

## CHALLENGES AND VIEWS ON GENDER EQUALITY OF MUSLIM WOMEN

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**Abstract.** The question of the actual status of Muslim women, their place and role in the family and in society, has long attracted close attention and is a key issue in discussions on the recognition of women's right to freedom and gender equality. The article highlights issues related to different views on this problem, cites fragments from the Koran confirming equal gender parity, as well as the main stages of integration of Muslim women into Western society. It is emphasized that higher professional education, financial independence, religious tolerance and the right to active participation in the public life of the country are the fundamental principles of modern Muslim women. The article gives information about three prominent Muslim women's organizations in Germany defending women's interests.

**Keywords:** *Gender equality, Muslim women, women's organizations in Germany, emancipation, education, discrimination.*

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### 1. Introduction

Muslim women and their position in the Muslim world are currently the subject of much discussion when Islam is discussed. Some, speaking about the position of women in Islam, criticize the perceived lack of equal rights between male and female representatives. On the other hand, many prominent Muslim women are convinced that men and women have the same basic rights within Islam.

Today, various women's organizations in Germany are campaigning for women's interests within Islam.

It is a common opinion that Islam is a religion that provides few or no opportunities for women to live an independent and autonomous lifestyle writes religious scholar, lawyer and theologian, co-chair of the Community of Muslim Women (1996-2004) - ICA - Islamic Christian Working Group (2003-2009). Mohaggegi, has been lecturing on the religion of Islam at the University of Paderborn since 2007 and has lived in Germany for over 30 years, having moved from Iran. She works in various working groups on intercultural and interreligious dialogue and is the founder and board member of "HUDA - Netzwerk für muslimische Frauen e.V. - Community of Muslim Women" (Gorbatkova, 2003; Islam und Homöopathie, 1998).

It is known that the Koran and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad are the main sources of Islamic teaching. These sources contain statements that can be used both to support this view of inequality and to support gender equality. The Koran generally addresses people and statements often begin with the phrase "O people!" or "Praise Allah" and this address is directed to both women and men (Porokhova, 2022).

The origin of human beings “from one soul” and the statement “And from her He created her a mate” (Surah 4:1) emphasizes their equality. This leads to the conclusion that all human beings are equal before God. Differences, mentioned in the Koran as attributes to be recognized and accepted are expressed as “And among His signs is this, that He created you from dust and then, behold, ye are men scattered far and wide. And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them and He has put love and mercy between you. “Difference has been given to you both in tongues and in color (of skin)” (Surah 30:22), man and woman as a couple complement each other and the basis of their life together should be “mercy and love” (Porokhova, 2022). “As human beings, they have equal responsibilities and duties and should be held accountable for the consequences of their deeds” (Porokhova, 2022).

These fragments of the Koran, being revolutionary, attempted to change the prevailing view of women. The Koran questions the way of life of seventh-century people in the Arabian Peninsula, but takes into account the customs of the time, which were characterized by customary tribal rights.

The Qur'anic texts on women must be analyzed in terms of their meaning and influence on the time and not just accept external formulations, the author writes (Mohagheghi, 2007).

The realities of women's lives have changed dramatically since then. Nevertheless, the Koran exists as a source of wisdom and guidance when read, understood and interpreted from the perspective of today.

The basis for modern interpretation is found in the Koran itself and in the tradition of Islamic scholarship. In these two sources, there is a perceived inequality between men and women, especially in the rulings from which civil laws are derived. The statements regarding inequality between men and women reflect the social realities of the time of revelation and can only be read and understood in their historical context. The generalization of these passages still prevents the legal equality of women in some Muslim communities today (Mohagheghi, 2007).

One example of this is the debt contract in money lending, which requires the presence of witnesses to determine the rights and obligations of debtors and creditors. This rule has found its basis in the Koran. Surah 2 verse 282 states that either two men or one man and two women should be present as witnesses, “in case one of them makes a mistake, the other shall remind her” (Porokhova, 2022).

