

## **Towards a Theory of Gender Equality in Muslim Societies**

CSID Annual Conference, Washington, D.C., May 29, 2004

Asma Barlas

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According to the conference description, our panel will discuss the meaning of justice for women in Islamic democracy and whether women and men can participate as equals in Muslim societies. I will join this debate on justice and democracy by engaging the concept of sexual equality, specially in light of my understanding of the Qur'an's teachings. Basically, I will propose some Qur'anic principles that can help Muslims to revision relationships between women and men in order to make them more equal, hence also more just and democratic. However, prior to doing that, I would like to explain the reason for my focus and also to discuss the problem of sexual inequality in Muslim societies so as to provide a context for my arguments.

Although equality remains a contested term and, for Muslims, an extremely fraught one, it is essential to clarify its meanings in order to arrive at a more egalitarian understanding of justice and democracy than most practicing Muslims currently seem to have. Few Muslims would deny that justice, or *adl*, is a central concern in Islam, and while not everyone may agree on the nature or degree of the overlap between Islam and democracy, many are willing to extend the Islamic concept of consultation, or *shura*, to include the principle of accountable and representative, hence to some extent, democratic governance. However, few Muslims like to apply the concept of *adl* or *shura* to sexual relationships or to incorporate sexual equality into their definitions of democracy and justice. To the contrary, most Muslims obdurately insist that Islam is concerned with justice and not with equality, thus counterposing them to one

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another. The majority also holds that, within the context of the family, *shura* does not imply a dialogue of equals or even a mutuality of dialogue. Rather, it is the man's prerogative as head of the family and the woman must simply submit to him in his capacity as her "husband, father or brother," in the words of the late Maulana Maududi.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, then, democracy and justice stop at the threshold of the family and neither concept entails equality although it is unclear whether one can have justice and democracy in the absence of equality. This is why I believe that in debates about democracy and justice Muslims need to address the issue of equality separately and that also explains my own particular focus.

It is, of course, easier to talk about the need for equality than it is to get Muslims to devise a theory and practice of equality, or even to accept it as a Qur'anic principle. To our abiding shame, most Muslim societies are mired in discriminatory and patriarchal cultures that have the weight of history, tradition, and hegemonic readings of the Qur'an behind them. (By patriarchal I mean pertaining to male rule such as evidenced in Maududi's formulation, as well as to forms of male privilege that arise from confusing biological sex with gender roles; i.e., theories of sexual differentiation.)<sup>2</sup> Thus, while Muslims are the first to point out that Islam gave women certain rights in the seventh century that European women would not win until fairly recently, they do not believe that equality was one of the rights. Indeed, Muslims read three or four words in the Qur'an to

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<sup>1</sup> Maududi in Mazhar ul Haq Khan. *Purdah and Polygamy*. New Delhi, India: Harman Publications, 1983: 61-62.

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mean that God has made men ontologically superior to women even if only by a single degree (*darajah*), preferred (*faddala*) them to women, put them in charge (*qawwamun*) of women, and given them a license to beat (*daraba*) disobedient wives. In addition, most Muslims interpret the Qur'an's provisions on polygyny as an unqualified right for all men and as a sign of male privilege, while they read one of the Qur'an's provisions about testimony as equating two women with one man, hence as confirming their inequality. Such readings, which are amplified by the secondary religious and literary texts, have led Muslims to conclude that inequality and patriarchy are scripturally mandated in Islam.

Ironically, not only Muslim conservatives, but also many feminists and secular critics are invested in this reading of Islam as a religious patriarchy and it serves them both well. It allows conservatives to safeguard male authority and to dismiss any critique, specially by Muslim women, as unIslamic, Western-inspired feminism, and it allows secular and feminist critics to safeguard the epistemic privilege of their own "unmediated secularism"<sup>3</sup> and to dismiss liberatory readings of religion as apologia.

And, yet, between the competing hegemonies of conservative Muslim patriarchies and liberal and secular feminisms, Muslims increasingly are finding the space to challenge patriarchal readings of the Qur'an. Amina Wadud, Azizah al-Hibri, Riffat Hassan, and I all offer readings which show that the much vaunted degree that men have over women is a reference to the husband's rights in a

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<sup>2</sup> I borrow this definition from Zillah Eisenstein. *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America*, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1984: 90.

