



Rediscovering the Liberated Woman: An Exploration of Women's Rights in Islam

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ABSTRACT

Women's rights in Islam remain widely debated, often distorted by cultural biases and patriarchal misrepresentations. While Islam originally emerged as a revolutionary force for gender equity, it is frequently perceived as inherently patriarchal. This article explores the Islamic framework on women's rights through a critical, qualitative lens, aiming to dispel myths and align Islamic teachings with international discourses on gender equality. Focusing on foundational rights—marriage, divorce, inheritance, education, and social status—it highlights how Islam granted women unprecedented rights at a time when they were largely oppressed elsewhere. It also examines the intersection of gender with ethnicity and socio-economic status, illustrating how these dimensions shape women's experiences across Muslim societies. This article underscores Islam's commitment to women's dignity and empowerment through education and authentic reinterpretation of texts, promoting dialogue to align Islamic principles with contemporary gender discourse.

Keywords: *Women's Rights, Islamic teachings, Gender Equality, Education, Empowerment, Social Justice.*

Introduction

The concept of women's liberation is often framed through a Western lens, leading to widespread misconceptions about the role and rights of women in Islam. Contrary to the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman, Islamic teachings, rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah-granted women rights and dignity over fourteen centuries ago. These rights include spiritual, educational, social, economic, and political freedoms, long before such discussions emerged in Western societies. However, due to cultural misinterpretations, colonial legacies, and patriarchal practices, the authentic Islamic perspective on women's empowerment is frequently overshadowed. This article aims to rediscover and highlight the holistic, dignified position Islam provides to women, examining how the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) uphold values of equity, autonomy, and respect for women.



By revisiting Islamic primary sources and the historical role of Muslim women in early Islamic societies, it becomes clear that Islam promotes a vision of womanhood that is liberated in both spiritual and societal terms. Understanding this vision is not only crucial for Muslim communities reclaiming their narrative but also for fostering interfaith and intercultural dialogues around gender justice and human rights. This article, therefore, challenges the orientalist narratives and reclaims the discourse around Muslim women's rights by grounding it in Islamic epistemology.

Empowerment is the process of moving from a state of powerlessness to one of autonomy and influence. According to Kabeer (1999), empowerment is "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them". Women's empowerment, therefore, seeks to ensure that women enjoy full and equal rights with men in moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, and economic spheres. Although modernization and urbanization have transformed women's lives to a great extent, gender inequality remains a global issue. Women still face challenges in breaking social, cultural, and legal barriers in order to fully participate in society. The struggle for gender equality has been a longstanding one, deeply rooted in history and marked by significant resistance. Historically, women were excluded from public life, often denied education, property rights, or a voice in political matters.¹⁹

Mary Wollstonecraft was among the first to advocate women's rights during a time when women were exploited socially, politically, and economically. She laid the foundation for modern feminist thought in the 18th century. Later, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) became a cornerstone of Western feminist movements, arguing against the legal subordination of one sex to another.

The global feminist movement developed through three major waves from 1848 onwards, leading to significant milestones such as women's suffrage, legal recognition of property rights, and access to political participation. Countries like New Zealand (1893), Finland (1906), and Norway (1913) were among the first to grant voting rights to women. However, this progress was uneven. For instance, Switzerland did not allow women to vote until 1971, despite its long-standing democratic tradition.¹³

Similarly, in France—a country that produced iconic figures like Joan of Arc—women were not enfranchised until 1944. Norway, however, took early steps toward gender equality by granting women the right to inherit property in the 1840s and the right to conduct business in 1864). Despite all these achievements, women in many parts of the world still continue to be denied basic rights.

This global movement for women's rights has prompted increasing attention toward the status of women in Islam. Unfortunately, the topic is often clouded by orientalist assumptions and cultural misinterpretations. Contrary to popular belief, Islam recognized women's rights over fourteen centuries ago, affirming their social, legal, and spiritual dignity. This article seeks to rediscover the authentic Islamic vision of the liberated woman and explore how Islam supports women's empowerment through the Qur'an, Hadith, and the practical examples set by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). By doing so, the discussion aims to challenge both Western misconceptions and patriarchal distortions within Muslim communities.

