

Toward the Full Inclusion of Muslim Women in the Ummah: An Activist's Perspective

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Abstract

This paper outlines some of the challenges that prevent Muslim women from becoming full members of the Ummah. Although we often hear of the rights of “women in Islam” in the abstract,¹ we must know the specifics to improve the lives of Muslim women in reality. This paper tries to provide those specifics. It does not analyze the items, since the issues covered are many and disparate; rather, it simply highlights some concerns so that qualified practitioners can discuss and debate remedies.

The bulk of this paper's main concern is to address some of the obstacles that hamper efforts to alleviate these challenges. The first section presents the list of challenges, while the second section discusses these obstacles. The paper concludes with a series of proposals intended to assuage the listed problems. Therefore, its focus is on more broad-based remedies rather than a specific remedy for a specific problem. The paper's underlying assumptions are that women should be fully included in the Ummah and that this is not the case now. To make this clear, a definition of “full inclusion in the Ummah” is given before the paper proceeds to listing the challenges.

Defining Full Inclusion in the Ummah: Equity in Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil

The three main criteria for a person to be fully included in a community are:

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- Being an equal partner (have equal access to power) in dialogue and decisions that shape the community (e.g., political, social, economic, and spiritual decisions);
- Being a respected partner in dialogue and decision-making, and;
- Having a private life free of extraordinary difficulties (e.g., illiteracy, poverty, and domestic violence) that hamper his or her ability to be involved in community life.

These three criteria are part of living an Islamic life in all of its dimensions. God created human beings to worship Him (Qur'an 51:56) and has given male and female believers the duty of enjoining good and forbidding evil (Qur'an 9:71). Enjoining good and forbidding evil has private and public dimensions. This paper is concerned with the public dimensions of Islamic guidance – the sociocultural aspect, the aspect of living in society. The presupposition is that as far as Muslim women are concerned, these three criteria are not met on all three counts.

Challenges Facing Muslim Women

Generalizations about women's lives in contemporary Muslim societies need to be made with extreme caution, for each woman has a unique set of living circumstances. An upper-class woman in Egypt, a rural village woman in Bangladesh, and a middle-class Muslim woman in suburban America all live in different environments. Nevertheless, since no contemporary society currently embodies an ideal Islamic society, Muslim women face some of the challenges faced by men in their communities (e.g., poverty and disease), while others are specific to them as women (e.g., discouraged attendance at the mosque, illiteracy and insufficient education, and domestic violence).

Globally, Muslims face huge difficulties: oppression, occupation, slaughter, famine, floods, extreme poverty, and others. Even in these extreme situations, Muslim women have to deal with such unique problems as rape as a tool of war. This paper does not address these severely life-threatening challenges, which have been taken up by numerous non-governmental organizations. Rather, this paper addresses the kinds of challenges confronting Muslim women in societies that are at peace (or relatively so) and not facing extreme conditions.

Working for concrete change means knowing the specific issues that Muslim women are facing, and those that block them from living fulfilling

lives. Specific challenges are enumerated in the following list. Of course, these challenges assume different manifestations and priorities in different communities. Sometimes the same event adversely affects Muslim women in different ways: the recent lashing of a poor girl, Bariya Magzu, in Nigeria increased racism against Muslim women in the West. Consequently, this list of challenges must be thought of as a starting point, one to be augmented by those with other experiences and insights.

I have divided these issues into “public” and “private,” but in reality the line between the two is blurred. For example, disease, drugs, and domestic violence are public health and private issues. Public issues include those policies that result in excluding women from the mosque, from decision-making in the community’s affairs, and from leadership roles; suppressing their roles outside the home; and confronting sexual harassment in the workplace. Private issues consist of such practices as isolating women in the home, illiteracy, lack of Islamic knowledge, marriage and divorce issues (the worst ones being seclusion, abandonment, forced marriage, or abusive spouses [sexual or emotional], rape, and harassment), inheritance, economic dependency, drugs, poverty (that can lead to prostitution), diseases, excessive control by men of the household and control of young women by older men and women, and violence.

Women living as minorities in western countries also face poor language skills, legal status issues (e.g., dependency on spouse’s visa), and racism within and without the community. Women living in secular Muslim countries also face harassment from the state for wearing hijab, attending study circles, going to the mosque, and other Islamic activities.