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divorce and not a statement about male ontology or privilege. Likewise, the allusion to what God has preferred is not to men, but to God's favor upon some of them in terms of the worldly goods they possess. The charge to men to maintain their families does not carry with it the charge to rule over the wife, or to act as the head of the family, such a feudal concept being external to the Qur'an. Nor is its sanction for "wife-beating" as clear-cut as it is made out to be since *daraba* also means to separate and restrain and we can read the disobedience to which the Qur'an refers as being to God and not to the husband. The Qur'an also does not treat polygyny as a universal model, or as a way for men to obtain children, or sexual release. The "two-for-one"<sup>4</sup> formula is nullified by other cases of evidence-giving, one of which privileges the wife's testimony over the husband's and the other which promises that on Judgment Day baby girls who were killed by their fathers will be called upon to testify against them. Finally, the fact that the Qur'an treats women and men differently in some cases does not mean that it treats them unequally or that it views them as *being* unequal. Difference is not the same as inequality and the Qur'an never suggests that women and men are opposites of one another or incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal, in the manner of Muslim misogynists.<sup>5</sup>

This new scholarship on the Qur'an not only opens it up to egalitarian and anti-patriarchal readings, but it also advances new interpretive methodologies for

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2001: 338.

<sup>4</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

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reading it. My own work, for instance, defines a Qur'anic hermeneutics that can yield more contextually legitimate readings of it than those that project patriarchy and inequality into the Qur'an. As I also argue, since meaning is contingent on who reads a text, how, and in what contexts, Muslims need to recognize the relationship between religious knowledge and the means of its production instead of taking certain forms of knowledge (like anti-women readings of the Qur'an) as infallible and indisputable. As the Qur'an itself recognizes, texts are open to multiple, and even conflicting, readings which is why it asks us to read it for its best meanings. To my mind, the idea of best presupposes both the multiplicity of readings and the freedom to choose between them through free and reasoned discourse since one cannot arrive at a shared understanding of the best in the absence of a dialogue. In the very connectedness of existential and hermeneutic issues, then, we have a reason to press for just and democratic societies in which we can arrive at ever better interpretations of the Qur'an that can foster the practice of equality.

Unhappily, however, this is not possible in most Muslim societies in which women are excluded from knowledge-production and public life, citizens are denied basic civil and political rights and liberties, and religious knowledge is the preserve of a professional class of male interpreters that considers itself the final arbiter of religious dogma. Even more unhappily, it is not only the structure of religious knowledge and authority and the persistence of antidemocratic states

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<sup>5</sup> Asma Barlas. *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.

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that keeps Muslims from engaging in the sort of critical debate that I believe the Qur'an envisages will accompany its readings. It is also a certain rigidity, defensiveness, and arrogance of the mind bred by both adversity and privilege. The adversity has to do with the vicissitudes of Muslims following the decline of the Islamic empire and the advent first of Western colonialism and then of US global hegemony that underwrites repression and underdevelopment in many Muslim societies. The privilege, on the other hand, accrues from the ideology of male supremacy that has survived these reversals of fortune in tact. As a result, even in "the West"—where we do enjoy civil liberties, though they have been curtailed since 9/11—Muslims continue to resist new readings of the Qur'an on the ground that they destroy its integrity by forcing modern/ Western/ feminist ideas onto it. While such a critique may be true in some cases, this line of reasoning suggests problematically that the Qur'an is a historically specific text whose meanings could best be understood by male scholars in the seventh and eighth centuries, most of whom read patriarchy and inequality into it. As such, claims about defending the Qur'an's integrity cannot be taken at face value so long as this defense protects the status quo in Muslim societies.

In spite of such resistance, however, I remain convinced that the most compelling argument for equality and against patriarchy comes from within the Qur'an itself and that so long as Muslim societies continue to press women into servitude to men, they cannot be viewed as Islamic. I say this based on my understanding of the Qur'an's teachings on a range of issues which I have discussed in detail in *Believing Women*. Here, I have time only to make

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reference to a few. The most notable is the concept of *Tawhid* that affirms God's unqualified unity and sovereignty and which, in its most profound sense, is a doctrine not only about the nature of God, but also about the nature of an appropriately God-conscious stance on the part of human beings. It teaches that submission (*islam*) can only be to God and must be freely chosen; in other words, there should be no coercion in religion. The Qur'an also tells us two other things of significance about God that are pertinent to my discussion: first, God is unlike anything created, hence beyond sex and gender and we should not use similitude (i.e., similarity) to describe God. Secondly, God is just and God's justice lies in never doing *zulm* to human beings, the Qur'anic meaning of *zulm* being to transgress against their rights.<sup>6</sup> Thus, even divine justice is based in a recognition of the right of human beings to be protected against transgression.