The Evolution of the Women's Rights Movement in the United States

The evolution of the feminist movement across different countries has followed various historical and cultural paths. In the United States, women initiated a struggle for their rights in a series of organized phases. According to Muhammad Rafiq Chaudhary, the women's rights movement in America developed through three major stages:

- The Early Women's Rights Movement – This initial phase focused on raising awareness about the basic civil and legal rights of women.
- The Suffragette Movement (1890–1925) – In this phase, women campaigned actively for their right to vote and participate in the political process.
- The Modern Feminist Movement – Beginning in the late 20th century and continuing to the present day, this phase focuses on broader issues such as gender equality, reproductive rights, workplace equity, and the dismantling of patriarchal structures.

These phases reflect the progressive transformation of feminist thought and activism in American society.¹¹

Perspectives on Feminist Thought: Key Schools of Feminist Ideology

Understanding the different schools of feminist thought is essential to grasp the true objectives behind the feminist movement and the rights it seeks to secure for women. Broadly, three major schools of feminist ideology have gained prominence:

Radical Feminism views patriarchy as the root cause of women's oppression. According to thinkers like Elizabeth Gould Davis, men have historically kept women economically dependent to maintain dominance. Radical feminists argue for a complete rejection of heterosexual structures, often promoting separatism and even same-sex relationships as a means of liberation. Shulamith Firestone, in *The Dialectic of Sex*, goes further to suggest that biological roles, such as childbirth, are the basis of women's subjugation. Radical feminism sees true

freedom for women only when existing patriarchal and capitalist hierarchies are dismantled.¹⁵

Marxist (or Socialist) Feminism traces women's oppression to capitalist economic systems. Inspired by Karl Marx, this school believes that class struggle and private property are central to gender inequality. Thinkers in this tradition argue that unpaid domestic labor and motherhood are forms of economic exploitation. They advocate for a socialist system to eliminate class divisions, thereby liberating women.²⁶

Liberal Feminism emphasizes individual rights and equal opportunities. It seeks personal autonomy and political participation for women through legal reforms and institutional support. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2007), liberal feminists advocate for reproductive rights, protection against sexual harassment, equal pay, access to education, and legal action against domestic violence. They believe the state has a central role in promoting gender equality.²⁸

These ideologies, though different in approach, have collectively shaped the feminist discourse, especially in the West, where feminist thought has been deeply influenced by these varying schools—each aiming to redefine the role of women in society from a different angle.¹²

Global Women's Conferences and the Feminist Movement: A Historical Overview

The feminist movement gained significant momentum when global women's conferences began to take place. These conferences provided a formal platform to advocate for women's rights. After the establishment of the United Nations following World War II, the UN Charter led to the creation of the Human Rights Commission. Shortly after, the Women's Rights Commission was established with similar goals to those of the post-French Revolution feminist movements in Europe - focusing on equal rights for women and eliminating gender-based discrimination. The decade of the 1960s was especially pivotal, as it marked the peak of the feminist movement, prompting the organization of major international conferences to spotlight women's issues.²⁶

The global movement for women's rights was significantly advanced through a series of United Nations-sponsored world conferences. The Mexico Conference in 1975, declared as International Women's Year, brought together 133 countries with 113 delegations led by women, and focused on development, education, health, and political participation. The Copenhagen Conference in 1980 served as a follow-up to assess the implementation of the action plan set in Mexico, drawing participation from around 145 nations. The Nairobi Conference in 1985 further expanded the global dialogue, with nearly 15,000 members from various

NGOs attending seminars, workshops, and lectures on women's rights. The momentum continued with the Beijing Conference in 1995, which gathered over 30,000 participants and marked a shift from addressing women's issues in isolation to emphasizing gender equality and the need to restructure societal systems to ensure true empowerment for women.