Barriers to Participation

What is being done to alleviate the problems faced by Muslim women? There are already many women’s groups, human rights associations, Islamic relief organizations and the like, all dedicated to helping Muslim women, men, and children. Many people put themselves at risk and experience great hardship to help those in need. However, there are substantial barriers to relief efforts and to instituting true Islamic values including women in our society. I think there are several interrelated reasons for these obstacles: disagreement among Muslims as to what constitutes women’s role in “true Islam,” an overall conservative discourse that seeks to limit women’s role outside the home, deeply rooted cultural practices that are detrimental to women, the politicized context of discussing these issues,

women themselves, the lack of Islamic knowledge (on the part of both men and women), and women's primary role as wives/mothers. I will examine these in some detail below.

Women's role in "true Islam." If we want to work toward the full inclusion of Muslim women in the Ummah, we need to know exactly what that means, and whose definition and/or perspective will guide us in implementing this policy. I worked at an Islamic school where a male teacher would not sit in the same room with female teachers, because he believed that this was un-Islamic. He also believed that men should make all decisions affecting the community and that women did not have to be consulted. He did not see this as excluding women, but simply as having women in their proper Islamic place.

Other teachers (male and female) did not agree. They were convinced that as long as both male and female teachers respected one another, talked in a business-like manner, lowered their gaze and so forth, it was permissible to be in a meeting room together to discuss school-related issues. They further believed that it was appropriate and desirable for female teachers to have an equal say in running the school.

Each party believed that it was following Islamic guidelines, yet each party's position leads to radically different consequences for women's role in society: one is a role more restricted to the home and family, whereas the other is a more expanded role that includes the home, family, and broader community. While perhaps well intentioned, the restricted vision of a woman's role in "true Islam" denies Muslim women full inclusion in the Ummah and dismisses their public role of enjoining good and forbidding evil by dismissing it as unnecessary.

The Taliban brought such questions into stark relief when they forbade, in the name of Islam, women in Afghanistan to work and seek an education. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center Towers of 9/11 brought all of these issues firmly into the western public consciousness. Different perspectives on Islam are scrutinized constantly and measured against the Taliban version. Muslims had long been horrified by the Taliban's treatment of women, but few were active in doing anything about it. This was often an apathy based on a genuine and reasonable fear of airing "dirty laundry" under the eyes of a western discourse predisposed to anti-Islamic attitudes. ("Islam oppresses women, look at the Taliban for example, and here are Muslims that agree.") But 9/11 gave the Muslim Ummah a wake-up call about apathy's consequences, and now there is a sense of urgency in discussing internal problems facing Muslims and their remedies. This paper

seeks to contribute to this internal debate, as it relates to women's role in the Ummah.

An overall conservative discourse that seeks to limit women's role outside the home. Muslim women's role in society has been a matter of fierce debate since the colonial era.² There is a whole range of opinions, from Maududi's endorsement of seclusion,³ to Muslim advocates (from within the faith) attempting to reinterpret the Qur'an's message on women's role,⁴ to Muslim women who position themselves as feminists from without the faith arguing for secular democracy,⁵ and all positions on the continuum.

Three kinds of Islamic discourse are currently the most influential in our communities: scholars advocating a return to the legal schools (*madhahib*)¹⁰; Salafi scholars advocating an end to the *madhahib* and a return to "true Islam"¹¹; and scholars positioned in-between, like the Ikhwan, Egypt's Yusuf al-Qaradawi, or Sudan's Hasan al-Turabi.¹² From the viewpoint of women's role in the community, the first two groups tend to see a more restricted role, whereas other scholars interpret it within certain limits of Islamic traditions (e.g., hijab, modesty, and male/female mixing). Muslim advocates who position themselves as believers and who argue for a reinterpretation of the Qur'an and Shari'ah have an ambiguous status in our communities: They are often branded as "feminists" (a derogatory term meant to disgrace them). Muslim feminists who do not position themselves as believers have no respect whatsoever.

The cumulative effect of these different opinions is to see a more restricted role for Muslim women. This is not thought of as exclusion, but simply as appropriate Islamic behavior. Nevertheless, the consequence of limiting women's role outside the home is to diminish their voices and to lose the benefit of their insights, skills, and knowledge. I believe that this is to the detriment of the community, women themselves, and also to their families.

