

# Islam, Humanity, and Equality for Women

Lily Zakiyah Munir

## Introduction

The challenge faced by Islam to remain as a great Tradition in this modern life is how to promote its face of humanity. Islam which is understood through attitudes and behavior of its followers gives a diverse image, reflecting their diverse socio-cultural and political backgrounds from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere in the world. This paper discusses the less understood and less promoted dimension of humanity within Islam, with focus on women's issues.

The basic argument conveyed in this paper is that equality between women and men is sanctioned under Islam which was revealed 15 centuries ago. Similarly, rights of women depicted in the universal women's/human rights perfectly get along with the spirit for liberation Islam brings for the oppressed groups. The compatibility can be observed if the fundamental values of Islam on women and gender in the Qur'an and Hadith are understood with distinct thinking and no gender biases which may arise out of patriarchal cultures.

The mission of Islam, i.e. to bring blessings to the whole universe, can only be achieved if this religion is understood and implemented in a dynamic and progressive way. Only in this way can Islam adjust to the continuously changing world and, hence, its teachings on humanity can be materialized. Islamic teachings can be broadly classified into two levels: the universal and the particular. The universal teachings like principles of justice, equality, public goodness, freedom, etc. are absolute and unchangeable. But how these principles or norms are to be implemented or manifested depends on the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. The parameter of justice for women, for example, may be different in the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabian peninsula than that in the current times in another part of the world like Indonesia. Hence, it is necessary to continuously refresh Muslims' understanding of the religion in line with the changing contexts. Human problems are never static and Islam should be able to respond to these problems. This can be done only if the religion is lived empirically in dynamic and continuously changing settings. .

This paper discusses three major areas: *first*, on Islam as a religion for humanity. This section attempts to understand the human dimension of the religion, which most Muslims have given very little attention to. Lack of attention to the humanity dimension of Islam has resulted in the various social ills and the exclusionary stance of many Muslims. *Second*, on the Qur'anic injunctions on women, relating to their rights and equality with men. These verses could be and have been interpreted with some gender bias because of patriarchal tendency and male ego of the reader. This could happen because every text, moreover religious text, is open to different interpretations because of the reader's backgrounds. After trying to understand the frame of thinking on Islam and the Qur'an, this paper will present the debates on two issues of polygamy and veiling. An elaborate

discussion of women's rights in Islam that show their convergence with the universal rights is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper will end with a brief reflection reiterating the importance of reading the Qur'an and Hadith texts on women or gender with crystal clear, without gender biases or male ego, and by correlating them with the universal norms of Islam on women's liberation.

### **Islam a Religion for Humanity**

Islam, literally, implies the meaning of peace, submission, justice, and well-being (*maslahah*). Linguistically it is metamorphose of root words *salima-yaslamu-salaaman* meaning safe and peace and *aslama-yuslimu-islaman* referring to the verb which means to save or to bring peace. Generically, it is a religion that brings the mission of liberation and salvation through a set of new moral values for social transformation. Islam is a source of morality because of its metaphysical and humanistic character.

The presence of Islam as a source of norms and morality can be observed in the socio-historical context of the Arab in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Arabs then lived as nomads in open deserts and were susceptible to inter-tribal conflicts and wars. Islam presented itself amongst these nomads, built their sensitivities and internalization for ethical values and moralities. The language of the Qur'an, laden with aesthetics and messages on humanity and the one-ness of God, had influenced these nomads, moving their hearts and emotions and inspiring them to lead a new life in societies fabricated with social norms and order.

