

## Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Islam: Addressing Contemporary Issues in Pakistan

Dr. Ahmad Raza

Assistant Professor, Imperial college of Business Studies, Lahore.

Email: [ahmadrazacti@gmail.com](mailto:ahmadrazacti@gmail.com)

Dr. Muhammad Imran Anwar

Assistant Professor, Imperial college of Business Studies, Lahore.

Email: [drmimrannizami@gmail.com](mailto:drmimrannizami@gmail.com)

Dr. Zafar Ali

Assistant Professor, Imperial college of Business Studies, Lahore.

Email: [zafarabasi786@gmail.com](mailto:zafarabasi786@gmail.com)

Dr. Muhammad Imran

Assistant Professor, Imperial college of Business Studies, Lahore.

Email: [imran555@gmail.com](mailto:imran555@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The article explores the intricate relationship between Islamic principles and women's rights, focusing on gender equality within the context of contemporary Pakistan. It examines how Islamic teachings, when accurately interpreted, promote the dignity, education, and empowerment of women. However, the article also highlights the challenges faced by women in Pakistan due to cultural practices and patriarchal norms that are often mistakenly justified through religion. By critically analyzing these issues, the article aims to distinguish between cultural practices and authentic Islamic teachings, advocating for the alignment of Pakistani societal norms with the true spirit of gender equality in Islam. The discussion includes the role of women in education, economic participation, and decision-making, and addresses misconceptions about women's roles and rights within an Islamic framework. Additionally, the article considers the legal and social frameworks in Pakistan, suggesting reforms that could better uphold women's rights in line with both Islamic principles and international human rights standards. The article emphasizes that achieving gender equality is not only a religious imperative but also a crucial element in Pakistan's socio-economic development.

**Keywords:** Women's rights in Islam, gender equality, Islamic teachings, cultural practices, empowerment, socio-economic development, legal reforms

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## **Introduction**

The topic of women's rights and gender equality within Islam is both timeless and contemporary, particularly in the context of Pakistan. Islam, at its core, promotes the dignity, respect, and equality of all human beings, regardless of gender. However, in Pakistan, these principles are often overshadowed by cultural traditions, societal norms, and patriarchal interpretations that undermine the true essence of Islamic teachings. As a result, women in Pakistan continue to face significant challenges in areas such as education, employment, legal rights, and personal safety. Addressing these issues requires a deep understanding of Islamic teachings alongside a critical analysis of the socio-cultural factors that perpetuate gender inequality. This article explores how Islam inherently supports women's rights and examines the contemporary challenges in Pakistan, proposing ways to reconcile religious principles with modern-day realities to achieve true gender equality.

## **Islamic Perspective on Women's Rights**

Islam's perspective on women's rights is deeply rooted in the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah (traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Contrary to common misconceptions, Islam grants women a range of rights, many of which were revolutionary at the time of their revelation.

### **Equality and Dignity:**

The Quran explicitly states that men and women are created from the same soul and are equal in the eyes of Allah.<sup>1</sup>

Allah Says "O mankind, fear you're Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women." This verse emphasizes the fundamental equality of men and women, both in creation and spiritual standing. Additionally, the Quran asserts that men and women are equally responsible for their actions and will be rewarded or punished based on their deeds: "Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while being a believer, We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward according to the best of what they used to do"<sup>2</sup>

### **Economic and Legal Rights:**

Islam granted women rights to inheritance, ownership, and financial independence long before such rights were recognized in other societies.<sup>3</sup>

"For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much—an obligatory share." This verse clearly outlines women's right to inherit property, which was unprecedented at the time of revelation. Moreover, Islam allows women to own property, run businesses, and manage their finances independently. The Prophet's first wife, Khadijah (RA), was a successful businesswoman, which further underscores the Islamic endorsement of women's economic autonomy.

### **Education:**

The pursuit of knowledge is highly emphasized in Islam for both men and women. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim"<sup>4</sup>

This hadith highlights the importance of education for all Muslims, regardless of gender. The

Prophet's encouragement of women to learn and seek knowledge is evident in his interactions with women in his community, where he ensured that they had access to religious and worldly education.