Deeply rooted cultural practices. A Muslim culture is always a combination of two elements. The first element is the people's beliefs about what Islam requires. This belief is based either on knowledge, or assumed knowledge masking ignorance, of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the *madhahib*. The second element consists of customs that may have no real reference to Islam but are the result of traditions, often pre-Islamic, that have evolved over time. Unfortunately, many such cultural practices that harm women are often justified in the name of Islam or, even if not justified explicitly as religious, are considered as part of the community's traditions that have no basis in the Qur'an or the Sunnah. Several examples are the cur-

rent rape laws in Pakistan, which punish a raped woman for adultery (*zina*) while allowing the rapists to go unpunished; so-called “honor” killings, in which a woman is murdered to protect the family’s reputation; the cultural practice of denying a woman her inheritance rights so as to keep property “within the family”; forcing women to wear hijab by violent methods; blaming the woman victim of domestic violence for her husband’s abuse (a common problem in western societies as well); not educating women; keeping women illiterate; and not allowing women to drive (Saudi Arabia) or to vote (Kuwait), and so forth.

In addition, based on two jurisprudential principles that everything is permissible unless expressly forbidden and the allowance for local custom and practice (*urf*) in elaborating *fiqh*,¹⁵ patriarchal cultural practices that ultimately are detrimental to women have entered Islamic law.¹⁶ One example is the curtain or walls dividing men and women’s prayer sections in the mosque. This practice has no basis in the Sunnah or in the Rightly Guided Caliphs’ practice. However, at some point in history it was incorporated and became so deeply rooted that many people currently think it that each mosque must have such a curtain or wall. This has been one of the most damaging innovations to women’s inclusion in the community. Behind the curtain, women’s voices are cut off from group discussion, they become passive recipients of decisions made by men who consult only among themselves, and thus are sent the message that they are not part of the community. Hence, women start behaving as if they are not part of the community – witness their gossiping and talking during the Friday *khutbah*, which voids the prayer, or during a lecture or an announcement.

The politicized context of discussing these issues. Unfortunately, it is difficult to discuss Muslim women’s role in society without coming across the idea that arguing for a more active role for women outside the home (i.e., for their full inclusion in the Ummah) is to seek a westernized role for Muslim women. The colonial attack on Muslim societies has left a searing impact on the Muslim psyche – a siege mentality, a posture of defense. Islam has to be proven “better” than the West, and women’s position in Islam more exalted than their fellow women’s position in the West. Everything is said or done with an eye to the West’s reaction, which sometimes leads to such contrariness that whatever the West does or condones is *not Islam*, is *worse than Islam*, and so on.

The politicized context of discussing women’s role in Muslim societies is a real hindrance to bettering their lives. Too often, the reform or change advocated by Muslim reformers is seen as implementing westernization,

which has a negative connotation. Other Muslims work against reform, even when it is squarely within the bounds of Islamic tradition. One example is the effort to eradicate “honor killings.” Those working to assist women in these situations can be accused of teaching women to be immodest, licentious, and flirtatious, although these people are promoting the Qur’anic commands for the just and kind treatment of women. As we see in Qur’an 24:4, 23, God says that accusing chaste women of sexual misconduct constitutes a great sin.

Muslims must move beyond this defensive anti-western reaction if Muslim women are to be accorded their God-given rights. Muslims must be secure in the knowledge that God has given them the religion of truth (*din al-haqq*), and that they must fear God’s reaction before that of the West. Muslims must follow His commandments and the Sunnah even if that involves doing something very different (e.g., wearing hijab) or very similar (educating women) to what the West condones.

Women themselves. Muslim women sometimes hinder the changes meant to better their lives. This is rooted in a culture that limits their community involvement as well as their knowledge of their Islamic rights and privileges. Women often do not accept the opportunity to become more involved in community life when it is presented to them. When one is used to being hidden behind the curtain “veiled,” coming outside leads to feeling of exposure and vulnerability. It is also an internalization of sexism and chauvinism. A good example of resistance to change based on ignorance is the campaign to eradicate female circumcision, a practice with weak support from the Sunnah and terribly harmful consequences for women. Yet it is women themselves who continue the practice, in spite of the education campaigns and state laws prohibiting it.¹⁷

Alternatively, some Muslim women who have obtained post-secondary education and entered the work force lose interest in community development because the current community situation is too restrictive and does not accept their skills and expertise, which give them leadership potential. They fear being judged or labeled *liberal* or *feminist*. This is an example of the manipulative power of derogatory language.

