The Misinterpretation of Women’s Status in the Muslim World

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Abstract

Spiritual equality, responsibility, and accountability for both men and women are well-developed themes in the Qur’an. Spiritual equality between men and women in the sight of God is not limited purely to religious issues, but is the basis for equality in all aspects of human endeavor. This article’s main interest is in the woman’s status, and her role within the Arab countries. Islam is the main religion—its principles, values, and practices are dominant in the region. Therefore, this article introduces and discusses the misinterpretation of women in Islam, with special consideration of Muslim women’s rights and their roles within the Muslim society. This will help to enhance future discussions of social behavior, values, and attitudes toward women in Islam.

In the last few decades there has been a great misunderstanding in many aspects of public consciousness about the role of women in Arabic society. There is a significant gap between the status of males and females. However, this gap is more evident in rural areas. The level of women’s rights and roles in many Arabic countries prevents women from improving their economic growth and development. This gender gap is the result of social, religious, cultural, and gender inequality. More specifically, it results from structural constraints faced by women.

Gender inequality is not a new issue, nor is it only Muslim women who are suffering from this inequality. There is gender discrimination almost everywhere. The Qur’an is the basis of Islam, and encompasses rules, legislation, examples, advice, history, and system of the universe. It draws a picture of the earth and describes the roles of human beings. The Qur’an is the answer to the spiritual and material needs of the Islamic society, and is an exposition and an explanation of all aspects of life.

Discussion

It is quite evident today there are divergent views toward women’s rights among religious scholars. Religious scholars in the more conservative societies, usually in areas where interaction with other societies is limited, have a conservative view toward women. An example of this type of society is the country of Saudi Arabia. More liberal countries have more liberal views toward women’s rights. Syrian, Egyptian, and Lebanese people and their religious scholars have more liberal views toward women in their interpretation of both the Qur’an and the Hadith.
Islam came to liberate women from their status in pre-Islam, or *Jabilia*. The first verse or *Aya* of the *Qur'an* forbids the killing of daughters at birth. Islam sees a woman as a mother, sister, wife, helper, and supporter. She has a role in the society and contributes to it. Islam says, “Paradise lies under her feet.” In an authentic *Hadith*, a man came to the Prophet and asked him:

“Who is the one most worthy of my care?” The Prophet replied, “Your mother.” The man asked “Then Whom?” He replied, “Your mother.” The man further asked, “Then whom?” He replied, “Your mother.” The man asked “Then whom?” And in this fourth time the Prophet replied “Then your father.” (Muslim, 2003, p. 73)

A woman is also a daughter and a sister and like her male brother is born of the same lineage and from the same womb:

He bestows female (offspring) upon whom He wills and bestows male (offspring) upon whom He wills. (*al-Shura*, 42:49)

Islam also describes woman as a wife who is a source of comfort for her husband, as he to her:

And among His signs this, that He created wives from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquillity with them and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. (*al-Rum*, 30:21)

A woman’s responsibility in faith is exactly the same as a man. A woman also has full financial status as that of a man:

She has the right, in the same way as a man, to posses of assets, real estate or cash. She has the right to use her wealth in any manner she wishes so long as it is approved by the Shari‘ha, so she can buy, sell, trade, provide grants and loans, incur loans, exchanges assists. . . . (Muslim, 2003, p. 367)

**Equality of the Sexes in Islam**

In many other religions, women have had to fight for their rights, and their struggle, in many cases, is ongoing. Islam has justly granted women their rights without their having to demand or fight for them. Allah emphasizes this quality in the following verse:

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 in charity, 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. (*Qur’an, al-Ahzab*, 33:35)
A number of Islamic virtues are mentioned here, but the primary message is that these virtues are applicable to both women and men. Both sexes have human rights and duties to an equal degree and the rewards of the Hereafter are available to men and women alike. Each individual will be judged according to his or her deeds. Gender is simply not an issue. This can clearly be seen in the following verse:

Whoever works righteousness man or woman and has faith, verity, to him will we give a new life and life that is good and pure and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their action. (al-Nahl, 16:97)

Islam clearly recognizes the equal potential and ability of both sexes, but Allah has created human beings in a manner whereby men and women are better suited for their differing, but complementary traits. Just because the male may be better at a given task than the female does not mean that he is inherently superior. This is an error made by many feminists who assume that liberation may be achieved by adopting a male role. Instead of recognizing and cherishing their femininity, they seek to imitate men to the detriment of woman and human society in general. By aspiring to male traits, values, and behavior, they have further diminished the female while elevating the male.

