

Islam's encounter with women's rights and feminism : The need for greater engagement of Muslim women

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Abstract : The question of women's rights in Islam generates huge interest among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Scholars of feminism are sharply divided on the question of women's status in Islam. One group associates Islam with misogyny and gender oppression, while the other celebrates the religion as a liberatory force for women. Remarkably, despite a surge in female educational attainment and consciousness in Muslim societies, compared to their secular counterparts, Islamic women have not taken an extensive part in the discourse of women's rights and feminism. In light of this perception, this paper will highlight Islam's gender egalitarian values and discuss the urgency and efficacy of Muslim women's greater involvement in the discourse of women's rights.

Keywords : Muslim women, Misogyny, Gender egalitarianism, Islamic feminism, Female infanticide.

Introduction

Despite spectacular advancement of knowledge and limitless access to information, ignorance and misunderstanding about Islam seem to be the order of the day, and this breeds hatred to the religion and to its followers. Islam is widely associated with the "lack" and "absence" of some fundamental human values, especially gender egalitarianism. Perhaps, more than half of the charges critics of Islam make against it are related to gender issues. Or, the question of women's rights in Islam is used by anti-Islamic commentators to denigrate the religion or to spread secular, atheistic philosophies and worldviews at its expense. Especially in the post-9/11 era, this anti-woman charge against Islam has contributed to the deepening and intensifying of the growing waves of Islamophobia especially in Muslim-minority countries in the west.¹ However, for scholars with adequate knowledge of women's position in Islam, this phenomenon causes an abiding sense of perplexity and bewilderment mainly due to the strangeness of the charge against Islam involving gender issues. For them, Islam is a religion of justice and establishes complete equity between men and women. They use the status of women in the Qur'an and hadith and the Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) kind, exemplary treatment of women to vindicate their views.

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Because of the widespread interest in the feminist discourse and a consequent negative representation of Islam, there has been an upsurge of Islamic literature that deals with various dimensions of gender issues in Islam. However, the participation of Islamic women (compared to their secular counterparts) in this intellectual venture has been marginal and inadequate. In most cases, Muslim men speak on behalf of Muslim women, and this metaphorically deprives the latter of their right to represent the self and makes the intellectual project of clarifying Islam's view on the woman question ineffectual to some extent. Based on this observation, this article will provide a general overview of women's rights in Islam and will examine the necessity of Muslim women's effective engagement in the debate on women's rights and feminism.

An overview of women's position in Islam

When discussing women's position in Islam, it is important to bear in mind that most Muslims believe that gender egalitarianism is so patently obvious and prominent in the Qur'an and hadithⁱⁱ literature that it requires little substantiation. There are innumerable Qur'anic verses and hadiths that emphasize gender justice and obligate men to be kind and compassionate to women.ⁱⁱⁱ The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) touched upon the issue of gender justice in his historic address – Khutbatul Wada – at the farewell pilgrimage. He stated:

O People! It is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under God's trust and with His permission. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers. And it is your right that they do not make friends with any one of whom you do not approve, as well as never to be unchaste.^{iv}

The gathering at the farewell pilgrimage was reportedly the largest in the Prophet (SAW)'s life, and he passed away a few weeks after speaking at that massive congregation. As the content of the speech suggests, the Prophet (SAW) may have known that his days were coming to an end. So it was a most important, thoughtful and well-documented address. In that last and most crucial speech, the Prophet (SAW) did not discuss the details of Islamic teachings; he rather touched on some of the most fundamental principles of Islam. Among the few topics he highlighted in that short, crisp and magnificent address, his emphasis on the kind treatment of women occupies the largest space. Since he did not forget to remind his followers of the importance of treating women well in that valedictory speech, it is easy to understand that gender justice is of paramount importance in Islam.

