

GENDER RELATIONS IN ISLAM: A TEXTUAL (*NUSUS*) STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The discourse that has evolved around gender relations is highly contentious, particularly in the context of the rising divergent waves of feminism in the West. This has led to stark gender issues, occasionally manifesting in radical perspectives. The widening gender gap has reached a pinnacle, impacting both personal and collective spheres, further exacerbating the ongoing gender conflict. However, it is essential to question whether this course aligns with the desired societal direction and contributes meaningfully to the resolution of the gender discrimination. Against this backdrop, this paper is an effort to provide an alternative perspective vis-à-vis gender relations in light of Islamic *nusus* (textual evidence). The paper will use Qur'an as a primary source of Islamic law in suggesting a distinctive model of gender relations. Furthermore, the paper seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding that may diverge from conventional narratives, offering an alternative lens through which to assess and address the complex dynamics of gender discrimination.

Key Words: Islam, Gender, Nusus, Equality, Spouse.

1. INTRODUCTION

The quest for women's empowerment has persisted over centuries, with historical deliberations highlighting its centrality in various reformative movements, a significance that endures to the present day. In the Western context, the women's liberation movement fervently worked towards empowering the "neglected half" of society – women – by advocating for equal educational, social, and marital rights previously denied to them. Concurrently, critics of feminism argue that this movement neglects traditional gender roles and engenders conflict between the sexes, disrupting the essential harmony necessary for the well-being of humanity. Such criticism intensified

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following radical feminists' call to devalue household responsibilities, question the institution of marriage, and view motherhood as a form of enslavement and impediment to a successful career.ⁱ

So, we find different methodological approaches have been employed to address issues of gender discrimination against women, with some adopting a rational stance endorsing equal opportunities, respect, and recognition in society. Conversely, there are those who adopt a more radical approach in confronting pervasive gender discrimination. This article seeks to illuminate the perspective on gender relations as prescribed by the divine directives of Islam, drawing insights primarily from the Qur'an.

1. QUR'ANIC DICTUM ON GENDER RELATIONS

The Qur'an emerged as a source of optimism for marginalized segments of society and those grappling with the pervasive influence of unethical practices. It is evident that the Qur'an bestowed women with their entitlements, encompassing spiritual, educational, social, financial, and marital rights. It not only acknowledged and respected women's rights but also ensured that they were granted with dignity and reverence. Eliminating the bigotries and biases between the genders and all sorts of sense of superiority, Qur'an says:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you.ⁱⁱ

This verse recalls us of our origin and our position in the sight of our Creator. It also reprimands us of being judged not by color, creed, race, gender etc. but by virtue.

3. QUR'ANIC VIEW ON GENDER EQUALITY AND GENDER IDENTICALITY

Equality determines having same regard and reward for ones actions and no discrimination in any form or shape. Qur'an upholds gender equality and clearly states:

If anyone does deeds of righteousness be they male or female and have faith they will enter paradise and not the least injustice will be done to them.ⁱⁱⁱ

In a historical context, Umm Salamah raised a pertinent question about the exclusive mention of men in the Qur'an, given that it is a universal source of guidance

for individuals regardless of gender. In response to her query, Allah addressed this concern through the revelation of Surah Ahzab, affirming that both men and women would be held accountable for their actions and rewarded accordingly. The Qur'an clearly states:

For Muslim men and women and 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 (and deny themselves), 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.^{iv}

Nevertheless, here it is important to mention that equality should not be taken same as Identicality. Islam affirms the biological, emotional, psychological differences between male and females and allows them to celebrate their distinctiveness and feel pride in doing so. The Qur'an clearly says, "The male is not like the female";^v highlighting the distinctive characteristics of both the genders. The purpose of creation in Islamic tradition is to worship Allah (the Creator) and to follow His commandments. The purpose of our life as male or female is to obey the instructions of our creator and qualify the test.^{vi} Islam offers a *tawhidic* paradigm wherein we are not subservient to anyone but our Creator and our value is manifested from the obedience of our creator rather than any human being. The Qur'an declares that men and women are not the same. It is important to make a distinction here between being identical and being equal. Islam recognizes that men and women have different abilities and strengths that complement each other. They differ biologically, physically and emotionally, but their differences do not lead one gender to be superior to the other. This rather allows us to celebrate our uniqueness and not trying to be like other and lose our own identity. The Qur'an denounces any form of patriarchy or matriarchy and binds all the humans together as a creation of the one Creator, created to worship Him only. And these differences in one's nature consequently lead to the difference in the delegation of authority and responsibilities. The Qur'an says:

