

Islam: The Real Empowerment of Women



Feminism, Woman's Liberation and the Muslim Woman

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This paper is meant to offer a clear picture of feminism within an Islamic context. It is not meant to be extensive or exhaustive but rather short enough to be readable yet comprehensive enough to be informative regarding the subject matter. With that said, the main topic of this paper is the natural empowerment of women inherent in Islam. It is not the aim of this paper, nor within its scope, to offer commentaries of every Muslim society or Muslim lands, either their condition today or throughout history. Instead of looking at Muslims, we want to look at Islam. Of course, this is not to negate the need to offer historical anecdotes and evidence, as any religion must be manifested in order to be considered viable. However, the focus will be on principles established by the source text of the Qur'an and prophetic narrations, as well as the understandings of them established and manifested within the formative generations, the period of the pious predecessors.

This is important, as what is experienced by women in societies, as well as their needs and wants, are not universal. Rather the overall conditions of women folk in general are conditional on the circumstances of their time period, geographical location and cultural environment. In fact, even the terms used in these types of discussions are not universally defined. There are over 15 different schools of thought regarding feminism, each with their own definitions and ideologies regarding feminism, equal rights and the empowerment of women. Generally speaking, whenever equal rights and the empowerment of women are discussed there are specific issues and key areas that are looked at and discussed. These areas include the role of women in the work force and economic equality, participation in the fields of politics and leadership roles, and levels of education - always in comparison to their male counterparts in a given society.

At face value, all of this is very telling. From the first things that can be deduced is that it is not something understood universally, rather, in order to have a conversation on the topic of feminism, one must know which definition of the term is being used, as well as the ideology this usage espouses. A second thing that can be deduced is that those engaging in the conversations tend to be focused mostly on a modern (and western) perspective of both family and social structures, as well as a materialistic focus of empowerment. It seems the discussion revolves around a person's access to "credentials" in order to attain the abilities to gain in wealth and positions of authority.

In this paper, we will look at women in relation to these areas according to Islam but we will extend this topic further in order to also look at the position of women in other areas also. These areas include how women are viewed within the family structure, the social structure, within the legal system and with regards to religion, or, one's relationship with God.

Strangely, anytime these discussions are had they always seem to begin from an assumption that women are somehow disempowered and treated unjustly. It is from this perspective that discussions of women's empowerment and feminism seem to be framed and I see no reason to substantiate such a position. Rather, I hope that this work will show that in Islam, women are very much empowered despite what may be found in various nations and societies - be they Muslim or otherwise. Due to this, perhaps the best next step would be to define the term "empowerment."

According to the World Bank, Empowerment is "the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes." Speaking more generally, we can say that empowerment is a process in which a person moves away from inability and towards ability. It is a process by which an individual becomes transformed and transformative; attaining the ability to transform their lives, their environment and the lives of those around them.

It is according to this understanding of empowerment that we view women as empowered rather than disempowered in or by Islam. As for the term "women's liberation", this tends to be aimed more at the establishment of equal rights between men and women within a given society. These movements, seeded in the U.S. and U.K., were founded in the greater era of civil rights of the 1960's and 70's. Although equal rights were the focus of the movement in its beginning, it has since evolved so that the term "women's liberation" has grown to include campaigns aimed at the reformation of laws surrounding issues such as "reproductive rights", sexual harassment, sexual violence, domestic violence, and maternity leave. Again, such matters are found already addressed in Islam and hence, the discussion of these matters from an Islamic point of view is not one of reformation or liberation but rather of "application."

Islam is not a religion in the Western sense, it is not simply the area of life pertaining to a person's faith and the rites, rituals and festivities which surround that faith. Instead, Islam is a holistic way of life that encompasses both, a human-being's relationship with his/her Creator as well as the relationship with the creation. In this way, a person's profane life is also enveloped by expressions of their faith, from the way they eat to the way they sleep, from business transactions to marriage and family. It is in this light that Islam has sciences, principles and

guidance governing every sphere of life, not just the realm of spirituality but also personal, family, financial, civil and even criminal laws. It is an entire system of life for the individual, the family, the community and society as a whole.