Islam guides its followers to keep balanced and not transgress in all aspects of life. The all-purpose prayer of Muslims which is always recited in all occasions is the prayer for goodness in the world and in the hereafter. Along with this line, the Prophet Muhammad asked Muslims to work for their worldly life as if they would live forever and work for their life in the hereafter as if they would die tomorrow. This reflects the importance of keeping the same weight between vertical relation (*hablul min Allah*), which is the relation between human and God, and horizontal relation (*hablul min al-naas*) or the relation amongst human beings and between human and the environment. The feeling of tranquility a Muslim gains after performing ritual activities such as prayer or fasting, which is vertically oriented, should become a basic capital to radiate peace and goodness to others. This balance between personal and social piety is important. Muslims are encouraged normatively to spread *salam* (peace) by saying *assalamu alaikum* which means 'may peace be blessed upon you.' This phrase is not just for greeting, but also is a pray for the safety of others. Similarly, teachings on justice, equality, mutual love, mutual help, etc. should have effects on others.

It is at this public level that Islam is currently faced with a serious challenge as shown by the increasing phenomena of violence, wars, or inter-religious conflicts. Fundamentalism, characterized by rigid and textual approach to religiosity and tendency to go back to the past, is also a threat to Islam because it erodes the humanity face of the religion. As a way of thinking, fundamentalism has always been unfriendly to women. In terms of women, fundamentalists are obsessed by women's sexuality and how to control it.

Women, then, have to be covered or domesticated, or their public activities restricted, so they say. They should be properly dressed and veiled so as not to become temptress. Islam is often hijacked to perpetrate discrimination against and injustices to women. Their rights as promised in the Qur'an and hadith are often withheld. Therefore, it is time that we promote a new paradigm in viewing Islam, to bridge the wide gap between its idealistic universal values and their realities in daily pluralistic life.

### **The Qur'an, Male Ego, and Discrimination Against Women**

The low status of women and the discrimination against them in many Muslim societies have become a major concern of Muslim intellectuals. Women appear to be powerless in facing the challenges of patriarchy, male egoism and hegemony woven in the name of Islam. This is not ungrounded. The concept of an ideal Muslimah (Muslim woman) is constructed as such that it covers a woman who is obedient and submissive, faithful, loyal, serving, and pleasing to her husband. Women, physically and functionally, are restricted in the areas of, in the Javanese term, *dapur* (kitchen), *sumur* (well/washing area), and *kasur* (mattress). Women are marginalized and valued only on their domestic and sexual roles. They are deprived from involvement in the public sphere which deals with the society at large. Countless religious books, mostly classical, have such contents and are widely circulated and used in *pesantrens* and other religious educational institutions. Written by scholars highly respected as religious intellectual authorities, these books are often viewed as 'sacred' and treated as if they were the words of God Himself. They are unsurprisingly influential in shaping Muslims' dogma and paradigm regarding gender and women.

The most often cited Qur'anic verse to justify male superiority over women is the following, "*And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise*" (QS al-Baqarah/2:228). This verse is to be analyzed and understood carefully. The Qur'an ensures that women have rights similar to those of men; but in the following part it says that men are a degree higher than women. These statements seem to contradict each other. To understand this seemingly contradictory verse, one has to relate it to the pertinent social context of its revelation. The verse reflects the then social realities that are iniquitous to women and that it is not easy to reconcile the situation for the favor of women. The Qur'an has no intention to bring an abrupt change by terminating the long-aged practices detrimental to women. It may spoil the social system which, in turn, may create another problem. Hence, the verse is to be understood in relation to the universal message of the Qur'an and its spirit to liberate the oppressed groups. It should not be understood in isolation, textually, and more over, with an already gender biased mindset.

Another verse often quoted to support male family leadership regardless of men's quality or capacity is Q.S. al-Nisa'/4:34. The verse, in classical exegeses, is interpreted as illustrating sexual hierarchy, with women as sexual objects at the service of men. The verse in question, in Al-Tabari and al-Baydawi's reading (Stowasser 1998: 33), says:

Men are in charge of/are guardians of/are superior to/have authority over/women (*al-rijalu qawwamuuna 'ala l-nisa'*) because God has endowed one with more/because God has preferred some of them over others (*bi-ma faddala Allahu ba'duhum 'ala ba'din*) and they support them from their means (*wa-bi-ma anfaqu min amwalihim*). Therefore the righteous women are obedient, guarding in secret that which God has guarded. And for those whom you fear may rebel (*nusyuz*), admonish them and banish them to separate beds, and beat them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. For God is Exalted, Great.