While in pre-Islamic Arab society women were being treated like chattels, domestic paraphernalia and men's property to be transferred from father to son or to son-in-law, Islam not only established complete gender equity in terms of women's equal human

identity and their right to own property but also ensured their right to work (if needed) and to equal pay. In the twenty-first century, the establishment of these rights may not sound very remarkable or revolutionary. But let us look at the economic rights of women in Britain, for example, and see how they fared only decades ago: "In Britain, women did not have the right of equal pay to equal work until the enactment of the Equal Pay Act of 1970 (enforced in 1975 and amended in 1984)."^v

Islam has given women the right to ownership and equal pay for equal work since the seventh century. The Qur'an is categorical: "And do not covet that by which God has made some of you excel others; men shall have the benefit of what they earn and women shall have the benefit of what they earn; and ask God of His grace; surely God knows all things."^{vi} This verse establishes the agency of woman as a free human being and suggests that men's work and women's work are equally worthwhile. From this and similar Islamic precepts, it can also be inferred that Islam does not entertain any differentiation between men and women in terms of work and pay. The writer Halide Adivar Edib (1884 – 1964) interprets this verse thus:

I believe this verse contains the two greatest and most enduring truths without which no decent society can exist. It recognises woman as a free human being, responsible for what she does – more than twelve centuries before the West recognised this principle. The second significance for this verse goes far beyond women's rights and far beyond the Islamic world. It establishes a principle of universal validity, which must and shall be the foundation-stone of the future human society. One can receive the benefit only of what one earns: that and only that.^{vii}

In the context of seventh-century Arabia, such economic rights for women were highly revolutionary. Islam made some other groundbreaking changes to establish women's rightful position in all spheres of life. For example, fourteen centuries ago Islam abolished the cruel practice of fathers burying their daughters for the fear of poverty or of social disgrace and stigma attached to the birth of a female child. On a superficial level, one may think that female infanticide is a matter of the past, as female children's right to life and women's equal dignity are now guaranteed in law books and in various national and international charters.

However, reality does not give us much moral comfort in this regard. The fact of the matter is that, female infanticide is practiced in today's world in various forms. The most widespread method of female infanticide is abortion that is practiced mainly because of one-child state policy, preference for male children, the bestial desire for the enjoyment of sexual and material life without bearing the responsibility of rearing (female) children. Some kill prenatal and postnatal female babies for economic reasons. Many parents go for abortion, as they believe children may impede their hedonistic impulse of individualistic aggrandizement. There are many other parents who abandon their newborn babies in hospitals or on the streets, as they regard children as economic burdens. Especially in the west, there is an increasing number of men who desert their sex partners or wives once

the latter give birth to children; as a result, children born in such relationships do not receive proper care. Moreover, there is a sharp rise in single mothers who have to look after their children independently without any help from the father. In some pagan cultures, female children are slaughtered at the altar of gods and goddesses to appease them, as they believe that such sacrifices may avert natural calamities.

In “Female Demographic Disadvantage in India 1981–1991: Sex Selective Abortions and Female Infanticide,” S. Sudha and S. Irudaya Rajan argue that prenatal sex selection is widespread in India and in some other Asian countries, and this affects gender demography. They have found out that there is a “persistent (or even worsening) female mortality disadvantage, despite overall mortality decline, due to selective neglect and the spread of female infanticide practices in some areas” in rural India.^{viii} In India and China, unbalanced sex ratios among children are obvious and are mainly caused by the widespread practice of female infanticide in various forms.

In such a socio-cultural context, the Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions are immensely pertinent to our world:

Say (O Muhammad!): Come, I will recite to you that which your Lord has made a sacred duty for you: That you ascribe nothing as partner to Him and that you do good to parents, and that you slay not your children because of penury – We provide for you and for them – and that you draw not nigh to lewd things whether open or concealed. And that you slay not the life which God has made sacred, save in the course of justice. This He has commanded you in order that you may discern.^{ix}

Surely, your Lord makes plentiful the means of subsistence for whom He pleases and He straitens it for whom He pleases; surely He is ever Aware of, Seeing, His servants. And do not kill your children for fear of poverty; we give them sustenance and yourselves (too); surely to kill them is a great wrong.^x

There are many hadiths on this subject. For instance:

Ibn `Abbas (may God be pleased with him) says, ‘God’s Messenger said, “Whoever had a daughter born to him, and he did not bury her alive or humiliate her, and he did not prefer his son over her, God will admit him to Paradise because of her.”^{xi}

Abu Hurairah (may God be pleased with him) reports that the Prophet said: ‘Whoever has three daughters, and shelters them, bearing their joys and sorrows with patience, God will admit him to Paradise by virtue of his compassion towards them.’ A man asked, ‘What if he has only two, O Messenger of God?’ He said, ‘Even if they are only two.’ Another man asked, ‘What if he has only one, O Messenger of God?’ He said, ‘Even if he has only one.’^{xii}