The other set of the Qur'an's teachings that I would like briefly to mention are those that treat human equality and dignity as ontological facts. The Qur'an teaches that women and men originated in a single self (*nafs*) and are God's vice-regents (*khilafa*) on earth, equally endowed with moral agency and the capacity for moral choice and God-consciousness (*taqwa*). It also says that God has put love and mercy (*sukun*) between wives and husbands and made them each other's guides and friends (*awliya*) who both have the obligation to enjoin the right and forbid the wrong. In the end, it is on the basis of their moral praxis,

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<sup>6</sup> See Izutsu, Toshihiko. *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*. Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964.

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rather than their biological sex, that human beings will be judged and they will be judged by exactly the same standards.

Those who read male supremacy and sexual equality into the Qur'an ignore that male authority as it is structured in Muslim patriarchies violates each and every one of these teachings and leads unavoidably to heresy (*shirk*). Men not only coerce women into submitting to them, but by claiming that they are entitled to women's submission, set themselves up as rivals to God on earth. Additionally, they debase God by projecting a sexual identity and sexual bias onto God by claiming that God "himself" is partial to men who have a special affinity with God. They also read *zulm* into God's speech by reading the Qur'an as an oppressive text and they themselves commit *zulm* against women by denying their right to dignity and equality as enunciated in the Qur'an.

I believe that it is in light of the foundational *ayat* about divine ontology and human equality that Muslims should read the Qur'an's provisions on social issues, like maintenance, divorce, polygyny, evidence-giving, and so-called "wife-beating." I have pointed out that not only can each of the four words—*darajah*, *faddala*, *qawwamun*, *daraba*—on which Muslims hang patriarchal readings of the Qur'an be read differently if we read them with attention to context, grammar and syntax, as Wadud urges, but that they also can be understood differently if we read them with the entirety of the Qur'an's teachings in mind, as the Qur'an itself asks us to do. Dominant readings of the so-called misogynistic verses ignore the totality of these teachings and, indeed, undermine them by making it seem that in religious matters, the Qur'an grants women and

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men equality but that in social matters, it privileges men. It is incoherent to maintain that women are equal to men in the sight of God, but unequal in the sight of men. Such a view suggests that divine speech is riddled with an enormous contradiction and, as believers, we simply cannot accept that. Rather, we need to recognize that the problem lies not in divine speech but in our failure to read it in a just and ethical manner.

Admittedly, these verses, or my discussion, do not amount to a theory of equality, or even to defining the term. However, they provide Muslims necessary principles for evolving “a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an and seeks *the practice* of rights and justice for *all* human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.”<sup>7</sup> This is Margot Badran’s definition of Islamic feminism which she says she has derived from my work as well as Wadud’s, even though neither one of us calls ourselves a feminist. Speaking for myself, it is partly because (as Badran herself points out) the concepts of “gender equality and social justice are embedded in the Qur’an” and were introduced to Muslims fourteen centuries ago. I thus derive my understanding of both from my engagement with Qur’anic epistemology, as I insist on terming it.

At the same time, however, I believe that Muslim understandings of these concepts remains flawed for complex reasons many of which have to do with our interpretive history. Even so, I feel that the most onerous burden we carry today

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<sup>7</sup> Margot Badran, “Islamic Feminism: Beyond Good and Evil, Beyond East and West,” unpublished paper, 2003.

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is not just historical, but also epistemological and ethical. It is an epistemological burden in that, as a community, we are unwilling to question knowledge that undermines our very conception of God even as it deifies and sacralizes males. It is an ethical burden in that we remain trapped in a reading of history, tradition, and the Qur'an that sanctions *zulm* against women. So heavy have these burdens become that some Muslim scholars of the Qur'an have begun to talk openly about problems in "the text itself" and the need to move "beyond" it, a thinly veiled euphemism for abandoning the Qur'an. That our scripture has become so burdensome to us is, I believe, the most eloquent testimony of our moral and hermeneutic failure to read it in light of its own teaching that

Those who listen  
To the Word  
And follow  
The best (meaning) in it:  
. . . are the ones  
Whom God has guided, and those  
Are the ones endued  
With understanding  
(The Qur'an, 39:18).

My own view is that we cannot arrive at the best meanings of the Qur'an so long as we treat our past as the end of history and thus fail to interrogate it or improve upon it. The crisis today is not of Islam, as our detractors pronounce it to be; rather, it is a crisis of Muslims who have thwarted Islam's democratic promise and its inherently just and egalitarian worldview because of what they have wrought with their own hands and minds. Since the problem is of our own making, we must also be the ones to unmake it.