And do not wish for that by which Allah has made some of you exceed others. For men is a share of what they have earned (in terms of reward), and for women is a share of what they have earned (in terms of reward). And ask Allah of His bounty. Indeed Allah ever knows of all things.^{vii}

This verse was revealed when Umm Salamah (R.A), wife of the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم, had requested him for doing what men had been told to do in terms of fighting in

the way of Allah, and earning the reward.^{viii} Then Allah revealed *ayah* in Surah Aal-'Imran:

And their Lord responded to them, 'Never will I allow the work of any worker among you to be lost, male or female; you are of one another'.^{ix}

These two verses elucidate it for us that the ultimate success and peace in life does not lie in yearning to be like others and desiring to be at other's place. Rather, it lies in doing what one has been ordained to do and Allah will not waste any sincere effort sent forth by male or female. Both men and women instead of aiming to be identical should rather support each other and work together in their own ways complimenting each other for the construction of a healthy individual self, family unit and society.

4. ISLAM- PROMOTION OF CO-EXISTENCE, NOT CONFRONTATION

The protracted discourse surrounding gender equality, extending over numerous centuries, has manifested as a multifaceted issue, contributing to intricate familial dynamics and contentious interpersonal relationships. Globally, the perpetuation of violence against women persists as a manifestation of the entrenched dominance wielded by their male counterparts under the auspices of patriarchal structures. Concurrently, there is a discernible resistance against male chauvinism, prompting women to establish autonomous domains of influence, such as matriarchy, and cultivate affiliations within female-centric movements encompassing lesbianism, cultural feminism, and radical feminism. Conversely, the Qur'an, characterized as a divine communication, provides an impartial perspective on the harmonious coexistence of genders, thereby presenting a nuanced and equitable depiction of gender relations.

There are four main gender relation scenarios depicted in Quran which are as follows:

(i) MEN AND WOMEN ARE SUPPORTERS TO EACH OTHER

In Islam, the role of a man and woman is complimentary, it is not conflicting. It is that of a partnership, it is not antagonistic, so as to strive for supremacy. The Qur'an states in *Surah Tawbah*:

Men and women are *awliya* of one 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 for Allah is exalted in power, wise.^x

The verse outlines the foundation of gender relations as *wilayah*, (*Awliya* is the plural form of *wali* and *wilayah* means friendship, compassion, support, protection and closeness for one another).^{xi} Thus, Qur'an envisions a society wherein men and women have utmost respect and regard for each other and are supportive of each other in building up a decent society where everyone is allowed to practice his/her basic spiritual and social rights ordained to him/her by their Creator. It further expands that concept to give each person (male and female) equal responsibility for their actions and fulfillment of religious duties. The concept of *wilayah* establishes that men have no superiority over women, as God orders both genders to guide one another and keep each other in check.^{xii}

(ii) MATES ARE A SOURCE OF TRANQUILITY

The Qur'an states, "And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who think".^{xiii} This verse declares the purpose of the coexistence of the opposite genders i.e. finding tranquility in each other. So, any marital relationship filled with coercion and violence is not approved of by our Creator. Men and Women, according to the Qur'an, are a source of affection and solace for each other which should remind them of the blessings of their Creator. This is quite opposite to the modern concept of marriage being a form of slavery while the Qur'an calls it a constitution of love, mercy and affection. This verse can be taken as a reminder that the spouses are inherently equal, and the union between them is of peace and compassion.

(iii) SPOUSES ARE LIKE A GARMENT

Describing the closeness and the intimate relation between spouses, the Qur'an states, "They are your garments, and you are their garments". One primary purpose of clothing is to conceal one's nakedness, since this nakedness (*awrah*) is embarrassing to display, and should be hidden from the eyes of others. Similarly, each spouse conceals the other spouse's faults, and does not reveal them to others. They cover each other's weaknesses and safeguard the secrets shared between them. Clothing is the primary method through which humans beautify themselves. Similarly, spouses beautify and complete one another.^{xv}

Thus, gender relations according to the Qur'an should be complimentary in nature where in each person (male or female) protects and honors his/her spouse. This verse declares the abhorrence for the prevailing domestic violence which not only women but even the men are victims of. Gender equality should be an unbiased movement launched for the interests of both men and women to lay the foundations of the sound society wherein everyone's position in this society is secured.