Again, this verse is to be understood critically. In the then Arabic society, women were not expected or required to earn a living. Men were solely responsible for it. Because men were obliged to provide means for the family, they were granted a degree superior to women. That is the wisdom of Allah. As Allah is the Most Just, if the social context changes and if women start earning for living (and there is no prohibition in the Qur'an and Hadith for a woman to work to financially support herself or her family), there is no one who will restrain women from getting a similar status to men or even a higher status on certain issue. The Qur'an never stops advocating gender equality doctrine as manifested in many verses in the Qur'an. This is the smart argument of Engineer (1999).

### **Equality and justice for women**

To understand how Islam has uplifted the status of women and, therefore, to appreciate its revolutionary breakthrough for women's liberation and empowerment, it is crucial to understand the socio-cultural condition of pre-Islamic Arabia. This period is also known as *jahiliya*, where ignorance, lack of moral values, licentiousness and corruption prevailed in the society. Women enjoyed no rights whatsoever, and were treated more as a commodity than a full human being; they were not only enslaved but also inherited as a possession. Females were often viewed as a burden because they could not defend the tribe during the war and possessing inherent sin and wickedness. They were a constant threat to family's honor, which led to the practice of female infanticide, a barbaric custom of burying female infant alive in the desert. The killing of an infant girl was carried out in many ways. Some would dig a hole and bury her in it until she died, others would throw her from an elevated place, and still others would drown or slaughter her (Al-Hibri 1982, 222; El-Bahnassawi 1985).

The Qur'an illustrates the gruesome fate awaiting female babies and the profound sadness of their fathers at their birth in the following verses: "*And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief. With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had. Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah, what an evil (choice) they decide on.*" (QS al-Nahl/16:58-9) This practice is strongly condemned in the Qur'an, "*When the female (infant) buried alive is questioned; for what sin was she buried?*" (QS al-Takwir/81:8-9).

The Prophet Muhammad shows his defense for the baby girl and greatly improves the status of women by saying that one to whom a daughter is born and who does not bury her alive, does not humiliate her, nor prefers a son to a daughter, will be sent by Allah to paradise.<sup>1</sup> The Prophet also says that hell fire is to one who has to go through trials and tribulation due to a daughter and yet does not hate her and behaves well to her.<sup>2</sup>

Islam ends these atrocities to women, grants a full human being status to them and places them on an equal footing to men. There are more than 30 verses in the Qur'an which support equality between women and men and the rights of women in various aspects of life. Among of them is on the creation of human being. The Qur'an has refuted the idea that woman is a secondary creation deriving from the rib of man which is part of Biblical tradition illustrated in Genesis 2: 18-24. Instead, women and men are created equally from a single soul (*nafs*) as depicted in the *Surah al-Nisa'* (The Women) verse 1, "*O mankind, reverence your Guardian Lord who created you from a single nafs ...fear Allah, through Whom you demand your mutual (rights)...*". Women and men were created to be equal parts of a pair, "*And of everything We have created pairs ...*" (QS al-Dzariyat/51:49), and their relationship as one of 'love and mercy' as contained in the following verse, "*And among His signs is this, that he created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts) ...*" (QS al-Rum/30:21).