Women in Middle Eastern Societies

As stated earlier, women’s rights in Middle East societies are fairly equal to the man’s. However, due to social and cultural constraints, the situation appears to vary with the prevailing social norms. According to Ahmed (1987), women held a preeminent position in early Islamic society. However, colonialism has negatively influenced the situation of women in Islamic society. Muslim men, feeling threatened by foreign values that were imposed upon them, began to protect and hide their women. Sfeir (1985) and Chehabi (1995) describe Islamic women’s position as constrained by customs and social attitudes, which limit their access to the world and to a public social life.

Women in Islamic Societies

Women’s rights are limited, due primarily to the culture and to some extreme interpretations of religion. This is not just restricted to Islamic countries; it is also seen in Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries. This is due to the fact that most of these societies usually have a strong culture and tend not to interact with other cultures around them, but instead isolate themselves. This has affected the opinions and attitudes of some of the religious scholars in the interpretation of some religious issues.

In the course of her study, Kamaruzaman (1986) was able to observe, firsthand, the condition of Muslim women in the countries of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Algeria, and Pakistan. She found that the problems faced by women in these coun-
tries were very similar to those of women in Malaysia. Even the elite and educated women appear to be generally unaware of rights granted to them centuries ago by the *Shari’a*, or Islamic law.

Islam liberated women from cruel prejudice and gave them dignity and the pride of being female. Islam projected a woman as being comparable to a man, and embodied the philosophy of being both equal and different. Fourteen hundred years ago, Islamic women were given the right to run their own businesses, to keep their financial autonomy after marriage, and, more importantly, the right to learn, the key to emancipation. They do not need to change their name upon marriage and thus are not made to feel as if they are a man’s possession.

**The Arab Women’s Solidarity Association (AWSA)**

AWSA is nonprofit, nongovernmental organization consisting of approximately 300 diverse Arab women and their allies. AWSA does not speak as the unified voice of all Arab women. AWSA is a coalition built around the category “Arab women,” which serves as a political strategy for organizing feminists with commonalities, such as a shared Arabic language and similar cultural experiences, histories, and political dilemmas, particularly in relation to U.S. policies in the Arab world. Their goals include building solidarity, claiming cultural identity, and defining and defending women’s rights.

Numerous Arab feminists, including Margaret Salome (1994, pp. 206–209), have written about the AWSA. One common problem they have addressed is the mistaken assumption that all Arab women are Muslim and that all Muslim women are Arabs. This mistake often leads to blaming Islam for all Arab women’s problems or blaming Arab culture for all patriarchal implementations of Islam. Regarding the diversity of Arabs in general, Su’ad Joseph writes,

> There are Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis, Kuwaitis, Yemenis, Saudi Arabians, Bahrainis, Qatars, Dubains, Egyptians, Libyans, Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Sudanese, Eritereans, Mauritians; there are Maronites, Catholics, Protestants, Greek, Orthodox, Jews, Sunnis, Shi’a. Druz, Sufis, Alawites, Nestorians, Assyrians, Copts, Chaldeans, Baha’is; there are Berbers, Kurds, Armenians, Bedouins, gypsies, and many others with different languages, religions, ethnic and national identifications and cultures who are all congealed as Arab in popular representations whether or not those may identify as Arab. (Joseph, 2000)

