

WOMEN, ISLAM, AND HUMAN SECURITY¹

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Understanding Islam

Literally, Islam implies the meaning of peace, justice, and well-being (*maslahah*). Generically, it is a religion which brings the mission of liberation and salvation through a set of new moral values for social transformation. It brings vertical ritual dimension as well as horizontal humanitarian aspects and seeks to balance them. The goal of the religion, well-being or *maslahah* of all beings should exist simultaneously at personal and social level so that the religion can materialize its humanitarian mission in pluralistic societies. The highest level of *maslahah* involves respect to and protection of one's faith, life, intellects, descendants, and wealth. These basic teachings are so important that failure to uplift them may result in the disruption of social order. The second level of *maslahah* is the principle of ease, i.e. one should not feel forced and burdened in practicing religious rituals. These two types of *maslahah* are perfected by the third level, which is related to the esthetics and etiquettes dimensions of Islam. These humanitarian and tolerant aspects of Islam will emerge only when its doctrines are viewed with open mindedness and comprehensiveness.

However, achievement of these ideals has been hampered by Islamic fundamentalism including politicization of the religion to pursue political goals that has nothing to do with Islam at all. Islam explicitly teaches tolerance, peace, moderation, equality and pluralism. God has created human beings into males and females and make them tribes and ethnicities in order to know and understand each other; not in order to fight with each other. This is the basic teaching of Islam on egalitarianism and pluralism. The Qur'an says that there is no force in religion and that 'for you is your religion and for me is my religion'; which forms the basis of tolerance and religious pluralism. The Qur'an speaks of moderate people (*ummatan wasathan*) which refutes extremism and radicalism.

Fundamentalists—characterized among others by lack of humanity as they are too God-centered, utopian and unrealistic because of their adherence to the past, authoritarian because of their exclusionary stance, totalitarianism because of their radical approach to change the whole system, rigid and scriptural because of their refusal to contextualize their religious interpretation—not only fail to reflect Islamic teachings but even have portrayed a frightening face of the religion: violent, intolerant, and inhuman. It is, therefore, crucial for one to distinguish between Islam as a religion and faith and Islam as a political ideology which is used for purposes that has nothing to do with religion. Fundamentalism, because of its traits that are against Islam's basic mission, is, in Tibi's term, 'a horse of another color'; it should be encountered and more peaceful, tolerant and just face of Islam should be promoted

Women's liberating spirit of Islam and its challenges

To appropriately understand the Qur'an's treatment of women and gender, and therefore to appreciate its revolutionary breakthrough for women's liberation and empowerment, it is important that one observe the socio-cultural and historical context of its revelation. History notes that in the advent of Islam, women in the Arabian Peninsula enjoyed no rights whatsoever as a human being and were treated no better than a commodity. Women were enslaved and could be inherited as a possession. The Qur'an prohibited this practice as depicted in Q.S. al-Nisa'/4:19. The Qur'an also

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mentions that to the Arabs in that period the birth of a baby girl was a shame to them (Q.S. al-Nahl/16:58-59); baby girls were often buried alive. The Qur'an condemns this barbaric practice of female infanticide (Q.S. al-Takwir/81:8-9). The Prophet shows his defense for the baby girls 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.² 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.³

The spirit of women's liberation in Islam is also manifested in its teaching to abolish women's status as property, establish women's legal capacity, grant women the right to receive their own dowry, change marriage from a proprietary to a contractual relationship, and allow women to retain control over their property and use their maiden name after marriage. The Qur'an also grants women financial maintenance from their husbands and control over the husband's free ability to divorce.

In the pre-Islamic period, there was no restriction on the number of wives a man could have. Tribal chiefs and leaders had numerous wives, some as many as ten, in order to establish familial relationship for political alliances to minimize tribal competition and attacks. The Qur'an ends this practice in its verses (Q.S. al-Nisa'/4:3; al-Nisa'/4:129; and al-Ahzab/33:4). To Muslim reformers such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), the verses on polygamy are contextual and not normative; they are to be understood comprehensively and not to be taken partially by taking half the line and dismissing the other half. The Qur'an's recognition for polygamy is contingent upon equal justice and impartiality, both of which are practically impossible. Muhammad Abduh's Qur'anic interpretation was adopted by most Islamic reformers and provided the modernist rationale for many governments' Muslim family reform restricting polygamy.