This passage in the Koran gives women legal status to act as witnesses for the first time. In Islamic law, witnesses and female witnesses, must meet the criteria for their testimony to be valid in court - their knowledge and experience is an important criterion. Since many women were not familiar with the rules of contract law, two women were required to act as witnesses so that they could support each other. This means that this surah is not about gender but about competence. Accordingly, the testimony of a competent woman can have the same value as that of a competent man. The Koran itself provides a basis for this, since it speaks of witnesses in other cases, but does not differentiate between genders (Porokhova, 2022).

In Muslim countries where Islamic law developed along these lines is applied, legal equality for women is still difficult (Mohagheghi, 2007). In addition to prophets and messengers, the Koran also speaks of female personalities with recognition and respect. For example, Queen Sheba (Surah 27:22-44), Hagar and Sarah, Mary (Surah 19), Moses' mother and sister and Pharaoh's wife (Surah 28: 70ff) are prominent female figures whose

stories refute the notion that women are only portrayed as dependent, submissive and subordinate (Porokhova, 2022).

It should be noted that the Koran does not retell these stories in their entirety; it only mentions those aspects that are meant to guide and direct people over time.

Such aspects from the lives of the mentioned women prove that God revealed Himself to them directly (the story of Mary and the mother of Moses) and that women are recognized in leadership positions (like the queen of Sheba). Islam liberated women from the oppression of men and made them legal persons. It gave them a voice which they raised in demanding their rights (Mohagheghi, 2007).

It should be noted that apart from biological differences, men and women have basic equal rights. Islam per se does not contradict the basic human right to equality. Passages in the Koran also indicate that redressing existing grievances is an obligation that requires human endeavor. Any form of oppression, abuse and mistreatment constitutes an evil that must be dealt with. People themselves are responsible for it: "Allah does not change the condition of people until they change what is in themselves" (Porokhova, 2022).

Islam contains many ethical guidelines for all areas of life. Mutual respect, deference and restrained relations between men and women are important principles of the code that emphasizes rules of conduct between them. This code, which promotes treating each other with dignity, can lead to the exclusion of women from the public sphere if misunderstood and exaggerated. Petty arguments are used to legitimize such behavior that are not part of Islamic doctrine but are figments of human imagination. For example, in response to a question as to why the prayer rooms for men and women are separate, or why women occupy the back rows when praying together in the same room, Muslims often hear the statement, "So that men will not be distracted from praying by women!" Separate rooms are presented here as the form of gathering of men and women prescribed by Islam. While there is little to be found in the Koran about a detailed code of conduct, countless and sometimes bizarre statements can be found in traditions, such as the traditions, the so-called hadiths. They describe in detail the behavior of people, especially women, in public (Mohagheghi, 2007).

There are many traditions that literally try to justify the exclusion of women from society on the basis of "religious and moral injunctions". These traditions rarely take into account the traditions of the early Islamic period in which there was a lively exchange and fruitful cooperation between men and women. The cooperation was free from strict and draconian restrictions. From this period, women are known to have carried on the teachings of Islam as teachers, theologians and jurists (Hassan, 1996; 1998). Their role models were the wives of Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and granddaughter Zeinab. Their participation in public and political affairs played a significant role. Their lives as pious personalities show that they were always present in public life. In those times, women's place was not in the far corners or basements of mosques. They were not forbidden to publicly express their opinions, formulate questions and criticisms and they were visible in the community. Participating in the life of the community and taking responsibility was a duty.

To achieve this, everyone must have the opportunity to discover their abilities, develop them and act accordingly. This requires unrestricted access to resources and education for both men and women: "The acquisition of knowledge is a religious duty for both men and women" (Hassan, 1996; 1998).

Throughout history, patriarchal traditions, which vary from region to region, have completely or partially deprived Muslim women of their rights. To this day, Muslim

societies still have living conditions for women that are not in line with either Islamic teachings or universal human values. To attribute these conditions solely to Islam or to assume that Muslim women are simply allowed to treat themselves as the subordinate sex is far from reality. There have been and are Muslim women who fight against oppression on the basis of their faith. They see their freedom in their religiosity and stand up for their rights based on fundamental Islamic values. Living consciously within Islamic teachings, they realize not only their responsibilities but also their rights, which God in his mercy and love granted to all human beings at the creation of the world (Mohagheghi, 2007).