Ayesha (may God be pleased with her) says, ‘A poor woman came to me carrying her two daughters. I gave her three dates to eat. She gave each child a

date, and raised the third to her own mouth to eat. Her daughters asked her to give it to them, so she split the date (that she had wanted to eat) between them. I was impressed by what she had done, and told God's Messenger about it. He said, 'God has decreed Paradise for her because of it,' or, 'He has saved her from Hell because of it.'^{xiii}

The status of motherhood in Islam is the highest among human beings, and the honour of being a mother does not vary because of the gender identity of her children. However, in many societies female birth is regarded as a bad omen and the mother of daughter/s has to bear the brunt of humiliation in the family and in society because of recurrent female childbirths. The Qur'an categorically condemns such an attitude of neglect to female children and establishes the fact that only God determines the gender of a fetus:

To God belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth. He creates what He wills, He bestows female (offspring) upon whom He wills, and bestows male (offspring) upon whom He wills; Or He mingles them, males and females, and He makes barren whom He wills. Look! He is Knower, Powerful.^{xiv}

There are many parents who do not seem to be ready to welcome the birth of a female baby, and many a mother experiences familial or social oppression and maltreatment because of repeated female childbirths. In these verses, God categorically states that gender selection of babies is entirely in His hands and no humans have any power to decide upon the gender of a fetus. So stigmatizing women for female childbirths is not only unfair but also illogical from an Islamic point of view.

Such Islamic precepts can potentially remedy many social diseases that have engulfed today's world. Islam not only emphasizes parents' responsibilities to children, but also obligates the latter to be dutiful and respectful to the former. So these and similar Islamic teachings can cure the harsh hedonistic and individualistic tendency among many parents and children and can be a remedy for their irresponsibility, as many of them neglect (or pretend not to have time to perform their) parental and filial duties.

If we compare what Islam gave women in the seventh century with their position in Jahiliyyah (the pre-Islamic period of ignorance and savagery), we will find the Islamic rulings on gender issues quite revolutionary and liberating. According to Halide Adivar Edib:

In the sixth century came Islam, with a very different attitude towards women. The supreme aim of Islam being social justice, it could not leave half of society out of consideration. In pre-Islamic Arabia the position of women was degraded to that of cattle. A man could take as many wives as he wished, he could kill them, even bury his infant daughters alive. Islam instituted marriage, limited the number of wives and in case of divorce bound the husband to pay alimony. It inculcated a chivalrous attitude towards women in general and meted out equal punishment in cases of immorality.^{xv}

Importantly, around the time of the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia and the emergence of Islam as an emancipatory force, there was no feminist movement or any social demand for gender justice. Unlike the twentieth-century west, Arab society did not have any world wars, shortages of men and a consequent labour deficit to engender a sudden, serious concern for the rights of women. So there was no external pressure on the Prophet to take any measures or to pronounce any statements in favour of women's liberation. Gender justice was actually part of the whole message of Islam and the Prophet looked at it from the perspective of the primordial principle of justice which is the crux of the Islamic belief system. As the Qur'an states:

Say: My Lord has commanded justice [...].^{xvi}

To every people (was sent) an apostle: when their apostle comes (before them), the matter is judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged.^{xvii}

God commands justice, the doing of good, and generosity to kith and kin, and He forbids all immorality, bad conduct and oppressive attitude: He instructs you, that you may become mindful.^{xviii}

We previously sent our apostles with Clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance (of right and wrong), so that human may stand forth in justice [...].^{xix}

These verses emphasize justice in all its ramifications that include gender egalitarianism. The main thrust of the Prophet Muhammad's mission was to establish justice in all spheres of human life. Since there was no external force to put him under duress to elevate the condition of women, the elements of rage and anger were absent and thus he had the advantage of addressing this matter in a calm and balanced way. In other words, guided by God, the Prophet (SAW) treated the question of women in a dispassionate and objective manner. This marks a clear difference between the Islamic stance on gender issues and contemporary feminist philosophy which is primarily an antidote to gender unrest coursing through mainly the privileged women. Islam strikes a wonderful balance in gender relations. It is free from the abhorrent notions of women's inferiority that we find in some religious and cultural traditions as well as from the extremities of the women's liberation movement in the west. The emancipation of women in Islam was not the result of any revolt of one sex or section against the domination of the other. It was an integral part of the comprehensive Islamic reform that the Prophet Muhammad introduced to the world in the early seventh century.