Both women and men have equal responsibilities and rewards for adhering to the Five Pillars of Islam as expressed in QS al-Tawbah/9:71, "*The believers, men and women, are protectors one of another; they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. On them will Allah pour His mercy....*"

The Qur'an, in addressing the believers, often uses the expression, '*believing men and women*' to emphasize the equality of women and men in regard to their respective duties, rights, virtues and merits. It says: "*For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true 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, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.* (QS al-Ahzab/33:35)

All Qur'anic verses on the cosmic drama, i.e. the story of Adam and Eva being expelled from heaven, emphasize, through the use of a pronoun *huma* indicating two actors, that both of them were actively involved in committing the sin. Contrary to the Bible, the Qur'an places equal blame on both Adam and Eva for their mistake. Nowhere in the Qur'an can we find even the slightest hint that Eva tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit or even that she had eaten before him. Eva in the Qur'an is no temptress, no seducer, and no deceiver. They both lived in heaven, both got tempted by Satan, both ate

---

<sup>1</sup> Sunan Abi Dawud, *Kitab al Adab*, Bab *Fadl man 'ala yatama*

<sup>2</sup> Sahih Bukhari, *Kitab al-Adab*, Cahper on *Rahmat al- walad wa taqbilihi*

the forbidden fruit, both repented and were forgiven, and both fell from heaven (QS al-A'raf/7:19-23).

So in Islam there is absolutely no difference between men and women as far as their relationship to Allah is concerned, as both are promised the same reward for good conduct and the same punishment for evil conduct. The Qur'an says: "*And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women*" (QS al-Baqarah/2:226). Islam recognizes distinction, not discrimination, between women and men because of their biological differences. In spite of these biological differences, they remain equal partners as God's creation.

### ***Debatable Issues***

- *Polygamy*

Polygamy was widely practiced in pre-Islamic society. There was no limit for the number of wives a man could take. Early commentators of the Qur'an recorded cases of some Arabs having up to ten wives. The notion of justice towards these wives was not there in this society. The husband had unilateral privilege to determine whom he would love most and whom he would shower with his unlimited favors. The wives had to accept their fate without any recourse to the process of justice.

Islam does not accept this state of the affairs. Along with its basic project, empowerment of women, though within certain limitations of the given society, the Qur'an accepts the fact that women are victims of injustices in the society. However, abolishing polygamy completely and giving women equal status with men in every respect was not a practical proposition in that type of society. Thus, the Qur'an applied the middle-way solution, in what is termed "pragmatic-ideological" course (Engineer, ND: 87). While it hinted at equality directly as well inferentially, it sought solutions more acceptable to the society that was dominated by men.

It is clear from the Qur'an's statements that polygamy was not a very happy solution as far as the Qur'an was concerned, and yet it had to advocate it in a very restricted manner. The Qur'anic verse that refers to polygamy is QS al-Nisa'/4:3, which translates as follows. "*If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with orphans, marry of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with them, then only one.*" This rule on polygamy was introduced conditionally; the verse especially refers to the justice to be done to orphans. The verse was revealed immediately after the Battle of Uhud when Muslim community was left with many orphans and widows and captives of war. Their treatment was to be governed by principles of the greatest humanity and equity. As argued by Ali (1989:184), the occasion is past but the principles remain. He reads the verse as a possibility for a man to marry the orphans if he is sure that it is the way to protect their interests and their property with perfect justice to them and to his own dependence, if he has any.

The verse is not merely limited to orphans, but has a general application with regard to the marriage laws in Islam. Muslim jurists, as pointed out by Do'i (1992: 51) lay down the following conditions for a polygamous man: i) he must have sufficient financial resources to look after the needs of the additional wives; ii) he must do equal justice to them all. The wives are to be treated equally as far as the fulfillment of their conjugal and other rights are concerned. The condition of being just and fair is hardly possible to realize due to humanly limitations. The Qur'an is explicit about this, which makes it even clearer in its attitude for not advocating polygamy. The verse (QS al-Nisa'/4:129) is translated by Ali (227) as follows. "*You are never able to be fair and just as between women; even if it is your ardent desire; but turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air).*" This verse even affirms the Qur'an's attitude against polygamy. It is quite categorical that it is not within the power of human beings to treat wives, more than one, with equal fairness. There is a big gap between desire and its fulfillment, and as far as polygamy is concerned, the Qur'an is clear: in spite of good intentions, men cannot deal justly between their wives. This may be because, as the Qur'an says, "*God has not made for any man two hearts* (QS. Al-Ahzab/33:4), implying that a man cannot love two women equally. These verses, then, can be read together as presenting a case against generalized polygamy, which Muslims derive from reading half a line of QS al-Nisa'/4:1.