(iv) MEN ARE PROTECTORS AND MAINTAINERS OF WOMEN

The Qur'an says, "Men are the *qawwam* over women, because Allah has made some of them to excel the other, and because they spend from their means. So, the righteous women are devoutly obedient guarding in the absence (of their husband) what Allah would have them guard"^{xvi}

The verse begins with the statement that "men are *qawwamun* over women". The root of the key word, *qawwamun* (pl. of *qawwam*), is *qama* which means "to stand or to make something stand or to establish something. Therefore, it means one who is continuously standing over something (as, for example, a guard or caretaker) or one who is continuously making something stand, i.e. is maintaining it. The function of *qawwam* is also understood in the Qur'an to be characterized by fairness, maintenance and protection.^{xvii} This develops a sense of responsibility towards each other and helps in the healthy coexistence in the society.

But this verse is misunderstood a lot not only by non-muslims but also by the Muslim community who consider it as a clear chit for execution of their dominance on women. The duty of a *qawwam* is not to dominate others but to constantly being in service to them. Men according to the Qur'an are supposed to develop a strong sense of responsibility in terms of maintaining and protecting women, providing them and spending from their means. This clearly indicates that the Qur'an lays the burden of maintenance and providence on men and not on women as a general norm and women earning for her is an exceptional case; that does not in any manner excuse men from maintaining them. For the same reason, men are commanded to pay them their *mabarar* their dower.

Then Qur'an further continues about the characteristics of a pious woman as the one who is obedient to Allah and protects her chastity in the absence of her husband. The Qur'an sets up a family built on trust, and develop a sense of responsibility for each other that ultimately sprouts love and respect for one another. The Qur'anic account of gender relations demands execution of justice and display of humility from both the genders. In absence of which, the struggle for gender equality will be more of a biased than a balanced approach towards justice and Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized this message in his last sermon, "O people fear Allah concerning women. Verily you have taken them on the security of Allah. They have been made lawful unto you by words of Allah. You too have right over them that they should not allow anyone to enter upon them whom you do not like."^{xviii}

5. CONCLUSION

The gender discourse has provoked gender confrontation in the western model of emancipation where in men and women have been blaming each other for their position in social space which has resulted into a further widening of the gender gap especially in the case of radical feminism. It has resulted into the men bashing processions and gender discord. Islamtoo addressed the issue of gender disparity but it solved it by presenting a model where both the genders are subservient to their creator rather to each other. Where they share the bond of *wilayah*, companionship for the overall development of a human race. A bond, where both shoulder their responsibilities on the basis of the intrinsic, biological and physiological traits bestowed by the creator. Where the gender confrontation is replaced by gender coexistence.

NOTES AND REFERENCE

- ⁱ As reprimanded by a writer Amy C Goldman:
 “Feminists should recognize that traditional gender roles can be beneficial to both men and women. A better form of feminism would be not to rebel against ‘gender roles’, but instead to assert the value of these roles and to ensure their continuing existence... It is where distinctions between the sexes are properly maintained that men and women complement each other and promote each other’s happiness.” Goldman and others assert that feminists who criticize traditional gender roles devalue the importance of motherhood.
 (Jennifer A. Hurley, *Feminism Opposing Viewpoints*, Green haven Press Inc, San Diego, California, p. 14.)ⁱⁱ Al Qur’an, 49:13.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Al Qur’an, 4:124.
- ^{iv} Al Qur’an, 33:35.
- ^v Al Qur’an, 3:36.
- ^{vi} Al Qur’an, 67:2
- ^{vii} Al Qur’an, 4:33.
- ^{viii} Ibn Abbas, ‘Abdullah, *Tafsir Ibn Abbas*, Darul Kutub ‘Ilmiya, Beirut.
- ^{ix} Al Qur’an, 3:195.
- ^x Al-Qur’an, 9:71.
- ^{xi} Keelani, Abdul Rahman, *Mutaradifat ul Qur’an*, Ietiqad Publishing House, New Delhi, 2006, p. 499.
- ^{xii} Al-Alwani, Zainab, *Domestic Violence- Islamic Perspective*, p. 09.
- ^{xiii} Al Qur’an, 30:21.
- ^{xiv} Al Qur’an, 2:187.
- ^{xv} Al-Qurtubi, Shams al-Din, *Al Jami li Abkam ul Qur’an*, Vol. 2, Darul Kutub al-Misriyyah, Cairo, p.316.
- ^{xvi} Al Qur’an, 4:34.
- ^{xvii} Abdur Rahman Keelani. *op. cit.*, p. 444.
- ^{xviii} Imam Muslim, *op. cit.*, Hadith No. 1218.