Yet another problem is apathy. Perhaps due to the disincentives and barriers the community places before Muslim women who are active outside their homes, other women retreat into their homes. Lacking the fortitude to withstand the conflicts that can arise in doing community work, they find it easier to turn a blind eye and forgo their rights to voice their opinions on community matters.

Lack of Islamic knowledge (both men and women). Muslim women are often not given a sound Islamic education. The common belief is that since men will be the head of the household, their education has priority. Women might be taught the basics: prayer, fasting, hygiene, and so on, but often without understanding or knowing the underlying reasons and principles for these practices. Many are not taught to read or write either their own language or the Qur'an. Frequently, they are discouraged from attending the mosque. They are illiterate, have memorized a few surahs, pray all their prayers, but do not know what is *fard* or *sunnah*. And yet they are the ones who teach their children their first lessons in life and in Islamic living. As Ahmad Shawqy, the Egyptian poet said: "*Al-ummu madrasatun itha a>dad-taha a>dadta sha>ban tayyiba al-a>raqi*" (The mother is a school. If you tend to her, you tend to a nation whose roots are good). Such women can unwittingly pass on supersitutions and cultural practices that have no basis in Islam and other consequences of ignorance to their children, the next generation of Muslims.

Women as wives/mothers. Since women are the primary caregivers to children and also the most responsible for running the house, their duties can limit the amount of time they can devote to community work, even if they want to engage in it. It is a misnomer to consider full-time mothers as "not working." As anyone who has spent time with small children knows, mothering and taking care of a house is more than a full-time job. Women sometimes need a break from these tasks and an outlet for their other skills and expertise. They need support from husbands, family, and Muslim institutions.

In addition, women who work outside the home for wage labor face a "double shift": a full day at work and a full day at home. Women's work outside the home is an extremely controversial topic among Muslims. Many see it as a proof of the West's seduction of Muslim women out of their proper role of modesty and seclusion; others see it as a Muslim woman's fulfillment of her God-given skills to improve the community. For many women, salaried work is not a choice but a necessity – something often forgotten by the discourse of those who oppose it. Only upper-class/upper-middle class luxury enables some women not to work for wages. (Or, on the flip side, it enables them to work because they can afford housekeeping, childcare, servants, and so on. In such a case, it is the industry of the lower class that allows the upper class their leisure and work outside the home. If the remuneration for this labor is a pittance, then it is an exploitative relationship.) Islam is a gendered society that requires the skills

and expertise of women lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, and other professionals. This is another reason for women's education.

Moreover, the Sunnah is to assist in household duties. Considering such work to be "women's work" is only a cultural viewpoint. The skills involved in doing the dishes, cooking, vacuuming, and many other household tasks are not unique to women. In fact, even women who stay home full-time with children need help in these areas. Both boys and girls need to be taught these skills while they are growing up, and to see them as basic non-gender-specific tasks.

Broad-Based Remedies

Tentative steps for addressing the challenges facing Muslim women, considering the seven issues just outlined that often hamper reform effort, include:

- A vocal movement and effort to eradicate those practices having no basis in the Qur'an, Sunnah, of Shari'ah that harm women.
- A better Islamic education for men and women to provide a balanced emphasis on the *>ibadat* and *mu>amalat* aspects of Islam is needed.
- More discussion about women's role. Although Muslims will never agree on women's role in "true" Islam, it will be useful to have more discussions about how to find common ground based on the real Qur'an and Sunnah, not on traditions and customs.
- More women Shari'ah scholars. When it comes to asking for guidance on how to behave Islamically, people only listen to those trained in the Shari'ah. Therefore, there is a great need for women scholars of the Shari'ah. Since women have different life experiences, we can expect differences in their *fiqh* that will better address women's struggles than the *fiqh* of many male scholars.
- More supportive institutions for women's activism (e.g., childcare, husbands to babysit, playgroups, study sessions, extended family, or friends in the place of one).
- More supportive institutions for women in need (e.g., marriage counseling, domestic violence, divorce, and rape).
- NGOs like the Federation of Muslim Women (FMW), the World Islamic Call Society (WICS), Islamic Relief, and the International Development and Relief Foundation (IDRF) to assist women in need.

- The demand far more respect for different opinions than currently exists. No name-calling (feminist, *kafir*, and so on). We are all Muslims seeking God's pleasure.
- Scholars and other leaders must listen to the grassroots. Since scholarship and leadership can remove one from many of daily life's realities, such people would be well advised to become aware of the people's situations and experiences. Policies and *fatawa* can be better formulated when real-world situations are addressed.