The core issue of polygamy in current Muslim societies is that it has been taken as a general attitude of Islam, ignoring the social justice reason of the revelation of the verse. Polygamy, which was common in pre-Islamic society, apparently has a new meaning in Islam. Islam intended to change it from a male right into a female privilege in limited circumstances beneficial to women and children, not in circumstances detrimental to women. If it is acceptable to women, polygamy may be a way to protect them and give them sexual access to men at a time when women outnumber men. However, the Qur'an itself does not refer to the sexual nature or needs of women or men in dealing with polygamy; it refers only to the need to ensure social justice for orphaned girls, in a time when unprotected women were open to all kinds of abuse. Even so, polygamy is not the Qur'an's ideals; otherwise, 'its admonition to marry only one, its assertion that men cannot do justice between wives, and its reference to the oneness of the human heart would hold no meaning' (Barlas 2002:192). And since for believers the Qur'an's teachings cannot be meaningless, argued Barlas further, it is we who must be willing to reread the verses cumulatively as an argument against a generalized mode of polygamy.

- *Veiling (hijab, jilbab)*

There are two words that are currently used in Indonesia to refer to the same meaning: *hijab* and *jilbab*. The term *hijab*, literally means "curtain," appears seven times in the Qur'an: indicating metaphorical meaning, a concrete object, and an eschatological context, which has been interpreted as a mixture of two. Semantically, the general meaning of *hijab* refers to the concept of 'separation,' which can be concrete, metaphorical, or abstract. *Hijab*, in its concrete meaning, segregates individuals or groups of individuals from the society in general, and also the abstract institution of such

segregation. In medieval royal circle, the *hijab* was the curtain behind which the ruler was hidden from the eyes of the courtiers and commoners alike. This practice, first documented for the Umayyads and the Abbasids, later became part of an elaborate system of court ceremonials (Stowasser 1994: 168). While the custom of screening-off was unknown among the Prophet and the four rightly guided (*rashidun*) successors, it is here divinely legislated for the female elite of the first Medinan community, the Prophet's wives.

The descent of the *hijab* is an event dating back to QS al-Ahzab/33:53 (Ali 1989:1074-1075), which was revealed in the fifth year after the *hijra* (AD 627).

*“Oh ye who believe! Enter not the Prophet's houses, until leave is given you for a meal, not to wait for its preparation; but when you are invited, enter; and when ye have taken your meal, disperse without seeking familiar talk. Such (behavior) annoys the Prophet: he is ashamed to dismiss you, but Allah is not ashamed (to tell you) the truth. And when you ask (his ladies) for anything you want, ask them from before a screen; that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs.”*

The wedding of Zainab bint Jahsy to the Prophet is identified in the majority of hadith and *tafsir* accounts as the occasion for God's legislation of the *hijab*, imposed by God to shield the Prophet's women from the eyes of visitors to his dwellings. As pointed out by a number of great exegetes (Ibn Sa'd; Tabari; Zamakhshari; Ibn Kathir, in Mernissi 1991: 100; Stowasser 1994:90), the *hijab* “came down” in a double sense: Firstly, it was, literally, a “curtain” the Prophet loosened while standing on the threshold to Zaynab's chamber, in order to bar his servant Anas Ibn Malik from entering; secondly, the *hijab* also “came down” by way of God's revelation of the verse, which the Prophet recited to Anas. Other traditions report that the *hijab* was decreed after the Prophet saw some men loitering in the vicinity of Zaynab's house on the morning after the wedding night. Another strand of traditions mention that Umar ibn al-Khattab, urged the Prophet to conceal and segregate his wives, because both the righteous and the wicked entered into the Prophet's house.

