politician, named Mughirah ibn Syu'bah; Second, Abi Bakrah was seen coming from a less-respected family and the family tree is not known (Mernissi, 2001, p. 170).

Although Islam does not oppose equal rights for men and women, it opposes identical rights. Given that men and women are different by nature, they may need different rights (Nadeem 2020). The Quran (Al-Imran, 3: 36) expressly states that the two are not identical: 'The male is not like the female'. Therefore, the Qur'an deals with the uniqueness of men and women. On this basis, the verses of the Qur'an emphasize the different roles, positions, rights, and obligations to both genders, the difference in the extent of rights, and the different benefits for women considering their nature.

Hence, to maintain discipline, the husband is assigned the position of protector and maintainer of the family. Allah says in the Quran, Surah Al-Nisa' 4: 34, 'men are managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and tasked with supporting them financially'. However, he is given very strict instructions to be just and benevolent (2: 226-227) and fulfill his duties with equity and willing cooperation (4:4). Moreover, he is never to keep his wife merely to injure her or take undue advantage of her (2: 231).

Elias (2018) points out that the favor of men over women refers to the physical strength of men, which is on average much greater than that of women and which enables men to perform the hard physical labor and military duties necessary for political and economic security better. Instead, wives are advised to be loyal and obedient to their husbands (4:34) and prevent anyone whom their husbands do not like from entering their house. Here, this status of Qawwamun is not simply granted. The husband has elevated the status of the family breadwinner (Qawwam) by giving him higher economic responsibility. Meanwhile, the wife reduces her responsibilities by obeying her husband. As such, both are equal in their responsibilities. Considering the practical problems of life, the husband and wife are given due rights based on equity, justice, and benevolence. Despite having separate roles to play, each is equally responsible for accomplishing their mutually beneficial outcomes. Allah states in Surah Al Baqarah:

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Wives have the same rights on them as husbands have on them, per generally known principles. Of course, men are a degree above them in status (Quran, 2:228). And the mothers may nurse their children for two whole years (Quran, 2: 233). Similarly, in some other aspects, rights are provided equally but not identically. If we take the case of inheritance, Islam allows the male to inherit as much as two females (Quran 4: 11). Hence, the concept of equality needs to be enforced.

Conclusion

In promoting gender equality, Muslim feminists focus more on two crucial aspects. First, the inequality between men and women in the social structure of Muslims is not rooted in the existing teachings but in a men-biased understanding, which was then crystalized and believed as the standard teachings of Islam. Second, in the effort to establish equality, the sources of Islamic teachings related to gender relations need to be reviewed by referring to the fundamental principles of the teachings, namely justice and equality. The position of women in Islam is equal to men in the aspects that are not related to their nature (God's will) because the best humans in the sight of Allah are those who best devote themselves, either men or women. I would like to conclude the whole debate on 'Gender Issues in Pakistan' in the words of Dr. Rakhshinda Perveen: "The need of the hour is to define, interpret and apply Gender in a purely Pakistani context. Only then we would be able to reduce the disparities and losses in vital areas of national development named as education, economy, and health. Converting the gaps into gains in such areas would take us as a nation on the development path. That development would not be reflected in the stock exchange only but in a society marked by gender harmony, sensitivity, and human dignity."

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