Women's position in Christianity and western feminism

In all likelihood, a similar and just approach to gender issues was there in all revealed religions including Christianity. But, as widely known, the Bible underwent many revisions and alterations, especially in the hands of St. Paul who is known for his anti-female and anti-sex attitude. That is why there exists the notion of two phases of Christianity: the Christianity of Jesus Christ and the Christianity of St. Paul. Accordingly,

we should bear in mind that, when we talk about women's inferiority in Christianity, we actually refer to the modified Christianity promulgated by St. Paul and extant today, because the original teachings of the Prophet Isa (AS) (Jesus) are now virtually non-existent in their pristine form. As Halide Adivar Edib states:

The Christianity of Christ made no difference between men and women. Its strong point in the early stages was the sacred character, the indissolubility of marriage, and its insistence on monogamy added great strength to Western society. But in the Middle Ages, when the Roman Church organised a new society according to the teachings of St. Paul and the Church Fathers, the position of women fell very low. Sex and marriage were declared evil things; the centre of society shifted from home to the monastery. Women who lived as nuns and died as martyrs were respected, but the rest were [thought to be] the creatures of the devil. They were [considered] responsible for the original sin and the fall of man, and an oecumenical council even denied them a soul.^{xx}

The criticism of the position of women in Christianity is based upon the readings of the greatly altered form of the divine book, the Bible. Similarly, when most Muslims criticize western feminist ideas, they do not mean to go against the struggle that women and men in the west have launched to establish women's rights. Muslims can support wholeheartedly the legitimate issues and concerns of the early western feminist movement widely known as first wave feminism. However, there are good reasons for them to have reservations about many western feminist ideas that have powerfully influenced the western world since the late 1960s and early 1970s with the emergence of the second wave of feminism.

Regrettably, dominant western feminism has now become somewhat synonymous with a strong sense of individualism and with a lack of adequate concern for one's responsibilities to the family and to children. It has also contributed to creating a sense of rivalry between men and women, which has a bearing upon child development and is not conducive to a healthy family or society. The feminist theorist Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) also acknowledges this untoward outcome of the feminist movement, as she states:

No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own. The Suffrage campaign was no doubt to blame. It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon their own sex and its characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged. And when one is challenged, even by a few women in black bonnets, one retaliates, if one has never been challenged before, rather excessively.^{xxi}

The context of Woolf's criticism of the feminist movement is different, and it may be difficult to support her stance against the suffrage movement. However, in the context of second wave feminism, it can safely be said that the so-called sexual revolution has, instead of creating a congenial atmosphere for women's rights, pitted one gender against the other. Doris Lessing's indictment on conventional feminism is perhaps more pertinent

here. She states: “Do they [feminists] really want people to make oversimplified statements about men and women? In fact, they do. I’ve come with great regret to this conclusion.”^{xxii}

Apart from this anti-male charge against feminism, there are other criticisms which are extensively discussed in postcolonial feminist studies. The American feminist scholar Elizabeth Warnock Fernea believes, western feminism is “often associated with other movements—imperialism, colonialism, Zionism even. ... [F]eminism is somehow about depravity, particularly sexual depravity, birth control, individualism, no family concerns, no morals.”^{xxiii} Many such western feminist ideas are universalized on the plea of a supposed global feminist sisterhood. However, the postcolonial feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1955-) has misgivings about western feminism, as she states: “Beyond [feminist] sisterhood there are still racism, colonialism, and imperialism.”^{xxiv}

Such an indictment may be true concerning a section of western feminism, but we need to appreciate the fact that the women’s rights movement in the west took off as a result of embodied gender stereotypes, prejudices and inequalities there. We also need to appreciate that there have been different phases and branches of western feminism. Until the 1960s, the feminist movement in the west was largely fighting for women’s fundamental human rights, such as the rights to education and property, which were absent there, and I do not see any contradiction between Islam and those feminist concerns. However, when Islamic and postcolonial scholars critique western feminist ideas, they actually refer to the ideas of second wave feminists. Islam is opposed to many of second wave western feminists’ ideas, such as, “the right to sexual self-determination and the so-called sexual liberation of the 1960s” which Muslims may regard as “the false emancipation of Western women, exploited and sexualised in Western consumer society.”^{xxv}

