

# Gender Egalitarian in Islam

Farhat Naz Rahman *Ph D*\*

## Abstract

*Women's position is determined mainly by social practices. Theologically, Islam tends to assert the equality of the male and female while social structures create a distinction. To understand this paradox is to understand the essence of the Islamic philosophy of gender, which constructs roles from below, not from above. Even though Muslim women directly experience the consequences of oppressive misreading of religious texts, few question their legitimacy and fewer still have explored the liberatory aspects of the Qur'anic teachings. The same holds true for South Asian and many eastern societies. In the context of Islamic society:*

- a) *This study analyzes the contradiction between public conceptions of the ideals prescribed in the Holy Scriptures as to its implications for gender equity and development of society.*
- b) *It would focus on ways to popularize progressive interpretation in order to improve Muslim women's status.*

*The study is based on three sources of Islam: Qur'an, hadith, and writings of modern Muslim thinkers. Findings prove that it is not the revealed Qur'an and the authentic Sunnah that need revision. What need to be re-examined are fallible human interpretations and practices and the system of socialization and internalization so that proper ways of inducting new concepts and practices concurrent to the Islamic spirit are devised.*

The term equality is hard to define. In one sense all human beings are equal, but in actual life we find that no two human beings are really equal in all respects. Inequality leads to injustices and oppression only where artificial impediments, whether in the shape of laws and customs or traditions, are super-added to natural inequalities so as to prevent men and women from developing their native capacities to the full.<sup>1</sup>

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\* Associate Professor, Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology, Karachi.

<sup>1</sup> M. Mazharuddin Siddiqi, *Women in Islam*, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 11th Edition 1996, pp. 15.

Equality does not mean identicality: it means equity. Islam presents the roles of men and women as complimentary, not contradictory or conflicting. Islam does not support any social system that refuses to consider women as human beings or to give them any rights. Islam has never had anything to do with such nonsense. When a woman had no rights in this world, it declared:

*"And women shall have rights, similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable."*<sup>2</sup>

That still remains Islam's command – today and forever. Similar rights, not the same rights. Qualitative not quantitative equality. Both men and women are equal in their humanity and dignity and in their accountability to perform their assigned tasks and being judged according to their performance.

However, their assigned tasks are not the same. Their Creator has given them different capabilities: the tasks are based on those capabilities. This distinction is not an error that needs to be corrected. It is the only basis for building a healthy and prosperous society. Islam liberates a woman from the modern tyranny of having to become like a man in order to get a sense of self worth and achievement.

Gender egalitarianism is inherent in the ethical vision of Islam. This egalitarianism is a consistent element of the ethical utterances of the Qur'an. Among the remarkable features of the Qur'an, particularly in comparison with the scriptural texts of other monotheistic traditions, is that women are explicitly addressed. One passage in which this occurs declares the absolute moral and spiritual equality of men and women.<sup>3</sup>

*For Muslim men and women, – for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true [truthful] men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast ( and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise, – for them has God prepared forgiveness and a great reward.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Holy Qur'an, 2:228, Abdullah Yousuf Ali Translation.

<sup>3</sup> Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, Yale University, Michigan, 1992 pp 64.

<sup>4</sup> Al Quran Sura 33: 35

Practically women's position is determined not so much by the principles of Islam as by social practices. Any gender-based discrimination is a grave offense and against the teachings of the Qur'an. The Qur'an regards men and women as complementary to each other, one sex making up what the other lacks. Islam does not consider a woman a mere shadow or an extension of a man, always follows him or obeys him. She has full individual freedom and responsibility according to the message sent by Allah.

Like other major religions of the world, Islam has been tempered by patriarchal cultures and has been used traditionally to deprive women of their God-created, God-given fundamental human rights.<sup>5</sup> Somewhere in the dust of history, ulama (Islamic scholars) adopted the Christian theory that regards women as the source of (original and) all-evil.