Islamic Perspectives on Feminism and Women's Freedom

Islam is a complete code of life and was the first to establish the foundation of women's rights when other civilizations were immersed in ignorance and darkness. While Islam grants women many rights, it also places certain limits and boundaries upon their freedom. These boundaries are in accordance with the biological and psychological nature of women, a point even recognized by feminist scholar Shulamith Firestone, who mentions in her book that biological differences do bring natural limitations for women.

Although Islamic society places boundaries for protection and stability, it is also true that Islam remains the most powerful advocate of women's rights. Despite this, even women from Islamic countries have raised slogans for "women's freedom," which has led to multiple interpretations and debates about what true freedom entails.

According to the Oxford Science Dictionary, Muslim feminism broadly includes: "Women's awareness of the constraints placed upon them because of gender, rejection of these limitations, and efforts to construct a more equitable gender system involving new or improved roles for women and better relations between the sexes... Muslim feminists insist on equality of women and men as citizens in the public sphere."²²

Even though political rights like the right to vote are considered a step forward, they often fail to translate into real political power. As the Encyclopedia Britannica points out:

"The proportion of women elected to parliament remains low: 3-4% in the British House of Commons, 2% in the U.S. House of Representatives, and 7-9% in postwar German federal parliaments. In the Soviet Union (1970), although 30% of Supreme Soviet deputies were women, they held minimal power within the Communist Party's real centers of authority."¹⁴

Even by 1971, only 8 countries out of 129 UN members had yet to grant women the right to vote and participate equally in elections: "By 1971, of the 129 UN member countries, all but eight allowed women to vote and be eligible for election on the same basis as men."

Despite such progress in political rights, personal and family-level rights remain largely unaddressed in many societies. In fact, rights that women originally had

have often been stripped away in the name of freedom. As Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri writes:

“Protecting women's rights should include ensuring their dignity and respect at personal, societal, family, and institutional levels. In Western society, however, the reality is deeply disappointing. Due to the lack of respect for womanhood, the institution of the family—an essential unit for human development—has been fragmented and damaged.”¹

The Honour and Rights of Women in Islam

The status of women in Islam is often misunderstood due to widespread miscommunication and cultural distortions, particularly when assessed through Western standards. This mismatch in frameworks has contributed to the notion that Islam oppresses women. However, an exploration of Islamic teachings reveals that Islam not only acknowledged women's humanity and dignity long before modern feminist movements but also embedded these rights into its spiritual and legal framework.

Islam gave women rights and privileges at a time when they were treated like properties in many societies. Islam's approach to women begins with a fundamental affirmation of human dignity for all. The Qur'an states:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِّنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ
مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

*"And we have indeed honoured the children of Adam and provided them with (Means of transport) over the land and in the sea and bestowed upon them sustenance out of clean and pure things. And we have exalted them above most of our creation by conferring on them superiority."*²⁴

The phrase “children of Adam” is inclusive, referring to both men and women. The verse is foundational in establishing that respect, dignity, and honour are inherently granted to every human being, regardless of gender. Women, like men, are seen as purposeful creations, entrusted with responsibilities and roles that contribute to the well-being of society.

Women are fully capable of achieving spiritual elevation, just as men are. The Qur'an is explicit in its assertion of the spiritual and moral equality of men and women. Islam does not consider women inferior nor assign them a passive role in society; rather, it honors them in every stage of life. As daughters, they are a source of immense reward, as the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said,

مَنْ عَالَ جَارِيَتَيْنِ حَتَّى تَبْلُغَا، جَاءَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَنَا وَهُوَ، وَضَمَّ أَصَابِعَهُ

“Whoever brings up two daughters properly till they grow up, he and I will come (together) on the Day of Resurrection like this,” joining his fingers to show closeness.²

As mothers, women hold an unparalleled status in Islam, recognized not only for their biological role but for their emotional labor, spiritual influence, and moral guidance in the upbringing of future generations. The Qur'an acknowledges the hardship and honour of motherhood in several verses. One such verse states:

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ وَهْنًا عَلَى وَهْنٍ وَفِصَالُهُ فِي عَامَيْنِ أَنْ اشْكُرْ لِي
لِوَالِدَيْكَ إِلَى الْمَصِيرِ

"And we empathetically enjoined upon man [to do good] to his parents whose mother bore him (in her reproductive system) in pain after pain, and whose weaning also takes two years (and commanded him). 'Give thanks to me and to your parents. (You) shall return to me alone.'