**Social Rights:**

Women in Islam are entitled to respect, protection, and support. The Quran commands men to treat their wives with kindness and equity: "And live with them in kindness"<sup>5</sup>

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) reinforced this by stating, "The best of you are those who are best to their wives"<sup>6</sup>

This directive extends to all women, emphasizing that they should be treated with dignity and honor in all aspects of life.

This section reflects how Islamic teachings advocate for comprehensive rights for women, encompassing spiritual, economic, educational, and social dimensions, challenging the misconceptions that often surround the role and status of women in Islam.<sup>7</sup>

**Islamic Perspective on Women's Rights**

Islamic teachings on women's rights are rooted in the Quran and Hadith, emphasizing the inherent dignity, equality, and rights of women. The Quran explicitly declares that men and women are equal in the eyes of Allah, each possessing a soul created from the same essence.<sup>8</sup>

Islam grants women a range of rights that were revolutionary for the time of its revelation. These include the right to education, inheritance, ownership, and participation in public life. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) consistently advocated for women's rights, stating, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim"<sup>9</sup>

His teachings emphasized the importance of education for both men and women, reflecting the Islamic principle that knowledge and personal development are essential for all believers, regardless of gender.

Additionally, Islam's approach to inheritance is explicitly outlined in the Quran.<sup>10</sup>

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also demonstrated his commitment to women's rights through his actions. He emphasized the importance of treating women with kindness and respect, as reflected in his last sermon: "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 Allah'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"<sup>11</sup>

These foundational Islamic principles highlight the religion's commitment to gender equality and the protection of women's rights. However, in many Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan, cultural practices and patriarchal interpretations often overshadow these teachings, leading to the marginalization of women. A proper understanding and implementation of these Quranic and Prophetic directives are essential for addressing contemporary issues related to women's rights and gender equality.

Despite Islam's clear emphasis on gender equality, Pakistani society grapples with numerous challenges in upholding women's rights. These challenges are deeply rooted in a combination of patriarchal traditions, cultural norms, and the misinterpretation of religious teachings. The disparity between Islamic principles and the realities faced by women in Pakistan is evident in several key areas, including education, employment, legal rights, and violence against women.

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### **Education and Employment**

In Islam, the pursuit of knowledge is obligatory for both men and women. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim"<sup>12</sup>

Pakistan has one of the lowest female literacy rates in South Asia, particularly in rural areas where cultural barriers and economic hardships prevent girls from accessing education. This issue is compounded by societal expectations that prioritize domestic roles over educational and career aspirations for women. Women's participation in the workforce is similarly limited, with significant barriers including workplace harassment, unequal pay, and limited opportunities for advancement.

### **Legal and Social Inequality**

Islamic law provides clear guidelines on issues like inheritance, marriage, and divorce, aiming to ensure justice and fairness for women. However, cultural practices often override these religious principles in Pakistan. For instance, despite Quranic injunctions that entitle women to inheritance, many are deprived of their rightful shares due to societal pressures and family dynamics. Furthermore, legal provisions in Pakistan, such as the Hudood Ordinances, have been criticized for disproportionately affecting women, often leading to their victimization rather than protection.

### **Violence against Women**

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive issue in Pakistan. Practices such as honor killings, domestic violence, and forced marriages are widespread, often justified by distorted interpretations of religious and cultural norms. These practices are not only in direct violation of Islamic teachings, which strictly prohibit violence and oppression but also contravene Pakistan's legal obligations under international human rights law. Despite legislative efforts like the Anti-Honor Killing Laws, enforcement remains weak, and many women continue to suffer in silence.<sup>13</sup>

### **Political Representation**

Although there have been improvements in women's political representation, challenges persist. Women often encounter significant obstacles in accessing political roles, including gender-based discrimination and societal opposition. While Pakistan was the first Muslim-majority country to elect a female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, women's participation in politics remains largely symbolic, with many female politicians facing marginalization or limited influence within male-dominated political structures.

### **Education and Employment:**

While Islam encourages education for all, Pakistan struggles with low female literacy rates, especially in rural areas. Economic disparities and cultural barriers often prevent girls from accessing education. Similarly, women's participation in the workforce is hindered by societal expectations, lack of opportunities, and workplace harassment.