For many centuries in the west women did not have basic human rights which Muslim women had been enjoying since the Prophet Muhammad established Islam in Arabia. Equal education, employment, political representation, ownership of property, divorce, etc. were alien to western women until the twentieth century. So a strong feminist movement was badly needed there considering women’s plight in material culture. But with second wave feminism beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, mainly because of intense rage and anger directed at men and patriarchy with vested material interests in women’s subordination, it took an extreme turn in many respects.

The contemporary feminist movement did not see an equal momentum in the Muslim world mainly because of its distinct cultural specificities. A true revolution concerning gender relations occurred in Muslim society in the seventh century with the advent of Islam. As Amina Wadud states:

Islam brought radical changes regarding women and society, despite the deeply entrenched patriarchy of seventh-century Arabia. The Qur’an provides women with explicit rights to inheritance, independent property, divorce and the right to testify in a court of law. It prohibits wanton violence towards women and girls

and is against duress in marriage and community affairs. Women and men equally are required to fulfill all religious duties, and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanors.^{xxvi}

However, such a glorious account of women's empowerment and gender equity in the normative teachings of Islam should not lead Muslims to be complacent, to believe that Muslim societies are free from gender prejudice and discrimination, and to avoid undertaking important reforms. Few generations after the Prophet's time, the dominant, mainstream Islamic scholars began to interpret Islamic teachings with an anti-woman bias. Moreover, with the spectacular spread of Islam to other cultures, such as Byzantine and Persian, Muslims started to borrow and follow traditional practices from those societies. Given this fact, a fresh look at the teachings of Islam with the prism of gender justice is important.

The women's rights movement in Muslim society

Even though many Muslims have misgivings about western feminism, it cannot be denied that, because of the sweeping influence of the feminist movement, the issue of women's oppression in Muslim cultures has now surfaced, and many Islamic scholars have sincerely felt the need to address it. As a result, the women's rights movement in Muslim countries is quite strong now. But the question before the Muslims is: which framework to follow – western/secular or Islamic? The secularly oriented feminist scholars and activists in Muslim societies use a western model to ameliorate women's condition, which, instead of establishing women's rights, breeds unnecessary social and cultural tensions. However, Islamic scholars and many postcolonial feminist intellectuals strongly argue that, only the Islamic framework is practicable and can bring positive changes in Muslim women's status. Following the Islamic framework means going back to the Qur'an and authentic Prophetic traditions and interpreting them in the light of modern complexities but not swerving from fundamental Islamic principles.

In discussing the Qur'an and hadith with regard to women's rights (or any other issues, for that matter), Muslims strongly believe that the Qur'an is a divine revelation the Prophet Muhammad received from God and his sunnah (though not linguistically miraculous like the Qur'an) was inspired by the guidance of God. Muslims have no doubt about the authenticity of what they find in the Qur'an though they conduct a rigorous review of the chain of narration and the veracity of the text before accepting a hadith as reliable. This is not the case with the Bible which underwent a massive revision in the hands of St. Paul. So unlike Christian feminists such as the American writer Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815 – 1902) who had to develop *The Woman's Bible* (1895 & 1898), Islamic women's rights activists do not have to undertake a similar venture of revising the primary sources of Islam. What Muslim scholars need to do for the sake of gender justice is to highlight gender egalitarianism inherent in the Islamic message but ignored for centuries. Equally, they have to reinterpret some texts in the light of the primordial principle of justice and review them for authenticity, consistency and compatibility checks.