This verse reflects the weight of a mother's sacrifice and the divine instruction to appreciate it.

Highlighting the supreme value of mothers, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ further emphasized their elevated position by saying: *“الْجَنَّةُ تَحْتَ أَقْدَامِ الْأُمَّهَاتِ* “Paradise lies at the feet of your mother”. This powerful Hadith signifies that serving and honouring one's mother is among the highest acts of devotion in Islam and reflects her central role in the moral and emotional development of a family and society at large.³

Islam does not consider women inferior, nor does it assign them a passive or secondary role in society. Instead, it recognizes their dignity and honours them in various capacities - as daughters, mothers, wives, and independent individuals. Women are granted the right to own property, seek education, engage in business, and contribute intellectually and socially to the development of society. As wives, they are given the right to accept or reject marriage proposals and are protected through teachings that emphasize mutual respect, kindness, and justice within the marital relationship. This empowerment is not just cultural but divinely ordained, as affirmed in the Qur'an:

وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ فَإِنْ كَرِهْتُمُوهُنَّ فَعَسَى أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ اللَّهُ فِيهِ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا

“And treat them honourably. Then if you dislike them, it may be that you dislike a thing and places in it abundant good”²⁵

Hazrat Khadijah al-Kubra (RA), the wife of the Prophet ﷺ, was a respected businesswoman. The Prophet ﷺ himself traveled to Syria with her trade goods,

and this tradition of women working honorably continued even after the Rashidun Caliphate. Islam has never discouraged women from working; rather, it has provided guidelines and boundaries to protect them from moral corruption.²⁰

Raytah bint Abdullah, the wife of Abdullah ibn Mas'ood (RA), once said: "O Messenger of Allah ﷺ, I am a craftswoman and sell my handmade goods. Neither I nor my husband nor my children possess any wealth. May I spend on them from my earnings?" The Prophet ﷺ replied: "Whatever you spend on them will be rewarded." This proves that women could independently earn and spend during the time of the Prophet ﷺ.⁸

Islam granted women freedom in political participation and state-building from its very inception. Women such as Umm 'Ammarah (RA) took part in significant battles including Uhud, Hudaibiyyah, Khaybar, Hunayn, and Yamamah, and even sustained wounds in combat. Umm 'Atiyyah al-Ansariyyah (RA) reported, "I accompanied the Prophet ﷺ in seven battles. I would prepare food, tend to the sick and wounded, and care for the injured". Similarly, Umm Waraqah (RA) was honored by the Prophet ﷺ with the title 'Shaheedah' and was appointed to lead her household in prayer.

Islam also recognized women's opinions in political matters. During the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, when the companions hesitated to follow the Prophet ﷺ's instructions, he consulted his wife Umm Salamah (RA). She advised him to lead by example, and when he shaved his head and sacrificed his animal, the companions followed suit. After the death of Umar ibn al-Khattab (RA), Abdul Rahman ibn Awf convened a Shura council, which, according to Tareekh al-Tabari, was held at the home of Fatimah bint Qays (RA), indicating women's involvement in key political decisions.⁵

Women were also consulted on social issues. Caliph Umar (RA) once heard a woman singing in solitude due to her husband's long absence at war. He sought advice from his daughter Hafsa (RA), who suggested that women could endure separation for only four months. Umar then decreed that soldiers should not be kept away from their families for more than four months.

Furthermore, women were entrusted with administrative and diplomatic responsibilities. During the caliphate of Uthman (RA), Umm Kulthoom bint Ali (RA) was sent as an envoy to the Queen of Rome, where she presented diplomatic gifts and received gifts in return. Women like Umm Atiyyah (RA) also played key roles in managing camp logistics and food arrangements during battles.