This point is important to understand whenever a topic such as "equality" or "liberation" is discussed because it is in this light that the matter should be looked at. It is in viewing the holistic life of Islam that issues such as reproductive rights, sexual harassment, sexual violence, domestic violence, and others should be viewed. Perhaps first by asking a basic question such as, do all of these issues fall under the same realms of jurisprudence? Certainly reproductive rights and sexual violence are not legislated in the same way as one deals with personal or family law and the other with criminal law. So, due to this, we are left with either dividing these issues up into their many spheres of rights and laws or discussing the overall topic in a general and holistic way. Here, we choose the latter.

In Islam, every principle, every rule and regulation, every command and prohibition is aimed at aiding mankind with regard to their relationship with their Creator and their relationships with the creation around them - on both the macro and micro levels. In this way, the sciences of Islamic Spirituality as well as Islamic Law have been explained and codified in such a way as to delineate the sanctity of seven key areas of life. It is these seven areas which we would define as the God-given, inalienable rights of every human being. They are, in this hierarchy, 1) Faith, 2) Life, 3) Intellect, 4) Honor, 5) Lineage, 6) Wealth, and 7) Property. It is around these seven areas that both, the principles of spirituality and the principles of jurisprudence revolve.

These are the rights that every human being has, which are protected by Islamic law and are purified through Islamic Spirituality. However, there is that hierarchy. What this means is that one's wealth and property may be sacrificed for their honor and lineage, their honor may be sacrificed for their life and their life may be sacrificed for their faith, but it should never be in the reverse order. [Despite the urge to give examples, to do this would change the nature of this effort and lengthen it unnecessarily.]

This point of the hierarchy is important to understand as, when discussing one issue which may seem to trespass upon one "right", we would find that it is there only to preserve a weightier one. An example of this may be the free-mixing of genders. In Islam this is prohibited (as it was throughout western cultures as late as even a hundred years ago) and perhaps this free-intermixing is viewed as detrimental to a person's occupational opportunities (and this may affect men or women) and so infringing upon the right to acquire wealth for an individual; but do we not also see that it preserves both honor and lineage for an individual, a family and a community?

So it is, with these fundamental, God-given, inalienable rights as understood in Islam, we begin to tackle the issue of "feminism", "equal rights" and "women's empowerment." Or, perhaps more specifically, as mentioned earlier, the role of women in the work force and economic equality, participation in the fields of politics and leadership roles, and levels of education.

Perhaps a good way to move forward in this matter is to say, these rights are indeed equal for males and females. There is no one who can claim more of a right to life or honor or wealth based on their gender. In this light, perhaps the term "equal-rights" needs to be either tossed out or better explained. Tossing it out is the easiest and best method of dealing with it. Unfortunately, some would take offense to that and so, we will clarify it more. When equal rights are called for, it is most often the case that the rights in question are not what are really being sought but rather the expression of those rights. An example of this is that, in Islam, women inherit half of the amount of their male counterparts (husbands/wives, mothers/fathers, sisters/brothers, sons/daughters, etc.). This is held up as an injustice, oppression and a form of inequality. Such views are not looking at the rights of wealth and property but rather one perception of an outward manifestation of those rights. So then, how does such legislation reinforce and protect the rights of women? One point that is rarely discussed when this point is attacked is that the men of a family have a responsibility to provide for their women folk from their wealth. In this way, the "additional" wealth that goes to the man is expected to pay for the sheltering, the clothing, the nourishing, and the general welfare of the women. This, while all of the wealth of a woman is her own to spend, invest, save, or give out charitably as she likes. In this way, the wealth that is inherited not only balances out, but "balances more in favor" of the women of a family. This is a single example to show how, though something may, on the surface, be viewed as an inequality, it has at its core a manifestation of the overall protection of equal rights.

This raises an important question which we will not seek to answer and instead leave to the reader to reflect upon instead. That is, do we want true equal rights or do we want superficiality?

Continuing on, what is the legal views regarding the education of women in Islam? What about upward mobility in society? What about ownership laws? What are the Islamic views on the rights of women in the areas discussed by various feminist movements? One could suffice with a single example to answer all of these questions and nullify most opposition. The wife of Allah's messenger, our mother, A'isha (peace and blessings be upon them both and all of his family and companions), was one of the greatest scholars of her time, her knowledge was sought after, even by those viewed as her contemporaries in levels of knowledge. Though she

had no need to work, as she was supported fully by the community, she was free to keep or use her wealth however she pleased. She had her own mode of transport which she utilized and she also amassed an army of supporters who followed her into battle, under her direct leadership. No one criticized a single point I have made. The only "criticism" comes with why the army was raised and how it was utilized. For this, she herself regretted and repented - as she was also from the great people of spirituality amongst her time.