In addressing gender inequality, it should be borne in mind that Muslim society in today's world is beset with a complex array of interconnected social and political problems including women's low status. As AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman states:

Across the Muslim world today if anything is self-evident it is that the Ummah is badly in need of reform. On this point it can be stated with confidence that all Muslims are agreed. Poverty and injustice characterize the face of Muslim lands from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Pollution and corruption are the order of the day in societies where the gulf between them and the developed countries of the world have never been wider. Politics in the Muslim world are all too often the politics of desperation, economics the economics of deprivation, and culture the culture of despair.^{xxvii}

So when we discuss women's predicament in the Muslim world, we need to put things in the right context and perspective and highlight the real issues, including gender oppression, which have engulfed its social order. Many of these problems have their origin in the colonial experience that Muslims encountered in their lands. With the arrival of colonial rule, colonised women had another layer of oppression which postcolonial feminists regard as 'double colonisation'.^{xxviii}

Like most people in today's Muslim societies, women are the victims of dreadful injustices and of corrupt socio-cultural and political systems. So gender inequity is part of a larger social phenomenon, and it will be wrong to treat it in an isolated, detached manner. For example, in a country like Bangladesh, gender subordination is a major social disease, but this is not the only problem in the country which is beset with a vicious cycle of misrule, corruption, inept economic policies, oppression, and human rights violations of various kinds and degrees. As Joseph T. O'Connell observes:

Faced with staggering problems in economic, social, political, and religious life, the typical peasants and labourers of Bangladesh cannot live by language and the refinements of literature alone. In material terms, they need food, work, and basic security; in symbolic terms, they need to find meaning in their lives, inspiration for the sacrifices they are called upon to make, and a sense of security and solidarity. They seek leadership offering a message that speaks to them in an idiom they can understand and respect.^{xxix}

Because of fundamental differences in material conditions and of variations in socio-cultural specificities, uncritical replication of western ideas with regard to women's issues is not possible or beneficial in eastern societies in general and Muslim countries in particular. However, sadly, many feminists in Muslim society seem to have launched a program to imitate the west and to neglect Islamic values in the service of feminism, and thus they set a tone which the overwhelming majority does not stand and they speak in a language that Muslims cannot respect. As opposed to this secular feminism in Muslim cultures, there is an alternative movement by believing men and women that uses the Islamic framework to address gender injustices and that apparently has huge potential to

bring positive changes in women's condition, especially in the Muslim world. This socio-religious and intellectual movement is called Islamic feminism.^{xxx}

Muslim women's engagement in Islamic feminism

In order to ameliorate the condition of women in the light of Islamic teachings, the Islamic feminist movement among Muslims both in the east and the west has been underway for the last decades. Muslim women's scholarly engagement in gender issues has become quite noticeable and many of them have found their near predecessor or near contemporary role model in the example of the Egyptian intellectual and activist Zaynab al Ghazali (1917 – 2005) who used Islamic ideas and arguments in fighting for women's rights. Muslim women have now launched this movement that “clearly expresses the renewal of the place of women in Islamic societies and an affirmation of a liberation vindicated by complete fidelity to the principles of Islam”,^{xxxi} and they “are today calling for a liberation *within* and by Islam.”^{xxxii} Tariq Ramadan describes this group of Muslim women thus:

[T]hey study, express themselves and, more and more frequently, teach. They label themselves as Muslims, criticize erroneous interpretations, and use the scope for interpretation provided by the text and the various opinions of the ulama of the reformist tradition to construct a discourse on Muslim women that calls them to an active, intelligent, and fair faithfulness—and Islamic faithfulness that sets them free before God and does not subject them to the masochistic imagery of either East or West.^{xxxiii}

Muslim women in countries like Malaysia, Egypt, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Britain and America are playing a leading role in this interpretative venture.^{xxxiv} However, in many other countries like Bangladesh, Islamic women's voices are still not heard as clearly as men's in the intellectual domain. There is an urgency for the Muslim women to study Islam more. Their equitable status as enshrined in the Qur'an and hadith will be better realized when they come forward, study Islam and become assertive of their rights. In this respect, the legendary Bangladeshi women's rights advocate and writer Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's (1880 – 1932) passionate call to women is highly pertinent:

In conclusion I want to say that we are half of society. If we lag behind how will our society advance? If one leg of a person is fastened, how long will she go limping on the other? Our interest and men's interest is one and the same. [...] For a child both mother and father are equally needed. We [women] should possess required qualities so that we can go with them [men] abreast in both spiritual and material spheres. [...] In this world a nation whose men and women worked together reached the zenith of development. It is imperative we [women] should be complementary partner of men instead of being a burden for them.^{xxxv}

Rokeya made this call in the early twentieth century and its relevance to the present Muslim world is still very strong. If Muslim women do not come forward and become

actively involved in the intellectual movement of establishing their rights, there are two risks. Firstly, their absence and inaction may vindicate the (neo)orientalist perception that Muslim women are passive; and secondly, the Islamic feminist movement may not have the required legitimacy.