In addition to understanding this diversity, AWSA has called on the people who rally to their cause to understand that Arab women’s issues cannot be understood as simply based on gender. Western feminist misrepresentation of Arab women form limited categories of analysis that uses a “gender lens” which isolates gender from its social, political, and historical context. This leads to a very limited understanding of the big picture of women’s lives and the dilemmas they are facing.
As Nawal El-Saadawi, President and founder of AWSA has said, for Arab women, oppression cannot be separated from international politics: U.S. policies in the Arab world, economic exploitation, U.S. sanctions, Western colonialism, imperialism, media discrimination, U.S.–Israeli relations, and the many other local and global affairs that impact women's lives directly. For example, genocide waged by the U.S. government is currently taking place in Iraq. Millions of Iraqis have died as a direct result of the war on Iraq. The entire infrastructure of Iraq's society has been destroyed, and the United States continues to bomb Iraq on a regular basis; therefore, gender alone cannot account for oppression of Iraqi women. AWSA does not look upon gender as an isolated category, but also looks at religion, war, immigration and refugee status, displacement and poverty. For example, racist media images systematically portray Arab women as submissive, silent, and passive, or as belly dancers who are constantly seen and heard through these false perceptions. In academia and in social justice settings, we are either addressing women in terms of sensationalized topics such as circumcision, the veil, and honor killings, or not addressing them at all.

AWSA draws upon the history of Arab women revolutionaries in order to make both the history and contemporary voices a visible and integral part of global feminist movements in the new millennium. Hoda Sha'rawi (1879–1947), founder and president of the Egyptian Feminist Union and founder of several Arabic and French newsletters for feminist literature, gave numerous speeches and lectures in the Arab world and in Europe on feminism, as did Malak Hefni Nassef (1886–1918); Bahithat al-Badia, The Searcher in the Desert; and Nawal El-Saadawi, Hidden Face of Eve (1974) who wielded their powerful pens in defense of women's rights. Finally, grasping inspiration from Om Kulthoum (1904/5–1966), the diva of Arabic music who united Arab people, “made history just as history made her,” and sang “Demands are not met by wishes; the world can only be taken by struggle.”

Recently, two books by American female journalists have been published about the problems faced by women in the Middle East: Price of Honour: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World (Goodwin, 1994), and Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Muslim Women (Brooks, 1995). Both authors are journalists who have spent many years reporting from the Middle East. Their findings are profoundly disturbing; they center on the enormous influence of militant Islamic fundamentalists who have created a system of gender apartheid that, in some Arab communities, has created virtual prisoners from women. Both authors repeatedly refer to the well-known facts that none of the abuses, cruelties, or acts of violence against women has any justification in the Qur'an, the Sunnah, or the Hadith—the three sources of Islamic religion. They indicate that the extreme fundamentalist interpretation of the religious texts and traditions are the sole reason for the legal status of women. They also agreed that fundamentalist patriarchal attitudes toward women are characteristic of the three major religions in the area: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.
On September 15, 1994, the League of Arab States asserted its view on women’s rights and reached the following declaration:

Given the Arab nations’ belief in human dignity since God honoured it by making the Arab world the cradle of religion and the birthplace of civilizations which confirmed its right to a life of dignity based on freedom, justice and peace.

Conscious of the fact that the entire Arab World has always worked together to preserve its faith, believing in its unity, struggling to protect its freedom, defending the right of nations to self-determination and to safeguard their resources, believing in the rule of law and that every individual’s enjoyment of freedom, justice and equality of opportunity is the yardstick by which the merits of any society are gauged.

Furthermore, the following part of the Charter referred directly to the rights of women in the Arab world:

Each State party to the present Charter undertakes to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the right to enjoy all the rights and freedom recognized herein, without any distinction on grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status and without any discrimination between men and women.

Despite the above declaration from the Arab League, seven of thirteen Arab countries in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia region have not ratified the Convention on All Forms of Eliminating Discrimination against Women, while six have signed with “significant reservation.”

Only the following countries have given women their voting rights: Syria in 1949; Sudan in 1953; Egypt, Mauritania, Somalia, and Tunisia in 1956; Lebanon in 1957; Algeria in 1962; Libya and Morocco in 1963; Yemen in 1967; Jordan in 1973; Iraq in 1980; and most recently, Kuwait in 2009.

One of the earliest American studies on women is that of Elizabeth Fernea and Basima Bezirgan, Middle Eastern Women Speak (1977). Subsequently, Fernea published several other books, essays, and films on women in the Middle East. Another early study on women is the collection of essays by Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie entitled Women in the Muslim World (1978). In 1996, Cynthia Nelson, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at American University in Cairo, published a landmark study entitled Doria Shafik, Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart. Doria Shafik was a leading Egyptian feminist, poet, publisher, and political activist from the 1930s to the mid-1950s.