That single example suffices for those who wish to be intellectually honest. There is no one closer to and more beloved to Allah's messenger (peace and blessings be upon him) than this wife. If such behaviors were wrong, not only would she have known better, but the community would have chastised her for it. Instead we find her supported and even relied upon by our scholars to this day.

According to criminal statistics, at least 3 women are killed in the U.S. by their male partners every day. There are foundations throughout the country, such as House of Ruth, designed to assist women in abusive relationships to either get counseling, help, or escape. Despite this, it is often brought up that Islam "permits" men to abuse their women folk. This erroneous view is based on the Qur'anic verse,

وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ

"...and strike them..."

This small portion of a lengthy verse, within a larger discussion is isolated and bandied about as though it is a license for men to strike their women folk, and though this is not the case at all, it seems an uphill battle convincing otherwise, those who choose to use these words as a weapon in their battle for feminism and against Islam in general.

To understand these words in their proper light the overall verse must be looked at and, not just that, looked at in context. We read,

الرَّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ
 بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ
 وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ
 فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَانِتَاتٌ حَافِظَاتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ
 وَاللَّاتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ
 وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ
 وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ
 فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ
 فَلَا تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا
 إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا كَبِيرًا
 وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ شِقَاقَ بَيْنِهِمَا
 فَابْعَثُوا حَكَمًا مِّنْ أَهْلِهِ وَحَكَمًا مِّنْ أَهْلِهَا
 إِنْ يُرِيدَا إِصْلَاحًا يُوَفِّقِ اللَّهُ بَيْنَهُمَا
 إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا خَبِيرًا

MEN have a degree of authority/responsibility over women
 With regards to the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter,
 and with that which they spend out of their possessions.
 And the righteous women are the truly devout ones,
 who guard the intimacy which God has [ordained to be] guarded.
 And as for those women whose ill-will you have reason to fear,
 admonish them [first]; then do not share the marital bed with them;
 then beat them;
 and if thereupon they pay you heed, do not seek to harm them.
 Behold, God is indeed Most High, Great!
 And if you have reason to fear that a breach might occur between a [married] couple,
 appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people;
 if they both want to set things aright, God may bring about their reconciliation.
 Behold, God is indeed All-Knowing, Aware.
 [4:24,35]

In these verses we find the archetype of the Islamic family. As much as some in our era may take issue with it, it is indeed a patriarchal structure. Albeit that the wife is the partner to her husband, and they are viewed as equals in their rights before God and the laws, the man is indeed viewed as the head of the household. He has a duty and a responsibility as laid out in the verse, to provide for, to protect and to honor his family. The women too have their roles which are mentioned indirectly in these verses and they are that she guard over herself, the home and their children. This is the atomic structure of a family, a community and nations. Only with the introduction of toxins within society did this nucleus mutate into something deformed which then went on to deform entire communities and societies.

After delineating this family structure and the general roles of spouses, the verse went on to say, when the man fears that his wife is undermining his ability to fulfill his role, he is permitted to take steps to stop this in order to restore order in the home. The first step is that he speak to her about the matter and try to resolve it through clear communication. The second step is to cease sharing the bed with her, meaning do not permit her to enjoy the nearness and intimacy of physical, marital relations. If this still does not bear the desired outcome, the husband is indeed permitted to "strike" his wife. And this has been described clearly to mean in such a light manner so as to leave no mark behind at all. Our scholars liken this to disciplining an unruly child. Perhaps a reader takes offense to this. Perhaps it is seen as abusive or belittling - or oppressive even. The fact of the matter is that the husband is permitted to do this in order to preserve the honor of, not just the overall family, but specifically the wife. How so? Because the very next step is to make her behavior, which threatens to unravel the family at its core, public knowledge, going outside of the home to seek counseling from members of his family and her family to act as arbiters between them. If the counseling also fails, the the family is severed and this may be harmful to the family, their families and the greater community. It is in light of preservation of honor and lineage that such rights are granted.

Now, what if a person was to argue, we find this verse misused around the Muslim world and men utilize it to hit their wives, even injuring them. My response to that is this, as already pointed out, this is not unique to Muslim men and the fact that they use a misinterpretation of a religious scripture does not permit their behavior any more than the absence of such a scripture gives license to non-Muslim men the world over, regardless of their religious orientation.