The Qur'an states that men and women are equal in the eyes of God; men and women were created to be equal parts of a pair (Q.S. al-Dzariyat/51:49), and their relationship as one of 'love and mercy' (Q.S. al-Rum/30:31), and they are like garments to each other (Q.S. al-Baqarah/2:187). Both men and women have equal responsibilities and rewards for adhering to the Five Pillars of Islam (Q.S. al-Tawbah/9:71-72). 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, men and women are created equally from a single soul. Hence, in relation to the absolute, woman is equal to man in all essential rights and duties; God makes no distinction to man and woman; they are to be equally rewarded or punished for their deeds as illustrated below:

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 charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and men and women who engage much in Allah's praise—for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great rewards (Q.S. al-Ahzab/22:35).

However, these new moral values on gender equality and gender justice are challenged by male biases and patriarchal way of interpreting Qur'anic text, which coincide with the masculine nature of the Arabic language and cultural structure. The

² Sunan Abi Dawud, *Kitab al Adab*, Bab *Fadl man 'ala yatama*

³ Sahih Bukhari, *Kitab al-Adab*, B ab *Rahmat a—walad wa taqbilihi*.

masculinity is reflected in the Arabic language structure with its rigid gender segregation; for example, if there are a thousand women and one man, the pronoun to be used refers to male. Hence, one man can demean a thousand women. This gender-based classification applies not only to living beings but also to non-living beings; there is no single word in Arabic which is gender neutral. Therefore, in spite of being addressed to all humankind, the Qur'an, inescapably, appears to look masculine. This masculine linguistic character has further impact on women: they are positioned as object rather than subject of religious regulations..

On gender relations, the verse that is often quoted as indicating man having a slight edge and social superiority over woman is Q.S. al-Nisa'/4:34 and, hence, justifying gender hierarchies. The verse, in classical exegesis, is translated as:

Men are in charge of/are guardians of/are superior to/have authority over/women because God has endowed one with more/because God has preferred some of them over others, and they support them from their means. 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.

The verse legislates men's authority over their women, conferring on them the right to discipline their women in order to ensure obedience. This quotation is an example of how the Qur'an was read and interpreted by classical exegetes and documented in classical books that have remained immutable as a source of Islamic Family Law to the present time. A human product, nevertheless viewed as 'sacred' and unchangeable, such work, undeniably has impacted greatly on Muslim societies, exacerbating the already existing patriarchal attitudes. Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an had initiated the process of transformation into just and egalitarian societies. However, Islam's achievement during the Prophet's period in liberating the oppressed groups particularly women was at stake when Islamic societies fell back into feudalism. Under feudalistic system of the Abbasid dynasty, women's status was set back at the periphery. Women had no political rights and responsibilities; and the court culture had given rise to sexual objectification of women. The social context during this period was far more negative to women than that sanctioned during the Prophet Muhammad. The 7th – 10th centuries were the period when classical books with classical exegeses were documented. Muslim law, the sharia, was codified and the doors of logical reasoning (*ijtihad*) were closed as sharia was considered fully and exhaustively elaborated by the time. And this is the sharia that has been institutionalized in a number of Islamic countries and is being pursued in a number of regions in Indonesia, pioneered by Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam.

Islamic fundamentalism: a threat to women and human security

During the last three decades the world has witnessed the proliferation of Islamic fundamentalism worldwide. While going back to the fundamentals of Islam such as justice, equality, moderation and tolerance is a positive action, fundamentalism is quite the opposite. Islamic fundamentalism is characterized by their traits: rigid, unrealistic, authoritarian, totalitarian, and utopian; all of these are against the basic universal teaching of Islam and, therefore, is to be opposed. Formalization of sharia (Islamic jurisprudence) is an example of how Islam can be used as a political weapon.

While this politicization of religion has impacted states, societies, and communities, women have obviously seemed to be impacted the most. Let us learn from history. Let us look back at the Iranian Revolution under Khomeini in 1979, Taliban in Afghanistan, Sudan under Numairi, the Gulf countries and Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia. Political and religious authorities in these countries have demonstrated their ‘hatred,’ or most probably ‘fear,’ of women, as if women were the source of scandals and *fitna* (destruction) and therefore have to be rigidly controlled.

Many cases of discrimination and violence against women can be recorded from these countries. In Iran, women were strong supporters of the Revolution; but only two weeks after ousting the Shah, Khomeini issued fatwa to restrict women, obligating them to wear veil, withdrawing the Family Protection Law, and prohibiting women to work in ‘manly’ professions. The stories of Taliban’s inhumanities perpetrated in the name of sharia are widely recognized. Women teachers, doctors or lawyers have to stop working and stay at home, education for girls was closed, women have to wear burqa which hides the whole body except the eyes, etc. In Saudi Arabia, women may not have their own ID’s because it will require their photographs posted on the card, which, according to them, is prohibited.

