

Rayane El Masri

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### Feminism and Islam: Is it Possible to be a Muslim Feminist?

*Whenever I portrayed myself publicly as a young Muslim woman wearing the Hijab who talked about gender equality and women's rights, I get almost the same reaction from different people around the world "Oh, but is it even possible to be a Muslim and talk about women's rights?" or "How can you be a Muslim and ask for women's liberation? That goes against your religion!". I was as surprised as them by these questions, since a thing that felt so natural to me, and my religious upbringing was seen as something weird and controversial. Establishing justice and human rights is one of the first foundations that Islam came with. I grew up with the stories of Muslims fighting injustice in all its forms, so why did people assume that women's rights which are human rights are alien to Islam? A question that I mostly get asked is "Is it possible to be a feminist and a practicing Muslim?"*

In order to answer this question, let us first define the word feminism. There are different kinds of feminism and different definition, however, let's go with the simplest one, according to the Oxford dictionary feminism is the "Advocacy of the rights of women (based on the theory of equality of the sexes". Feminism is the belief that both sexes are equal, and thus men and women should have equal rights and responsibilities. So, does this goes against Islam's teachings? Is Islam against women's rights which are human rights? In order to answer this, we need to get a holistic view of humans and humanity in Islam first.

Similar to Christianity, in Islam human beings whether males or females are the predecessors of God on Earth and God created them in order to worship Him by concurring the Earth. God has specially devoted the faculty of reasoning to Human beings "*Truly, We did offer AlAmanah (the trust or moral responsibility or honesty and all the duties which Allah has ordained) to the heavens and the earth, and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and were afraid of it (i.e. afraid of Allah's Torment But man bore it. Verily, he was unjust (to himself) and ignorant (of its results). t.*"- Verse (33:72) translation by Mohsen Khan. Thus, all human beings are morally responsible to use their reasoning faculty to make the best decisions while here on Earth. Now, of course, this earthly life is just a test and humans are to be held accountable for their deeds on the day of judgment "*Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you would not be returned?"*- Verse (23:115) translation by Sahih International. Indeed, God is the most Just. In fact one of His names is the Just, so the Just would give every human being whether male or female what they deserve on the day of Judgment "*Never will I allow to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female. You are (members) one of another*".

A lot of negative talks have been spread about the status of women in Islam. Precisely, opponents of Islam tend to use misrepresentations and misconceptions about the status of women

in Islam in order to promote the idea that Islam is a misogynistic religion. In this paper, I am going to present three seemingly unjust women-related issues in Islamic law. Then, I am going to argue by referring to the Quran and Hadith that these issues stem from cultural biases on the one hand and from the misinterpretation of Islamic primary sources on the other hand. Finally, I am going to conclude that Islam is consistent in preserving the rights and dignity of women, and it is indeed for women's liberation, the kind of liberation that preserves her human dignity.

### Debunking the myths

The first issue that I'm going to talk about is the misconception of beating women. Many non-Muslims and Muslims alike think that Islam has allowed the beating of women especially wives. They tend to quote verse (4:34) in order to justify their claim. They choose their own translation of the word "ضرب" even though this Arabic word has many meanings other than beating. However, we cannot use this verse in order to justify the beating of women in Islam because one should understand the Quran in light of the life and teachings of the prophet peace be upon him (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019) and the prophet never abused his wives. In fact, the prophet repeated several times that men should respect, care for, women and treat them righteously. His final will during the Last Sermon was to take good care of women. In fact, domestic violence is clearly forbidden in Islam "Do not strike the female servants of God."-Prophet Muhammad PBUH (Sunan Abi Dawud 2146) (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019). Another Hadith that also clearly shows that hitting of women is forbidden "*Do not hit [women] and do not revile [women].*"-Prophet Muhammad PBUH (Sunan Abi Dawud 2144) (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019). In addition to these explicit Hadiths, it is important to note that the prophet who is the role model of Muslims, and the best man and prophet that never walked the Earth never once trucked a female or anything else according to his wife Aisha "*He never once hit a servant, a woman, nor struck anything with his hand.*"(Sunan Ibn Majah, 2060) (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019). In fact, the correct English translation of verse (4:34) would be "*Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with. And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them 'first', 'if they persist, ' do not share their beds, 'but if they still persist, ' then discipline them 'gently'. But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High, All-Great.*"- Dr. Mustafa Khattab, *the Clear Quran*. Clearly, the last part of this verse talks about exceptional where a woman is about to commit a serious act of disobedience. However even in this case, men are never allowed to hit women. In fact, it is men's duty to advise women gently, and if they insist, they must instruct them firmly but without using violence, that's because men in Islam men are the caregivers of women, whether that man was a father, a brother, or a husband. The prophet's cousin Ibn Abbas who is the foremost commentator on the Quran said that the last part of this verse is symbolic, and it doesn't actually call for physical violence (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019). In fact, we have many other verses in the Quran that hold symbolic meaning, and this one is no exception. Finally, marriage in Islam should be based on mercy and compassion "*And amongst God's signs is that He*