Muslim women in the Western world are often led to believe that their "liberation" can be achieved by adopting Western models of emancipation. Many are confused when active Muslim women justify their liberation on Islamic teachings from the Koran. Exchange and dialog between different perspectives on freedom and emancipation is necessary and enriching for all participants. However, claiming superiority, breeds mistrust, distinction and marginalization and thus will not serve the common goal of women's liberation. In dealing with all women's issues, it is important not to impose religious dogma rigid rules or use them to justify the existing political situation.

Social life consists of the coexistence and cooperation of all women and men. Responsibility before God manifests itself in responsibility towards other human beings and creation.

In this context, each person has the free choice to fulfill their responsibility and each person, whether male or female, must stand before God and account answer for their actions.

Muslim women have made significant progress, but challenges remain. Today, women in Muslim societies are represented in many spheres of public life, but are still dependent on men to make key decisions in their lives. For example, in some countries, a woman in a leadership position still needs her husband's permission if she wants to go somewhere, such as traveling. Society takes advantage of women's knowledge, experience and labor, but it also shows them its limitations (Mohagheghi, 2007).

## **2. On the civil status of Muslim women**

The question of the status of women, their place and role in the family and in society has long attracted attention and is important in discussions concerning the recognition of women's right to freedom and equality on an equal footing with men.

At the end of the twentieth century, the role of women began to change, taking a firm place in society. The women's movement of that time, while adhering to the status of women's equality in all spheres of life, also addressed issues related to changes in important spheres of life and activities of society. As a result, the women's movement, becoming a significant and progressive force, began to influence all forms of social development, particularly politics, economics and culture. In society, women have traditionally played a secondary role to men, that is, they have been dependent on men. On this basis, the activities of the women's movement, in particular, are aimed primarily at changing the position of women in society.

The issue of equality between men and women is not only central to the women's movement, but to the development of society as a whole. Women are constantly confronted with problems embedded in society itself. Upbringing and education, advantages in employment and promotion, distribution of responsibilities in the family - everything is considered in the interests of men and women can only adapt to this system,

which is not designed for them. A woman should make more effort to achieve equal status with a man.

Regarding the theory of female superiority, there is a viewpoint based on the fact that the survival rate of women compared to men is higher, they live longer, they adapt to physical overload better, they have stronger resistance to some diseases. Along with this, there is a viewpoint inherent in feminists about the moral superiority of women. These characteristic features constitute the basis of the theory of female superiority.

The women's liberation movement is associated with numerous social changes that contributed to its emergence. Research conducted by women scientists in the West has played an important role in the women's movement. The programs developed by them influence the worldview of the younger generation, in particular girls receiving higher education.

The end of the 20th century, as we have already noted, is characterized by significant achievements of the women's movement in the social and political life of society. Women are actively struggling to participate in the legislative bodies of their countries. In this connection, political party organizations are revising the system of their relations to the female half of society.

The issue of the family is of significant importance in the women's movement. It was the women's movement that contributed to changing lifestyles and increasing interest in interpersonal relations and took the form of a challenge to traditional ideas about the family. The women's movement proved by its existence and successes in solving socio-political problems how much women can do, how great is their creative role (Gorbatkova, 2003).

### **3. Breaking free from archaic attitudes**

Muslim women around the world are joining together in regional and supra-regional organizations in an attempt to combat inhumane and un-Islamic realities of life. The first and most important step in this direction is the education of women - both education to give them financial and life independence and religious education to assure them that atrocities in the name of God should not be tolerated. Unjust, violent and inhumane behavior is a crime in Islamic terms and must be prevented.

Women's access to and critical study of the Koran and traditions enables them to experience and live the faith authentically. It gives them the confidence to speak out against injustice and discrimination. These Muslim women see their freedom in a faith that frees itself from backward and archaic ideas and recognizes equality and equal rights as an inherent good. They see their freedom to build their lives independently and confidently and insist that the right to participate and contribute constructively to society is a God-given right that must be respected and recognized.

They do not see their religiosity as an obstacle but as a driving force. Believing in God and adhering to ethical values, they want to be recognized as active members of society. As an example, there are three Muslim women's organizations in Germany that promote women's interests in various fields (Mohagheghi, 2007).