What if a person was to argue at a more basic level and say, in our day and age, such patriarchal structures are no longer necessary or useful and may even be viewed as socially detrimental and hence, such guidance is both outdated and nullified. To such an argument I would point to the decay of society as a whole and say, when you mutate the atomic structure of a substance, you will find the whole becoming deformed over time. Despite our opinions, history (near, far

and our own) bears witness that the collapse of the family structure inevitably leads to the collapse of the society as a whole. Also, contrary to this, the healthier the families, the healthier the society.

So, topic by topic, be it employment, leadership, upward social mobility, actual mobility, education and economic status, the equal rights of women are protected in Islam. But this brings us to yet another area of discussion, the area of social interactions and behaviors or, gender roles in a community. This is important as we often hear calls to feminism to be little more than a right to be just like men. Often, this is a call to not just upsetting the harmony of a community found when our roles are honored, but actual calls to misbehave.

Everything was created in pairs. This is true on a cosmic level as well as an atomic level. We experience the world as an interplay of dualities. This interplay shapes how we experience the individual partners within these pairs, as well as the pairs themselves, and in turn this shapes our experience of life itself. It even plays a role in much of the language that we use. The duality of beauty and majesty, of night and day, of femininity and masculinity and of the roles of the male and the female were described in detail within the Chinese conceptualizations of Yin and Yang, this harmonious duality of creation that extends itself to balance and harmony. When such duality is disrupted, balance becomes unbalanced and harmony becomes disharmony, order then gives way to chaos. This is known and understood when spoken about in such a general way. However, when we wish to apply it to gender roles in this age, suddenly it seems to be less acceptable and somehow "murky".

It is known a-priori that the male and female are not "the same". Scientifically speaking, the female body is not like the male body and even the female brain is not like the male brain. This does indeed effect our experiences of the world. It also effects our capabilities. In many matters men cannot hope to approach the capabilities of women (except, perhaps, for a few anomalies) and there are areas ill-suited for the role of women. We do not seek to set up parameters here as there are always exceptions, but rather, we speak in a general way as this is a matter understood in a very general way. Men are not "designed" like women and women are not "designed" like men. Instead, we are a pair whose parts complement the duality.

Despite the inherent differences, many wish to be viewed the same and treated the same. This would not be establishing equality but injustice. Is there any sane individual who believes in God and a day of judgement who would say that, since a man may remove his shirt when he is laboring, a woman removing her shirt should be viewed the same exact way? There are differences, biologically, physically, sexually and socially between the male and the female and hence, fairness and equality should never be used to mean "sameness". In this way, societal

rules, regulations, and principles are established for the different genders, and although they may appear differently, they still seek after the establishment, preservation and equality of the rights they share.

As for gender roles themselves, I would say that, in general, I do not believe them to be universal. Instead they tend to be culturally based, established due to varying times, places and circumstances. These roles should not be looked down upon, negated or viewed solely in comparison to our own views but rather, understood in light of the people and their histories. Still, if I was pushed against my will to define gender roles in a general way, I would say this has already been made clear - men are to be protectors, maintainers and providers for their families and women are to guard over the home, themselves and the youth. In this way, the man acts as an outer shell of defense and the woman acts as an inner source of solace and by this, the next generation is not only preserved but also prepared well to face the realities of this life and to prepare for the next.

It is here that these discussions often begin to fall apart, as there are disagreements regarding the division of gender roles in any given family, community, society or nation. Often times anecdotes are brought forward to show that women can do this or that, failing to understand that it isn't a matter of questioning abilities but viewing pairs as complementary wholes. Furthermore, issues are claimed to be strictly "feminine" in nature and men are said to have little or no say regarding them. An example of this would be matters of laws regarding abortion and the like. It is a very strange view to assume these matters don't have a place in the discussion of such matters when, in a healthy society, we are speaking about an extension of the entire family and not just an unborn child of a woman. Such a point of argument itself is a display of gender bias and goes against the very principles many feminists call to - gender equality and empowerment.

What is more, it is often here that issues such as "oppression by force" is raised. What is meant here are the claims that men force women into roles or force women within their systems of rules, regulations and expectations. It is here that the call for empowerment is heard loudest also. There is legitimacy to such claims. In a patriarchal family structure (and society by extension) it is the male role to guard and protect the honor and sanctity of the female. As such, they do indeed establish boundaries and expectations for their household.