*created for you spouses from amongst you and placed between you compassion and mercy.”* (30:21) (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019). Furthermore, Islam openly condemns all types of harm and abuse “There is to be no harm nor reciprocating of harm.”-Prophet Muhammad PBUH (Sunan Ibn Majah, 2341) (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019), what about harming half of the Islamic society? From all the above, we can say that the act of violence against women in Islam is a myth that has been just debunked, and that Islam promotes kindness, love, and mercy towards women.

The second issue I want to talk about is the myth that Islam encourages the oppression of Muslim women through polygamy (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek, 2019). What many people are unaware of is that polygamy is a practice that was spread in the Arabic peninsula way before Islam (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek, 2019), and actually Islam came to regulate this activity. The verse “*And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or that which your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice”* (4:3) *This verse came to give rights to the orphan women who at risk of abuse by their male guardian.” It terminates the practice of taking advantage of orphans”* (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019). Aisha the wife of the prophet peace be upon him says “It was the custom of the Arabs, who had under their custody beautiful and rich orphan girls, to marry them without offering their fair dower.” This verse clearly states that men can have multiple wives only if they treat them equally and fairly, however verse (4:129) shows that men can never be perfectly fair in treating their wives (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek, 2019) “*You will never be able to maintain ‘emotional’ justice between your wives—no matter how keen you are. So do not totally incline towards one leaving the other in suspense. And if you do what is right and are mindful ‘of Allah’, surely Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.* Dr. Mustafa Khattab, *the Clear Quran* (4:129). Thus, we can understand, that if the wives cannot be treated fairly by their husband, the Quran indirectly says that monogamy is preferred (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek 2019). Finally, as we mentioned previously that Islam came to regulate the widely spread practice of polygamy in the Arabic peninsula, and actually in Islam women are allowed to specify their wish of monogamy in the marriage contract, so that their man cannot marry another woman. One finale note is that polygamy is not exclusive to Islam nor Arabs, in fact in India 5.8% of Hindus are polygamous compared to 5.7% of Muslims. Also 7.9% of Buddhists, 6.7 of Jains, and 15.25% of Adivasis are polygamous (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek, 2019). In addition to that many predominately Christian nations legalized polygamies such as Uganda (15.8%), Zambia (16%), Central African Republic (13.3%) , and the Republic of Congo (31.9%) (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek, 2019). In contrast, the percentage of polygamy in a Muslim majority country like Iran is only 1%, while in the U.S even though polygamy is not allowed in all states, it is important to note that there are around 9.8 million polymerous relationships. From all the above we conclude that Islam did not oppress women by allowing polygamy, instead, Islam came to regulate polygamy and give women who are in a polygamous marriage their rights that were not given prior to Islam, and as showed the Quran talks

about polygamy in special cases and it is better for a marriage to stay monogamous according to the Quranic view.

The third point I want to talk about is the misconception that Islamic Inheritance laws favor men over women. Often people who believe in this myth quote verse (4:11) “Allah instructs you concerning you children: for the male, [inheritance is] what is equal to the share of two females. But if there are [only] daughters, two or more, for them is two-thirds of one’s estate. And if there is only one, for her is half...”(4:11). However, this verse does not mean that men receive always more than women. In fact, women inherit less than men in 4 situations, they inherit equal to men in 10 situations, and they inherit more than men in 16 situations. Now it is important to understand that the laws of Islamic inheritance are grounded in a larger, complex system of Islamic finance, and this grounding is solely based on financial responsibility of each member (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek, 2019). Or in all cases where there is a difference between the inheritance share of males and females it is either due to the difference in proximity in relationship to the deceased or it is based on the financial responsibility of that heir (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek, 2019). For instance, in the case of the verse mentioned above where a brother inheritance the double of his sister’s share, that’s because a brother is responsible for financially taking care of his sister as long as she’s not married. If she gets married, it is the responsibility of her husband to financially take care of his wife. In Islam, in normal circumstances where the father is alive, it is the responsibility of the father to spend upon the whole household, and it is never the duty of the wife or daughter to spend upon the household. Finally, we conclude that it is not true that Islam favors men over women in inheritance, in fact, Islam was the first religion to give women the right of inheritance, however, her share is determined by the number of responsibilities she has, and not her gender (Khan, Chowdhury, and Alkiek, 2019).