Conclusion

Muslim women's active participation, with proper knowledge and understanding of Islam, is badly needed in the intellectual endeavour of establishing their rights in society. Knowledge is the key to win this battle against chauvinistic attitudes and patriarchal authority. Zaynab al Ghazali in an interview at her residence in Heliopolis, Egypt in 1981 expressed the same view: "The Muslim woman must study Islam so she will know that it is Islam that has given her all her rights."^{xxxvi}

It is important that (educated) Muslim women follow the footsteps of Zaynab al Ghazali and study Islam so that they can take an active part in the movement to establish the rights Islam has given women. Muslim women need to know more about Islam in order to fight for their rights enshrined in the Qur'an and hadith. They should emulate the example of Hadrat Ayesha, Prophet's wife and a polymath scholar with encyclopedic knowledge. Only then Muslim women intellectuals can differentiate "between Islam's (as Qur'an and Sunnah) embodiment of a positive vision for women, and Islam as culturally enacted practice."^{xxxvii} At present, there are many male Muslim scholars – such as Yusuf Qaradawi, Jamal Badawi and Tariq Ramadan – who have started talking about women's rights in Islam. But, it means so much more when female Muslim intellectuals take the lead in this regard. Many courageous Muslim women have started to make their voices heard. However, the challenge of misogyny as well as the danger of cultural onslaught from secular, Islamophobic feminism demands the participation of more Muslim women in the intellectual and political activism of women's rights and feminism.

Endnotes

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- ⁱ For a full-length discussion on this topic, see Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Feminism as Islamophobia : A review of misogyny charges against Islam." *Intellectual Discourse*, 20(1) 2012, 55-78.
- ⁱⁱ Hadith is the written record of the oral traditions of what the Prophet Muhammad said, did or approved.
- ⁱⁱⁱ For example, God states in the Qur'an : "And among His signs is this, that He has created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them; and He has put love and mercy between you. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect" (30 : 21). The following Prophetic statements are also relevant : "Fear God in respect of women." "The best of you are they who behave best to their wives." "A Muslim must not hate his wife, and if he be displeased with one bad quality in her, let him be pleased with a quality that is good." "The more civil and kind a Muslim is to his wife, the more perfect in faith he is." "One who makes efforts (to help) the widow or a poor person is like a mujahid (a Muslim engaged in

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- jihad or noble struggle) in the path of God, or like the one who stands up for prayers in the night and fasts in the day.”
- iv “The Last Sermon of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.),” retrieved on June 7, 2013 from <http://www.iium.edu.my/deed/articles/thelastsermon.html>.
- v Md. Mahmudul Hasan, “Feminism as Islamophobia : A review of misogyny charges against Islam.” *Intellectual Discourse*, 20(1) 2012 55-78, 61.
- vi Qur’an, 4 : 32.
- vii Halide Adivar Edib, *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*. Lahore : Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1935, 180.
- viii S. Sudha and S. Irudaya Rajan, “Female Demographic Disadvantage in India 1981–1991 : Sex Selective Abortions and Female Infanticide.” *Development and Change*, 30(3) 1999 585–618, 585. For more details, see : Barbara D. Miller, *The Endangered Sex : Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India* (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1997) and Sabu George, Rajaratnam Abel and B. D. Miller, “Female Infanticide in Rural South India”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27(22) May 30, 1992, 1153-1156.
- ix Qur’an, 6 : 151.
- x Qur’an, 17-30-31.
- xi Al-Hakim in al-Mustadrak 4/177.
- xii Ahmad, 2/335.
- xiii Sahih Muslim, 16/179.
- xiv Qur’an, 42 : 49-50.
- xv Edib, *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*, 179-180.
- xvi Qur’an, 7 : 29.
- xvii Qur’an, 10 : 47.
- xviii Qur’an, 16 : 90.
- xix Qur’an, 57 : 25.
- xx Edib, *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*, 179.
- xxi Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London : Penguin Books, 1993), 89.
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- xxxii Ramadan, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, 252.
- xxxiii Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, 141-142.
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