These cases against women are most probably related to the fundamentalists’ obsession to uplift social morality, which they do at the cost of women. One can observe that in countries institutionalizing sharia or in countries claiming to be Islamic, control over women has almost always become the first agenda, from veiling, segregation, or restriction to women by domesticating them. Nazih Ayubi in his book *Political Islam* (1991) makes an interesting analysis of this phenomenon. He contends that most population of Islamic countries view problems arising out of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization as ‘moral’ issues: an impact to husbands who have to depend on the wives’ salaries, a temptation to daughters through luxurious imported products such as cosmetics and shiny cars. These socio-economic factors have created tensions, and, mixed with sexual tension they seek justification. Women are seen as the source of this ‘moral erosion’ because of their decreasing values in submitting to men and in their standard of satisfaction, simplicity, and piety. These men find similarities among each other and, together, they push the authorities to take an action in the name of Islam.

Politics of women’s sexuality and morality

Stereotypes of womanhood and motherhood with all their symbolization prevail in almost all cultures and ideologies, including Muslim societies. Islamic discourse and social realities are very much obsessed by women’s sexuality, especially on how to regulate and control it. In Muslim societies sexuality may become a public issue even a political issue. Hassan Hanafi, a Muslim reformer, similarly observes that the Islamist approach is dominated by sexual perception in the world, starting from veiling, segregation between men and women, taking off sights to women, to lowering women’s voice. But the bigger the veil is, the bigger is one’s curiosity to know what is hidden behind, argues Hanafi. There are more in the socio-political world than just segregation of men and women which, in Hanafi’s term, indicates the unfulfilled sublimated sexual needs.⁴

⁴ Hassan Hanafi, *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* (Tradition and Reformation), in Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 45.

This politic of women's sexuality obsessing the contemporary Islamist movement is also admitted by *ulamas* who gathered at the conference on women's rights and responsibilities organized by the International Islamic Council on Women in cooperation with the Al-Azhar University in February 2001. Dr. Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi, a mufti from Al-Azhar whose works are often quoted by Muslim hard liners, argues that *ulamas* who issue excessively strong fatwas are basically violating women's rights guaranteed in the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition. Muslim women have been suffering from a double-edged oppression: first, because of blind imitation (*taqlid*) to the obsolete tradition during the pre-Islamic period, and second, because of blind imitation of Western women's tradition.

This fear of women's sexual power and the obsession of women's morality are reflected in the writings of *muftis* or *ulamas*, from the orthodox to contemporary ones. Prior to the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Mutahhari expressed his fear of the effect of women and girls without veils, as it may arouse male sexuality and distract men from productive activities. Mutahhari was not sure if *jilbab* could reduce women's sexual power and attraction; therefore, he suggested that male and female students of universities be separated by a curtain. This suggestion was implemented after the Iranian revolution.

Abul A'la al-Mawdudi, founder of Jama'at-i Islami in Pakistan who inspires Islamist movement worldwide, views that protection of women's chastity through *purdah* constitutes a basic human rights principle in Islam that has to be uplifted. He sanctions that women cover themselves well in their blankets, and pull down the blanket to cover their face.⁵ Hassan Al-Banna of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt expresses his fear of women's liberation and equality by saying that women's place is the home, and their primary roles are mother, wife, and housekeeper. Social mixing between men and women is prohibited. Sayyid Qutb, a radical ideologist who remained unmarried until he died, highly appreciates the role of family as an institution to 'breed the future,' yielding 'invaluable human products' under guardianship of women. Biological differences between men and women have caused differences of functions, sensitivity, and activities in a positive way. Women fulfill their functions by becoming a wife and mother, while men are absolute holders of power that cannot be denied, providers of means of living, and active members of public life. For Sayyid Qutb, the existence of men and women as couples in marriage is God's will, but there is no guarantee that the marriage will be eternal or monogamous. Polygamy is legitimate because of men's biological condition and God's holy will.⁶

Because of such demeaning views on women, it is not surprising that women have always become the primary target of (re)Islamization project worldwide. Women have been used as the easiest targets in creating symbols of Islamic identity.