### True Liberation

After analyzing the myths that opponents of Islam use to justify that Islam is a misogynic religion, I want to talk about an issue that always comes hand in hand whenever we’re talking about feminism and Islam and that’s women’s liberation. “Oh but you’re wearing this piece on your head and covering your whole body, I’m sorry but you cannot be liberated!”. To those, I smile and answer proudly “Thanks I don’t want your liberation.” Or as Mona Haydar, the famous pop star and Muslim feminist puts it in her Barbarian song “If they’re civilized, I’d rather stay savage”. Liberation is often mistaken with your external appearance and the amount of cloth you put on, the equation is simple, the more cloth you are willing to sacrifice for the sake of fashion, the more liberal you are. It is sad that modernity has reduced women to an object, where she is evaluated by their attractiveness rather than her mind. “Why you only care about my looks and don’t respect my mind?” A verse written by Nizar Kabbani, the so-called woman’s poet and later sung by the infamous Majida Al Roumi in her song “Be my Friend”. To this I answer, don’t blame a man for looking at your body while you made it the most attractive thing in you. No, I am not saying that men are animals that can’t control their instincts. I myself and other heterosexual women would

have looked the same way as any other men when some women or men are wearing something that grabs attention.

When it comes to me as a Muslim woman, I see myself as the most liberated of all women, because I don't allow any human to evaluate me based on my physical attractiveness. I'm liberated from the beauty standards that a woman must have in order to be deemed worthy. I don't let men instruct me how to dress, I don't take orders from men nor women, I only take orders from God. My worth is intrinsic, just like the worth of every human being that God created, yes, I want to have my rights as a woman, but the kind of rights that will do justice to me as a woman, a human being created by God, and who knows better what I need more than my own creator? Yes, I believe that I'm intrinsically equal to a man because God created me equal, but I don't necessarily want to do the things that men do, simply because I am not a man, I am a woman, and that doesn't mean in any way that I'm less worthy than men nor that I am better. It simply means that men and women are different, and within these two categories, I fully acknowledge that men and women are also very different. Just like today, some women in early Islam chose to fight against the enemy, others preferred to treat the injured. Furthermore, some Muslim women took on leadership roles and ruled kingdoms such as Shajarat al-Durr, the Mamaluk Sultana who ruled the Islamic kingdom of Egypt back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is important to note that there is nothing in the Islamic Shariah that forbids Muslim women from taking on leadership roles in their societies.

But didn't Islam explicitly assign gender roles for men and women? Yes, and no. It is true that in Islam and within a traditional nuclear family, the man is the one who is responsible to care for women in his family financially as explained in the first myth above. However, that doesn't mean that a woman needs to do all the unpaid labor work inside the house. Prophet Muhamad peace be upon him who is the most perfect man that ever walked on earth according to the Islamic doctrine used to help his wife in housework. He used to cook his food and sew his dress. Also, all Muslim jurists agreed that the work that a woman does inside her house is not mandatory, it is an optional one that she gets rewarded for by God. From here we see that in Islam, unpaid care work is not solely the duty of women, it is a shared duty of both men and women who choose to form a family. Nonetheless, if a Muslim woman chooses to work today for whatever reason she has, it is Islamically totally okay as long as she is working in something that is viewed as Halal or permissible in Islam just like a Muslim man too must engage in Halal work.

Finally, as a Muslim woman, I believe that all humans have the same dignity and worthiness, but I also believe that human beings whether men or women are different, just like God says in the Quran " O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you other, indeed Allah is the all-knowing, all aware." Finally, as a Muslim woman, I don't take men to be my standard, my standard comes from above, from God. God has liberated me from men made notions, and if you wanna make me go back to the Jahiliyya "Ignorance days" calling it liberation, I'll tell you thanks but no thanks. Not everything that a man does is superior, yes I mostly mean technology and engineering. I'm so sick of trends that want to

include women in STEM and see it as the only tool to women's liberation and gender equality as if STEM is everything there is to life. The truth is that engineering and technology are the two life valves of capitalism. So, wanting to include women in them doesn't stem from the benevolence of wanting to give women their rights, it's all about profit and gain. I'm not saying that engineering and technology are not important, of course, they are, but seeing them as the only mean to women's liberation and gender equality is a vicious act. Why don't we empower women in humanities, philosophy, academia, and jurisprudence? And why don't we empower men in nursing and teaching? The world needs the same number of qualified male teachers and nurses as it needs qualified female engineers if not even more. So why are we forced to see gender equality from one lens and not the other?

### Bibliography

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