Muslim interpreters stipulate that the Prophet's wives participated fully in the communal affairs of Medina until the revelation of the *hijab* verse. Their exclusion from public life was due to several factors, among others to provide domestic comfort and privacy for the female elite of Islam (the Prophet's wives). This notion, in turn, connotes an element of “privilege.” Indeed, the medieval Hadith informs that the *hijab* was imposed upon the Prophet's wives as criterion of their elite status. In addition, the *hijab* is also seen as a protective device, especially during periods of civic tension when the hypocrites were instigating disorder and stirring up inter-communal fears. Because of this social condition, the Prophet felt compelled to heed Umar Ibn Khattab's council and seclude his wives (Stowasser 1994:91).

Soon after the revelation of the *hijab* verse, self-protection of “the Prophet's wives, his daughters, and the women of the believers” was enjoined in the Qur'an (QS al-

Ahzab/33:59-60) by way of God's command that Muslim women cover themselves in their "mantles," or "cloaks" (*jalabib*, singular: *jilbab*) (when abroad), "so that they be known (as free women, not slaves) and not molested (in the streets) by the hypocrites, and those in whose hearts is a disease ..." (Stowasser 1994: 91). This legislation differs from the previous verse in two ways: firstly, it concerned individual female appearance when outside the home, not seclusion within it; and, secondly, it applied to all Muslim women, not just the Prophet's wives. Once again, classical exegesis has identified Umar Ibn Khattab as the main spokesman in favor of this clothing law.

Given the multiple meanings of the *hijab* and the context of its revelation, it is hard to understand how this phenomenon was made obligatory for Muslim women at large. Stowasser (1984: 93) relates it to the period after the expansion of Islam beyond the borders of Arabia, and later in the Islamicized societies still ruled by pre-existing (Sasanian and Byzantine) traditions. Rules on women's dress and space were formulated in the mid eighth century in an absolute and categorical way, reflecting the practices and cultures of that time. Meanwhile, Mernissi (1987:97) points out that the *hijab*, also meaning a veil that hides God from men, takes on an eminently negative significance. She further questions, how the *hijab*, with such a negative meaning, is claimed in our day as a symbol of Muslim identity, manna for the Muslim woman. Mernissi (101) concludes that the Prophet, during a troubled period at the beginning of Islam, introduced a breach in space separating the public from the private, or indeed the profane from the sacred, but which was to turn into a segregation of the sexes. The veil that descended from Heaven was going to cover up women, separate them from men, from the Prophet, and so from God. Is it really the meaning of the *hijab*?

## **Final Reflection**

The discussions above show that Islam urges its followers to keep the balance between the transcendental and social relations, and between personal and social piety. The feelings of secure, peace, and good resulted from performing rituals can be a strong foundation to promote humanity and human relations. Islam sanctions equal status to women and men as God's creation. The religion recognizes distinction, not discrimination, between the two genders because of their different biological conditions. Equality amongst all human beings including women and men is a basic principle in Islam and is beautifully illustrated in numerous Qur'anic verses. Texts on particular issues like polygamy or veiling which may sound discriminatory to women are not to be read in isolation. They are to be understood within the socio-cultural context of revelation and should not contradict Islam's universal message of justice and equality.

## **References**

Ali, Yusuf, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*. Washington DC: Amana Corporation, 1989.

- Barlas, Asma, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.
- El-Bahnassawi, Salem, *Women, Between Islam and World Legislations: Comparative Study*, Translated by Abdul Fattah El-Shaer, Kuwait: Dar-ul Qalam, 1985.
- Engineer, Ali Asghar, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Private. Ltd., 1999.
- Engineer, Asghar Ali, *The Rights of Women in Islam*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1992.
- Mernissi, Fetima, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Massachusetts: Persues Books, 1985.
- Mernissi, Fetima, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*. New York: Halstead Press Book, 1986.
- Stowasser, Barbara Freyer, *Women in the Qur'an's Tradition and Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.