Qur'anic consideration of women on earth centres on her relationship to the group, i.e. as a member of a social system. However, it is also important to understand how the Qur'an focuses on woman as an individual because it treats the individual, whether male or female, in exactly the same manner: that is, whatever the Qur'an says about the relationship between Allah and humans is not in gender terms. With regard to spirituality, there are no rights of woman which are distinct from those of man.<sup>6</sup> From early on, Islamic women are among the important contributors to different religious traditions. The narratives about Rabi'a al `Adwiyya, for instance, exemplify distinctly counter cultural elements with respect to ideas about gender. Short narratives depict Rabi'a surpassing her male colleagues in intellectual forthrightness and percipience as well as in spiritual powers. One relates how Hasan al-Basri approached Rabi'a. Throwing his carpets on the water, Hasan sat on it and called to Rabi'a to come and converse with him. Understanding that he wanted to impress people with his spiritual powers, Rabi'a threw her prayer carpet into the air and flew up to it; sitting there she said, "O Hasan, come up here where people will see us better." Hasan was silent, for it was beyond his power to fly. "O Hasan," Rabi'a then said, "that which you did a fish can do ... and that which I did a fly can do. The real work (for the saints of God) lies beyond both of these."<sup>8</sup> The tale thus shows a woman not only surpassing a man but also

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<sup>5</sup> Hassan Riffat, from open letter to General Perwaiz Mushrraf written in Pakistan Today. Weekly vol.5 No. 48, California, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *Quran and Woman* by Amina Wadud-Muhsin, Kula Lumpur 1992 p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Smith, *Rabi' the Mystic and her Fellow-saints in Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928 p. 36.

gently undercutting the formalism and literalness of orthodox religion and the trappings of piety. Another remark attributed to Rabi`a, made about Sufyan al Thawri, shows the same thing. "Sufyan would be a [good man]," she said, "if only he did not love traditions."<sup>9</sup>

Some, if not most Muslims, sometimes disregard textual injunctions on gender equity and the prophetic model individually and collectively. Revision of practices (not divine injunctions) is needed. It is not the revealed Qur'an and the Sunnah that need any revision. What need to be reexamined are fallible human interpretations and practices. Diverse practices in Muslim countries often reflect cultural influences (local or foreign), more so than the letter or spirit of Shariah. Fortunately, there is an emerging trend for the betterment of our understanding of gender equity, based on the Qur'an and Hadith, not on alien and imported un-Islamic or non-Islamic values and not on the basis of the existing oppressive and unjust status quo in many parts of the Muslim world.<sup>10</sup>

Women's functions vary widely in the Muslim world and in Muslim history. In peasant communities, women work outdoors, and among urban elites, womanhood is more frequently celebrated in the home. Recurrently, however, the public space is rigorously desexualized, and this is represented by the quasi-monastic garb of men and women, where frequently the colour white is the colour of the male, while black, significantly the sign of inferiority, of the Ka'ba and hence the celestial Layla, denotes femininity. In the private space of the home these signs are cast aside, and the home becomes as colourful as the public space is austere and polarized. Modernity, refusing to recognise gender as a sacred sign and delighting in random erotic signaling, renders the public space 'domestic' by colouring it, and makes war on all remnants of gender separation, crudely construed as judgmental.

There are other aspects of Shari'a which deserve mention as illustrations of our theme, not least those which have been largely forgotten by Muslim societies. The Lawgiver sometimes designs the intersections between the two-gender universes as rights of women, and sometimes as rights of men; and the former category is more frequently omitted from actualized Muslim communities. Frequently the jurists' exegesis of the texts is plurivocal. Domestic chores, for instance, appear as an aspect of interior sociality, but this is not identified with

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Jamal Badawi, 1997. *Gender Equity in Islam*. WAMY Studies on Islam. Website: <http://www.muslim.net/islam/Badawi.html>.

purely female space, since they are regarded by some madhhabs, including the Shafi'i, as the responsibility of the man rather than the wife. A'isha was asked, after the Blessed Prophet's death, what he used to do at home when he was not at prayer; and she replied: 'He served his family: he used to sweep the floor, and sew clothes.' (Bukhari, Adhan, 44.) On this basis, Shafi'i jurists defend the woman's right not to perform housework.<sup>11</sup>

In the Hanafi madhhab, by contrast, these acts are regarded as the wife's obligations. Islam's theological approach of gender thus contends with a maze, a web of connections, which demand familiarity with a diverse legal code, regional heterogeneity and with the metaphysical no less than with the physical.

This complexity should warn us against offering facile generalisations about Islam's attitude to women. Journalists, feminists and cultivated people generally in the West have harboured deeply negative verdicts here. Often these verdicts are arrived at through the observation of actual Muslim societies; and it would be both futile and immoral to suggest that the modern Islamic world is always to be admired for its treatment of women. This imbalance will continue unless actualized religion learns to reincorporate the dimension of *ihsan* which valorizes the feminine principle and also obstructs and ultimately annihilates the ego, which underpins gender chauvinism. We need to distinguish, as many Muslim women thinkers are doing, between the expectations of the religion's ethos (as legible in scripture, classical exegesis, and spirituality), and the actual asymmetric structures of post-classical Muslim societies, which, like Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Chinese cultures, contain much that is in real need of reform.