Muslim women contributed greatly to medical care in times of war. Rufaydah bint Sa'd, who lived near the Prophet's mosque, treated the sick and wounded. After the Battle of Khandaq, Sa'd ibn Mu'adh was placed under her care. Rabi' bint

Mu'awwidh narrated, "We went on expeditions with the Prophet ﷺ, gave water to soldiers, served them, and brought the injured back to Madinah".

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ exemplified gender respect and equity through his words and actions. From the earliest days of Islam, women such as Khadijah (RA) and Aisha (RA) played active roles in religious, social, economic, and intellectual spheres. Khadijah (RA), a respected and successful businesswoman, was not only the Prophet's first wife but also his confidante and supporter in the early mission of Islam- demonstrating how female leadership and agency were never discouraged. The Prophet ﷺ regularly consulted women on political matters, welcomed their presence in mosques, and valued their opinions in decision-making processes. His teachings and practice laid the foundation for a society in which women were recognized as essential contributors to the moral and social fabric of the Muslim community.

Historically, Muslim women were not only active participants in society but also leaders, scholars, and founders of institutions. One of the most remarkable examples is Fatimah al-Fihri, who established the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, in 859 CE—recognized by UNESCO and the Guinness World Records as the world's oldest continuously operating degree-granting university. Beyond her, women like Aisha bint Abu Bakr (RA) were renowned for their vast knowledge of Hadith, law, and theology, with male scholars frequently seeking her guidance.²⁷ Another notable figure is Shaykha Fatima al-Samarqandi, a jurist and scholar who advised rulers on Islamic jurisprudence in the 12th century. Muslim women historically taught in mosques and madrasas, issued legal rulings, and contributed significantly to intellectual and spiritual life, challenging modern stereotypes that depict them as historically passive or marginalized. These examples underscore that the legacy of Muslim women includes leadership, academic excellence, and social influence.²⁹

Dr. Jamal Badawi (1995) notes that Islam offered women rights at a time when other civilizations denied them even basic humanity. These include the right to inheritance (Qur'an 4:7), financial independence, legal identity, and the ability to engage in contracts and political life. He emphasizes that Islam's view of honour is holistic-it uplifts women's spiritual, emotional, legal, and social position. Islamic teachings elevated the status of women socially, economically, and spiritually by granting them rights centuries before Western societies did. Islam's message regarding women is not only revolutionary in its historical context but also timeless in its principles. It honours women as full human beings with a purpose, intellect, and capacity to contribute meaningfully to society. The Qur'an

and Sunnah offer a framework where dignity is not gendered but human, and excellence is defined by faith and righteousness.⁹

Islam granted women profound rights and social privileges at a time when they were widely oppressed, recognizing their intellectual, spiritual, and economic potential. From the early Islamic state in Medina, women were scholars, entrepreneurs, and active participants in public life. However, modern narratives often misrepresent Islam as oppressive, overlooking its foundational role in women's empowerment. Unlike Western standards that emerged later, Islam affirmed women's dignity and rights centuries ago, including education, property ownership, and decision-making. Empowerment—defined as the ability to make choices and act upon them—was embedded in Islamic principles. Misunderstandings between Muslim and Western views often arise due to judging women's roles by foreign cultural standards rather than appreciating Islam's contextually rich and balanced framework for gender equity.²⁷

So the final reflections of my research is the discourse on women's empowerment and rights reveals a stark contrast between Western feminist paradigms and the Islamic framework. While Western feminism has evolved through distinct ideological phases—from liberal to radical and Marxist—fighting for suffrage, political participation, economic independence, and bodily autonomy, Islam granted many of these rights over fourteen centuries ago. The Qur'an and Sunnah recognize women as spiritually equal to men, with autonomy in legal, economic, social, and educational matters. Women in early Islamic societies held positions of leadership, scholarship, and entrepreneurship—roles that challenge the widely held notion of Muslim women as passive or marginalized. Figures like Khadijah (RA), Aisha (RA), Fatimah al-Fihri, and Shaykha Fatima al-Samarqandi exemplify the vibrant legacy of Muslim women's contribution to religion, knowledge, and society. Islam provides a balanced, God-guided model of women's empowerment that upholds dignity and justice, countering both Western misconceptions and internal patriarchal distortions.

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