Conclusion

Muslim women live in a global environment that is totally different from that of a century ago. Where once it was the norm for women to wear *niqab*, lead a secluded life, and be illiterate, now it is the norm for women not to wear the *niqab*, to be educated, and, for many, to have waged labor outside the home. Lower class and rural women have always worked to help support the family, but with urbanization, industrialization and modernization, more upper- and middle-class women have joined the workforce. With this changed environment has come new rewards and challenges for Muslim women. Many are taking advantage of new educational opportunities and developing skills and knowledge that are an asset to them, their families, and the Ummah. Muslim women are active in such diverse fields as nursing, schooling, and engineering, all the while remaining committed to their families and duties as wives and mothers.

God has granted Muslim women a noble role in this life, and Islam gives Muslim women many rights within a secure environment in which they may prosper. Muslim women also have reciprocal obligations to their husbands, families, and society. When this balance of rights and obligations is finely tuned, when the people involved in her life act according to God's commands, a Muslim woman is assured of a good life. When this balance is out of tune, Muslim women face challenges to their prospering. In many Muslim societies today, women are infantilized by a social system that places them under men's tutelage. This suppresses their role in enjoining good and forbidding evil, which God has commanded them to fulfill in the Qur'an.

The verse means that women have a leadership role in enjoining good and forbidding evil, and that Muslim communities should foster their ability to pursue this activity. It means that women should be educated and allowed a full role in the community's deliberations and life. The idea of

women being involved in community discussions, serving on boards or in leadership positions, carries with it a feeling of novelty – for women as much for men. Neither is entirely used to women expressing their opinions forthrightly or giving advice. But it is essential for women’s voices to be heard in the community. Women’s perspectives necessarily differ from men’s because of their different life experiences, just as they differ among themselves as well. They have something important and unique to offer the Ummah. Full inclusion in the Ummah also means that women must be respected and protected from harm. This means that the communities must be dedicated to ensuring fair and just treatment of women, instead of sweeping things under the rug and ignoring their plight ... a community that is not afraid to face up to its problems and to develop actual solutions.

Notes

1. For example, Lois Lamy al-Faruqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam* (Indiana: American Trust Publications, 1988); Jamal Badawi, *Gender Equity in Islam: Basic Principles* (Indiana: American Trust Publications, 1995); Huda Al-Khattab, *Bent Rib: A Journey through Women’s Issues in Islam* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1997); Aisha B. Lemu and Fatima Heeren, *Woman in Islam* (London: The Islamic Council of Europe, 1976); and Fathi Osman, *Muslim Women in the Family and the Society* (Los Angeles: Minaret Publications, n.d.).
2. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992) for a good overview of such debates.
3. Abdul A’la Maududi, *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1972).
4. For example, the women authors in Gisela Webb, ed. *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).
5. For example, Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, rev. ed. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), and *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991).
6. See Ahmed, *Women and Gender*.
7. See Maududi, *Purdah*.
8. For example, the women authors in Gisela Webb, ed. *Windows of Faith*.
9. For example, Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil* and *The Veil and the Male Elite*.
10. For example, Abdal Hakim Murad, “The Problem of Anti-Madhhabism,” *Islamica* (UK) 2, no. 2 (Mar. 1995): 31-39.

11. For example, Shaikh Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, *The Prophet's Prayer Described*, trans. Usama ibn Suhaib Hasan (n.p., n.d.).
12. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening: Between Rejection and Extremism*, trans. A. S. Al Shaikh-Ali and Mohamed B. E. Wasfy, 2d rev. ed. (Herndon, VA: American Trust Publications and The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991); Hasan Turabi, *Women in Islam and Muslim Society* (London: Milestone Publishers, 1991).
13. Asifa Quraishi, "An Islamic Critique of the Rape Laws of Pakistan from a Woman-Sensitive Perspective," in Gisela Webb, ed. *Windows of Faith*.
14. Ibid.
15. 'Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Shari'ah: The Islamic Law* (London: Ta Ha, 1997).
16. Maysam Al-Faruqi, "Women's Self-Identity in the Qur'an and Islamic Law," in Webb, ed. *Windows of Faith*.
17. Ellen Gruenbaum narrates a story about a Sudanese man who did not want his daughters circumcised and his fears that the elder women in the family would do it while he was attending an overseas conference. *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 19-20.