Muslim women have for long periods of Islam's history left their homes to become scholars. A hundred years ago the orientalist Ignaz Goldziher showed that perhaps fifteen percent of medieval hadith scholars were women, teaching in masjids and universally admired for their integrity. Colleges such as the Saqlatuniya Madrasa in Cairo were funded and staffed entirely by women.

Male and female are aspects of duality, whereas God is unique. Nothing else resembles Him. He has no counterpart. So why is the male pronoun used to refer to Him? First of all, Arabic has no gender-neutral pronoun. Everything is

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<sup>11</sup> Islam, Irigaray, and the retrieval of gender' by Abdal Hakim Murad (April 1999) <http://www.iol.ie/~afifi/Articles/gender.htm>

either 'he' or 'she,' including inanimate objects. Even though English has the pronoun 'it,' to use 'it' to refer to God has a drawback, because 'it' is basically used for things and creatures that can't think. Likewise, to refer to God as 'she' has certain connotations of weakness in a human context. Like it or not, men have dominated public life and human societies throughout history. Therefore, the Qur'an uses 'He' to refer to Allah, while making it clear that God transcends all dualistic traits. Descriptions of God abound in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, but none of them gives the slightest inkling that He is masculine or feminine.

In contrast to Christianity, Islam has never depicted God as Father. Such a comparison is completely outside the boundaries of Islamic discourse. However, Muslims have always found it easy and natural to speak of the maternal qualities of Allah.

When we turn to the Qur'an, we find an image of Godhead apophatically stripped of metaphor. God is simply Allah, the God; never Father. The divine is referred to by the masculine pronoun: Allah is He (*huwa*); but the grammarians and exegetes concur that this is not even allegoric: Arabic has no neuter, and the use of the masculine is normal in Arabic for genderless nouns. No male preponderance is implied, any more than femininity is implied by the grammatically female gender of neuter plurals.<sup>12</sup>

The modern Jordanian theologian Hasan al-Saqqaf emphasises the point that Muslim theology has consistently made down the ages: God is not gendered, really or metaphorically. The Qur'an continues Biblical assumptions on many levels, but here there is a striking discontinuity. The imaging of God has been shifted into a new and bipolar register, that of the Ninety-Nine Names. Muslim women who have reflected on the gender issue have seized, I think with good reason, on this striking point. For instance, one Muslim woman writer, Sartaz Aziz, writes:

I am deeply grateful that my first ideas of God were formed by Islam because I was able to think of the Highest Power as one completely without sex or race, and thus completely un-patriarchal .... We begin with the idea of a deity who is

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

completely above sexual identity, and thus completely outside the value system created by patriarchy.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, by far the most conspicuous of the Divine Names in the Qur'an is al-Rahman, the All Compassionate. And the explicitly feminine resonances of this name were remarked upon by the Prophet (s.w.s.) himself, who taught that rahma, loving compassion, is an attribute derived from the word rahim (meaning a womb). (Bukhari, Adab, 13).

Prophet Muhammad was the first to use the example of mothers to illustrate God's mercy. After a battle, the Prophet and his Companions came upon a group of women and children. One woman had lost her child and was going around looking for him, her breasts flowing with milk. When she found her child, she joyfully put him to her breast and nursed him. The Prophet asked his Companions, "Do you think that this woman could throw her son in the fire?" They answered "No." He then said: "Allah is more merciful to His servants than this woman to her son." (From the hadith collection of al-Bukhari).

Another al-Bukhari hadith describes how during the Muslim conquest of Makkah a woman was running about in the hot sun, searching for her child. She found him, and clutched him to her breast, saying, "My son, my son!" The Prophet's Companions saw this, and wept. The Prophet was delighted to see their mercy, and said, "Do you wonder at this woman's mercy (*rahmah*) for her child? By Him in Whose hand is my soul, on the Day of Judgment, Allah shall show more *rahmah* toward His believing servants than this woman has shown to her son."