### **Legal and Social Inequality:**

Pakistani women face legal and social discrimination, particularly in matters of inheritance, marriage, and divorce.<sup>14</sup>

Islamic law provides clear guidelines on these issues, cultural practices often take

precedence, resulting in women being denied their rightful shares. For instance, despite Islamic injunctions, many women are deprived of their inheritance due to societal pressures and family dynamics.

**Violence against Women:**

Gender-based violence remains a significant issue in Pakistan. Practices such as honor killings, domestic violence, and forced marriages are prevalent, often justified under the guise of tradition or misinterpreted religious beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

This not only violates women's rights but also contravenes the teachings of Islam, which strictly forbids violence and oppression.

**Political Representation:**

Although there have been improvements in women's political representation in Pakistan, challenges persist. Women often face obstacles in accessing political positions, and those who do enter politics are frequently marginalized or subjected to gender-based discrimination. Addressing these contemporary issues requires a re-evaluation of how Islamic teachings are interpreted and applied in Pakistan. Scholars and religious leaders must work together to challenge patriarchal interpretations that undermine women's rights. It is essential to promote an understanding of Islam that aligns with its core principles of justice, equality, and compassion.

**Legal Reforms:**

Strengthening legal frameworks to protect women's rights is crucial. This includes enforcing laws against domestic violence, ensuring fair inheritance distribution, and providing legal aid to women who face discrimination.

**Community Engagement:**

Engaging communities in dialogue about women's rights and gender equality from an Islamic perspective can help shift cultural norms. Religious leaders play a critical role in this, as their influence can help dismantle harmful practices that are wrongly attributed to Islam.

Community engagement plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between Islamic teachings on women's rights and contemporary gender equality issues in Pakistan. By fostering dialogue and understanding within communities, it is possible to challenge and transform cultural practices that contradict Islamic principles of gender equality.

**Islamic Teachings on Gender Equality and Community Role**

Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of mutual respect and cooperation between men and women. The Quran advocates for equality and justice.<sup>16</sup>

"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, and for women is a share of what they have earned. And ask Allah of His bounty."<sup>17</sup>

This verse underscores that both men and women have distinct but equal roles and rights, and neither should undermine the other's contributions.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) reinforced these teachings by actively involving women in societal affairs and encouraging their participation in community life. For instance, he said, "The best of you are those who are the best to their women"<sup>18</sup>

This hadith reflects the Prophet's emphasis on respectful and equitable treatment of women, which should be a cornerstone of community values.

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**Current Community Challenges**

In practice, cultural norms and patriarchal interpretations often overshadow these teachings. For example, traditional practices such as honor-based violence, forced marriages, and limited educational opportunities for women persist despite their contradiction with Islamic principles.<sup>19</sup>

These practices are often perpetuated by a lack of awareness or misunderstanding of Islamic teachings regarding women's rights.

**Involvement of Religious Leaders:**

Religious leaders have significant influence in shaping community attitudes. Engaging them in advocacy for women's rights and gender equality can help in addressing and correcting harmful practices.<sup>20</sup>

Religious leaders who speak out against misinterpretations of Islamic teachings can be pivotal in changing entrenched cultural norms.

**Community Dialogues and Forums:**

Creating platforms for open dialogues where community members can discuss gender equality issues from an Islamic perspective is essential. These forums provide a space for sharing experiences, challenging stereotypes, and fostering mutual understanding.<sup>21</sup>

**Media and Advocacy Campaigns:**

Utilizing media to highlight positive stories of women's empowerment and the successful integration of Islamic principles with modern gender equality can shift public perceptions.

Community engagement is instrumental in addressing gender equality issues in Pakistan. By aligning community practices with the true teachings of Islam, it is possible to create a more equitable society. Through educational initiatives, involvement of religious leaders, open dialogues, and media campaigns, communities can work towards resolving gender disparities and ensuring that the rights and dignity of women are upheld in accordance with Islamic principles.

**Media and Advocacy:**

The media has a powerful role in shaping public perceptions. By promoting positive portrayals of women and raising awareness about their rights, the media can contribute to changing societal attitudes.<sup>22</sup>

Media and advocacy play crucial roles in shaping public perceptions and influencing societal attitudes towards women's rights and gender equality. In the context of Pakistan, where cultural norms and misinterpretations of Islamic teachings often hinder progress towards gender equality, media and advocacy efforts are vital in challenging these barriers and promoting a more accurate understanding of women's rights from an Islamic perspective.