In addition to these Americans authors, there is a new generation of Arab women authors who write in English, French, and Arabic about women in the Middle East. Fatima Mernissi (1987, 1991, 1993) of Morocco, Mahnaz Afkhami, and Evelyne Accad of Lebanon are just a few in this group of activists and feminists.
The People Who Rallied to the Cause

Despite the bleak picture of women in the Arab world, a substantial number of authors, both female and male, have tackled this subject head on. The following is an overview of the books that have been written as well as a short commentary on some of them.

   This chapter covers the similarities and differences between Egyptian and Sudanese women in the fields of infancy and childhood, education, marriage and divorce, and career opportunities.


   A landmark in Arab women studies by a Saudi female professor of anthropology. Since the written word has played a very important role in Arab culture and history, the author of this important book explains how the Saudi women writers use words as a means to counter the language of power and aesthetics as a political strategy for revisions of concepts, ideas, and institutions that are used to control them.


   The oral history of five poor Egyptian women. Their personal histories reflect the hardships, frustrations, and injustices to which a major segment of Egyptian women are subjected. This is a pioneer work using oral history method for studying women in the Middle East.

   This is a book about Egyptian women and the feminist movement. Egyptian feminist women imagined a dynamic gender culture within a rethought Islam and a reconstructed nation. This is a story of women’s insistence on the empowerment of themselves, their families, and their nation. It is their story, constructed out of their own narratives and records aiming to convey the process and vision of feminism. It is a story of transcendence; the transcendence of patriarchal colonial containment and triumphs and of unfinished business of a journey begun.

   This study is concerned with the activities and occupations of women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Nejd. Women’s access to religious worship and learning, professional sorcery, and healing and productive occupation are discussed in the context of the interplay between Islam
Wahhabi beliefs and the ideology of women’s modesty, with close attention paid to ethnicity, race, and economic context.


This title deals with Muslim women’s quest for human rights, and, in part, results from the “Washington Dialogue,” a conference on Religion, Culture, and Women’s Human Rights in the Muslim World, organized by the “Sisterhood Is Global Institute” in Washington, D.C., September, 1994. The aim of the Conference was to bring the views of the women from the Muslim world to the international debate on women’s rights.


A study of the degree to which women are integrated into the modern sector of society, and includes measures of female literacy, educational achievement, labor force participation, and fertility. The study includes the countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

Conclusions

Islamic religion is based on the *Qur’an*, which includes rules, examples, and advice concerning proper conduct, as well as the history and organization of the universe. It describes the earth and the roles and responsibilities of its inhabitants. The *Qur’an*, in answering all aspects of life, fulfills all spiritual and material needs of Islamic society. Islam set women free from the discrimination with which they were treated in pre-Islamic times (Jahilia). Islam does not put any obstacles in front of women, provided that their activity does not interfere with their role as wives and mothers because, according to Islam, the mother is the person a child needs most during the primary years of its upbringing; therefore, the role of a mother is one which is accorded the highest status.

The Prophet Muhammad said that one of the responsibilities of all Muslims is to work to support himself/herself and his/her family. He indicated that working Muslims will have a better status on the day of judgment, but unfortunately, people misunderstand this and sometimes human nature and the behavior of men and not their religion, makes them high-handed in their interaction with women.

Culture has its effects on the interpretation of the verses of the *Qur’an* and the *Hadith*. Opinions and attitudes toward women in the Bedouin culture are different from more open societies, especially in urban and agrarian societies. The main factors that have a major impact on women’s roles in Islamic countries can be summarized in the following: religion; culture; political factors—the relationship between religious scholars and state; media; and stereotype.

In Islam, a woman is held in high regard, and should be guarded like a pearl; unfortunately, people misunderstand this. The treatment of Muslim women accord-
ing to Islam is very high and respectful. A few scholars and people from other religions misunderstand this because they have different values and beliefs. Islam gave women rights in all aspects of life, but centuries and misinterpretations and misunderstandings have put women back to the pre-Islamic era again.

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**References**