### **Further Confirmation for This is Supplied in a Famous Hadith**

'On the day that He created the heavens and the earth, God created a hundred rahmas, each of which is as great as the space which lies between heaven and earth. And He sent one rahma down to earth, by which a mother has rahma for her child.' (Muslim, Tawba, 21) Drawing on this explicit identification of rahma with the 'maternal' aspect of the phenomenal divine, some Islamic traditions habitually identify God's entire creative aspect as 'feminine', and as merciful.<sup>14</sup>

In her book *The Tao Of Islam* the Japanese scholar Sachiko Murata draws parallels with the attributes of God (proverbial 99 names of Allah) in the

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<sup>13</sup> ibid

<sup>14</sup> ibid

concept of Yin and Yang whereby the names of Majesty can be considered Yang/Masculine/Jalal as for example, The Avenger, The Destroyer, The Reconer. Examples of Yin/Feminine/Jamal names are the Great Bestower, The Most Indulgent, The Beautiful, and The Source of Peace. The vast majority of what are called “The Most Beautiful Names of God” (Al-Asma al Husna) – the proverbial 99 names of God – mostly fall into these categories.

In this context one can note the significance of the name, ‘Al-Rahman’ which means the Gracious-Compassionate One, the All-Merciful. At a simple statistical level it is the most often repeated attribute in the Qur’an. Apart from its overwhelming presence in the text, every chapter, except one, begins with this name accompanied by its variant Al-Rahim. Etymologically they are inextricably tied to the roots of the word for ‘Womb’ in Arabic, making it a Yin/Feminine attribute par excellence.<sup>15</sup>

The meaning of gender as elaborated by establishment Islam remained a dominant discourse in the Muslim Middle East until about the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unambiguously and on all levels – cultural, legal, social, and institutional – the social system it devised and informed was one that controlled and subordinated women, marginalized them economically, and, arguably, conceptualized them as human beings inferior to men. So negatively were women viewed within this system that even women of the spiritual stature of Rabi’a al-‘Aadawiyya still could be deemed inferior to the least spirituality developed man in the eyes of many Muslims.<sup>17</sup>

The issues related to women generally cover four areas: (a) Status of women, (b) role of women, (c) participation and other rights of women, and (d) dress and conduct of women. Our approach is most commonly apologetic (defending or explaining the virtues of Islam, without recognizing and solving the problems, whenever appropriate or warranted). An example of such a well-articulated, apologetic approach:

What then is all this uproar by the Muslim women of today about? Is there any right or facility that Islam has not already

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<sup>15</sup> Perspective on Islam: Cultural Complications by Dr Durre S. Ahmed, A paper presented at Symposium on “Women and Religion, Debates on Search..” held on March 1996 at Chinag Mai, Thailand by Henrich Boll foundation.

<sup>17</sup> Women and Gender in Islam by Leila Ahmed, Yale University Press 1992, pp 240

given her so that she should still feel constrained to launch a campaign to win them through means such as suffrage and representation in parliament? Let us see: She demands an equal human status. But Islam has already given this to her in theory as well as in practice before law. She wants economic independence and the right to participate in social life directly. Well, Islam was the first religion that gave her this right. She wants the right to education? Islam not only recognizes it but makes the acquisition of it obligatory on her as well.

Does she want the right not to be given in marriage without her permission? Islam has given her this right as well as the right to arrange her own marriage. Does she demand that she should be treated kindly and fairly while performing her functions within the house, and that she should have the right to ask for a separation from her husband if he should fail to treat her in a just and fair manner? Islam does give her all these rights and makes it incumbent upon men to safeguard them. Also does she want the right to go and work outside? Islam recognizes this right of her too.<sup>18</sup>

One may notice from the above apologetic statement that there is a valid point made about what Islam says and suggests, but hardly anything about the contemporary problems in society and the kind of concerns various segments of society have in regard to gender issues. As we defend the message of Islam, we tend to gloss over the harsh realities of the gap that exists between the Qur'anic and Prophetic vision on one hand, and the existing conditions of the Ummah, on the other. We enthusiastically proclaim that Islam is the only Deen (way of life; religion) that has made seeking knowledge incumbent upon all Muslims, men and women. Yet, illiteracy is a widespread problem of the Ummah, with the rate of illiteracy being disproportionately higher among the Muslim women. Why? An examination of these issues is critical if we want to build a better Islamic future for ourselves in this world. Currently, rather probably as always, we have polarities in our thoughts, attitudes and conducts.

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<sup>18</sup> Muhammad Qutb, *Islam the Misunderstood Religion* p. 124, IIFSO edition  
[www.islamicunterlink.com](http://www.islamicunterlink.com)

Once an objective and fair assessment of Muslim practices is made, it should be compared with the normative teachings of Islam. There are enough indications to show that a gap does exist between the ideal and the real. Given the existence of such a gap, a wide gap at times, it follows those Muslim reformers and other international bodies and movements to share at least one thing in common: an awareness of the need to close or at least narrow that gap. The problem arises, however, as to the most effective frame of reference and to the particulars of implementation.

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