**Media's Role in Shaping Perceptions**

The media has a powerful influence on public opinion and societal norms. In Pakistan, media outlets, including television, print, and digital platforms, can either perpetuate harmful stereotypes or advocate for positive change.<sup>23</sup>

By highlighting issues related to gender inequality, violence against women, and legal injustices, the media can raise awareness and generate public discourse.

**Promoting Positive Portrayals:**

Positive representations of women in media can challenge stereotypes and provide role

models for both women and men. Programs and campaigns that showcase successful women, highlight their contributions to society, and address gender-based issues can inspire change and promote gender equality. For example, initiatives such as the "Girls Education Challenge" by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) aim to increase girls' access to education and highlight their achievements.<sup>24</sup>

**Raising Awareness of Gender-Based Issues:**

Media coverage of gender-based violence, discrimination, and legal injustices can bring these issues to the forefront of public consciousness. Investigative journalism, documentaries, and news reports that address topics such as domestic violence, honor killings, and forced marriages can expose the harsh realities faced by women and mobilize public and governmental responses. A notable example is the 2019 documentary "A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness," which addresses honor killings in Pakistan and won an Academy Award for its impactful storytelling.<sup>25</sup>

**Advocacy for Women's Rights**

Advocacy involves efforts to promote and protect women's rights through various means, including legal reforms, community outreach, and policy changes. In Pakistan, advocacy organizations and activists work to address gender inequality and empower women by advocating for their rights and challenging discriminatory practices.

**Legal and Policy Reforms:**

Advocacy groups play a crucial role in pushing for legal reforms that ensure women's rights and gender equality. This includes campaigning for the implementation and enforcement of laws related to domestic violence, sexual harassment, and equal inheritance rights. Organizations such as the Women's Action Forum.<sup>26</sup>

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) actively work on these issues, advocating for legislative changes and providing support to affected women.<sup>27</sup>

**Community Engagement and Education:**

Advocacy efforts also involve educating communities about women's rights and promoting a more accurate understanding of Islamic teachings. Workshops, seminars, and public campaigns aimed at dispelling myths and misconceptions about gender roles in Islam can help shift cultural attitudes and foster greater respect for women's rights. For instance, the "Women's Rights and Islam" campaign, spearheaded by various NGOs, seeks to educate both men and women about the equitable treatment of women as prescribed by Islamic teachings.<sup>28</sup>

**Collaboration with Religious Leaders:**

Collaborating with religious leaders and scholars to promote gender equality from an Islamic perspective is another effective advocacy strategy. By engaging with influential figures in the community, advocacy groups can leverage religious authority to challenge patriarchal interpretations and promote a more just and equitable understanding of women's rights in Islam.<sup>29</sup>

Islam unequivocally upholds the rights of women and promotes gender equality. However, the reality in Pakistan is that these principles are often overshadowed by cultural practices and patriarchal interpretations. To address the contemporary issues of women's rights and gender equality in Pakistan, it is essential to return to the true teachings of Islam, advocate

for legal and educational reforms, and engage communities in meaningful dialogue. By doing so, Pakistan can move towards a society that not only respects but also empowers its women, in accordance with the principles of Islam.

"Addressing Contemporary Issues in Pakistan" explores the intersection of Islamic teachings on women's rights and the challenges faced by women in Pakistan today. It highlights that Islam advocates for the dignity, equality, and rights of women through its scriptures and the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Despite these clear directives, women in Pakistan encounter significant obstacles, including limited access to education and employment, legal and social inequalities, gender-based violence, and underrepresentation in politics.

The article emphasizes the need to reconcile these challenges with Islamic principles by promoting educational reforms, legal protections, community engagement, and positive media portrayals. It argues that addressing these issues requires a return to the core teachings of Islam, alongside efforts to challenge patriarchal interpretations and cultural practices that hinder gender equality. Through these measures, Pakistan can move towards a society that truly reflects the principles of justice and equality espoused by Islam.

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