In pursuit of Islamic feminism

'Feminism' has been a contested term even in the west, where the term has originated. Historical literature is filled with different types of feminists who would certainly find difficulties identifying common ground. It is even more so whenever

⁵ Quoted in Mayer A.E, *Islam and Human Rights*, Boulder CO., Westview Press, 1995, p. 100-1.

⁶ In Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, London: Pinter, a Cassal Imprint, 1997, p. 133.

feminism is put in the context of Islam or Muslim societies. Questions will immediately arise, 'Is there such a term as Islamic feminism?' 'Is feminism compatible with Islam?' Scholars and activists are divided in terms of acceptance of "Islamic feminism." Some consider the term problematical as they find it difficult to reconcile between Islam and feminism and believe that the power structure is so male dominated that the epistemology of Islam is contrary to women's rights. Some Muslim activists who truly work to promote women's rights in Islam refuse to be called Islamic feminists because of their reluctance to be identified with western feminism.

There are, however, scholars like Fatima Mernissi, Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas who make attempts to craft a feminist theology and reinterpretation of Islamic texts. The Iranian Nayereh Tohidi, well known for her writings on politics and women, notes the recently growing phenomenon of Islamic feminism which she defines as "a movement of women who have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female supportive verses of the Qur'an in their fights especially for women's access to education."⁷ Hence, Islamic feminism neither adopts Western feminism nor follows Middle Eastern model of gender relations, refuses both secularism and Islamism, and is purely based on values and tradition of Islam prevalent locally as viewed and experienced by women in pursuing their equality and justice. Islamic feminism refers to the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition with a new spirit of unreading patriarchy that has prevailed for thousand of years and reclaims women's hijacked rights for living on an equal footing with men as God's vicegerents on the earth.

The essence of Islamic feminist struggle is to bring justice for women as promised in the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition from a discourse into reality. This concept of justice should be measured from a woman's insider perspective, the oppressed object. For centuries women have been muted for the sake of harmony or for other cultural reasons and it is time that they are to be encouraged to voice out their needs and aspiration. So education and empowerment for women are vital elements of Islamic feminism, in addition to education for men to be more appreciative of gender equality and equity.

Conclusion

To set up the context of understanding the issue of women, Islam and human security, it is important that one observe the following:

- A clear understanding of differences and contradictions between Islam as a religion and Islam as a weapon used to pursue political agenda, which has nothing to do with religion at all; one needs to approach this issue with objectivity and clear minds, without biases and prejudices against Islam.
- To appreciate Islam's revolutionary breakthrough in liberating women, one needs to observe progressively the improved status of women pre and during the Prophet's life and see the set back in women's status after the Prophet died and Muslim societies fell into feudalism and court culture. So, the issue is no longer religious, but patriarchal culture and male chauvinism.
- The Qur'an is laden with teachings on egalitarianism, women's empowerment, gender equality and justice. However, achievement of these ideals is hampered by

⁷ In Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate." In Saliba et.al (eds.) *Gender, Politics and Islam*, .Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

factors such as male biases in interpreting the texts and patriarchal attitudes among Muslim societies, like many other societies. Conservative Muslim ideologists like Hassan Al-Banna, Al-Mawdudi, or Sayyid Qutb who explicitly express their gender biased views may have strengthened the already patriarchal attitudes of many Muslims.

- The proliferation of political Islam in the last three decades have impacted states, societies and communities at large, with women to be the most severely affected. Formal sharia in Iran, Taliban Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries have shown how women have been victimized through the abuse of religious texts.
- Fundamentalists are obsessed with uplifting social morality, but they do it at the cost of women. The ‘politics of sexuality’ have been created to develop the myth that women are the source of *fitna* (destruction) and therefore need to be controlled, segregated, and covered. While the Qur’an speaks of equal responsibilities of men and women to uplift morality, this myth remains alive and believed even by women themselves. Women’s sexual power has been viewed as threat to men’s productivity; veil is not enough, women have to be hidden behind the curtain.
- In reaction to the growing pressure against women along with the (re)Islamization in the last few decades, there has emerged Islamic feminism, which is defined as “a movement of women who have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female supportive verses of the Qur’an in their fights especially for women’s access to education.” Islamic feminism neither adopts Western feminism nor follows Middle Eastern model of gender relations, refuses both secularism and Islamism. It refers to the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition with a new spirit of unreading patriarchy that has prevailed for thousand of years and reclaims women’s hijacked rights for living on an equal footing with men as God’s vicegerents on the earth.

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