This point of discussion is all too often then taken to extremes so that false claims are made. A simple case in point is that Muslim men force their women to cover. The fact is, it is viewed as a directive from God that women cover their bodies in the presence of non-related males in order to protect their chastity and honor. It is the role of men to remind and enforce such rules, but

they are not established by the man. What is more, the vast majority of Muslim women around the world cover out of a sense of faith and continue to cover regardless of what any men in their lives may say. Indeed, it is found that even when some faithless men call them to uncover, the women refuse, rising up in rebellion. And on the other end of the spectrum, we find faithless women, regardless of what the men in their lives may expect and even demand of them, they refuse to cover. To believe that there is some kind of coercion in all of the areas of a woman's life, both private and public, is to display a very disparaging view of the female. In fact, the argument itself, that men can force, coerce and oppress women against their will is an indication of a deep seated understanding that men have some kind of inherent strength beyond that of women. Such a claim is a self defeating argument.

Instead, in Islam, women are the partners of men. Literally the Yin to their Yang. One is not greater than the other nor does one have more or less rights than the other. Instead, they compliment one another fully and at every level. Men certainly have their ways of directing women, and women equally have ways of directing men. We should not pretend that it is otherwise.

Indeed, manipulations and control are found far and wide in our day and age, usually wielded by those who have no right to such directing. Peer pressure on social media, propaganda in mass media, and marketing strategies aimed at making people consume are some broad examples. The wielding of fear and anger to usurp the rights of citizens and feelings of inadequacy for having last year's gadgets, leading to desires for non-essential trinkets available only for a limited time are but some of the tools used to really manipulate and coerce. These have proven far more powerful than the wants and wishes of nearly every husband or father in this day and age.

Freedom, as understood properly, boils down to two fundamental matters: choice and limitation. In both regards, the ability to choose as well as the governing limitations, there is equality across the genders in Islam. This with the recognition that the true governing source is to be nothing other than the Unique-Singularity that is the Creator of us Allah's to Whom we shall all ultimately return.

Throughout history and throughout geographical location we find that the rules and regulations, the principles established in Islamic Law and Islamic Spirituality have found diverse expressions. Yet despite this diversity, or perhaps due to it, we also find that the sacred, the sanctified and the profane have always been honored according to what, in Islam, is believed to be the guidance of our Lord. A simple example of this is the covering of women. The method used traditionally in West Africa differs from that in North Africa, which differs from

that in the Levant, which differs from that in Eastern European lands, which differ from that in Persia, which differs from that in south east Asia which differs from what is found in China - and so on. All across the great expanse of the lands of Islam women covered according to the principles of their faith, adhering to what they testified to be The Truth from God Almighty, but they did it in their own ways, according to their own customs, styles and lifestyles. In this way it serves them based on their unified religious identity, despite their diverse cultural identities and utilitarian needs.

It is in light of all of this that we say that in Islam there is inherent equality between the genders as well as a natural empowerment of the women within their social frameworks. Regarding matters such as economics, education, roles of authority, and even freedom itself, despite any differences in appearance, there is equality. This equality, at its fundamental level, is the equality of rights. The equal right to faith, life, intellect, honor, lineage, wealth and ownership. After this, rules, regulations and principles arise in order to ensure the establishment and preservation of these rights. And it is in that light we make the claim that Islam itself is a natural empowerment of women.

Moving towards concluding this paper, we would point out that women are not only half of society, they are a guiding light within their generation and the backbone of the next. Women are the guides of the youth and the conscience for the men. If women allow themselves to be viewed and treated just like men, what then happens to our families? What happens to the next generations? If women are fooled into thinking men are opposition what then becomes of our humanity? If women are manipulated to rebel against their partners, what happens to our communities?

Instead, if women truly seek empowerment, know that it is found in exactly the same place a man may find his empowerment, the source of true strength, honor, and dignity - by coming to know our Lord and adhering to His guidance for our lives. In Islam, this is found within the Qur'an and prophetic narrations and these are a storehouse for guidance in every sphere of our lives. True feminism is found in living fully the role of a woman before one's Lord. True liberation is found in adhering to the rules, regulations and principles inherent in Islamic spirituality. True equality is found living according to the rules, regulations and principles of Islamic Laws. Being fully a woman entails you be the greatest you that you can be as you manifest your faith in every area of your life. Manifesting your identity as a woman who has chosen to align her limited free-will with the guiding will of her Lord.

And all success is with Allah alone.

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