BFMF, Begegnungs- und Fortbildungszentrum muslimischer Frauen e.V. in Cologne - "Meeting and Study Center for Muslim Women" in Cologne (this is a recognized educational institution that offers integration and language courses in addition to school education for women. Among the BFMF's activities are psychological counseling as well as specialist family and debt counseling. The organization's staff are



Muslim women from diverse cultural and intra-Islamic backgrounds who have a wide range of knowledge in Arabic, Turkish, Persian, English and French. For its work and civic courage, the organization was awarded the Karl Kübel Award in 1999 and the Alliance for Democracy and Tolerance Award in 2004. As can be seen from its website, some projects cannot currently be continued due to lack of funding ([www.bfmf-koeln.de](http://www.bfmf-koeln.de)).

“The Institute for Interreligious Education and Didaktik, IPD (Institut für Interreligiöse Pädagogik und Didaktik) considers itself a research institute dealing with religious education ([www.ipd-koeln.de](http://www.ipd-koeln.de)).

The institute offers related training for teachers and those interested in teaching Islamic religion in schools where the subject is taught or in mosques. The institute develops concepts and teaching materials, offers self-affirmation training for Muslim girls and promotes intercultural learning. One of the goals is to give children the opportunity to work with what they have learned and discover their own religion. Working with the Koran is designed to give children unbiased access.

HUDA Magazine - “Community of Muslim Women” HUDA views itself as an information and consultation center and seeks to unite the activities of Muslim women (Islam und Homöopathie, 1998). HUDA magazine, published four times a year, contains interpretations of the Koran as well as theological and social topics that are designed to stimulate reflection and discussion. The magazine provides a forum for sharing the diversity of Muslim thought and life. Telephone and internet counseling services enable bereaved women to talk about their family and social problems and if necessary, direct them to where they can find practical support and help. In addition to supra-regional organizations, there are many regional formal and informal associations of Muslim women. All of them have to fight for their religious, social, family and political rights in different societies.

Muslim women's questions often revolve around women's issues - specifically, work, family and how to balance them: Are housework and childcare still considered exclusively women's responsibilities? What about raising children if the mother works and the father has almost no time for the family? How to organize financing for the future of children so that they have a good education and a secured career? These questions are asked by many women who work and do not want to neglect family and motherhood (Mohagheghi, 2007).

In addition, there are questions that, depending on the society in which they live, require them to decide on their faith. There are traditional and culturally conditioned religious practices that prescribe a woman exclusively the role of an obedient wife and a good mother: that is, a person who plays an important role in the family, but who always lives under the control of her husband. Revisiting this image of women, especially when legitimized through religious arguments, is a complex process.

The key issues regarding men and women being of equal value and equal rights lie in the areas of education and learning, as well as reflected religiosity and theology. Equal opportunities for girls and boys enable them to grow into confident and independent individuals. Removing the religious justification for the oppression of women is a long and arduous journey that requires the commitment and dedication of all those who believe that men and women should not be advantaged or disadvantaged on the basis of gender: “And do not covet those benefits which Allah (so generously) has bestowed on some of you before others. The man shall have all that he deserves. And a woman shall receive what” (Porokhova, 2022).

#### **4. All are equal before God, but man inherits more**

Men and women are equal before God and therefore have equal rights, says the Koran. Islamic scholars agree with this. However, because men and women are different physically and therefore have different strengths and weaknesses, God has assigned them different tasks, according to the Koran. According to the teachings of the Koran, from the rights of one flow the duties of the other and vice versa.

For example, in Islam, a man is obliged to provide for his family alone. He must be responsible to God to ensure that his family lives in prosperity. On the other hand, if a woman earns money through her own labor, she is not obliged to give it to her family. This is why men and women treat inheritance differently: Women inherit only half of what a man would be entitled to, because he must also provide for his dependents. On the other hand, the woman has the primary responsibility for the welfare of the children. Especially at an early age, she is the most important person in the lives of her children. The Koran explicitly states that “a mother should feed her child with mother's milk if possible and she may even demand monetary compensation from her ex-husband in case of divorce” (Porokhova, 2022).

According to the Koran, a man may marry more than one woman, but must treat them fairly and equally, both financially and emotionally. Women are not allowed to have more than one husband at a time, but they can decide for themselves when and whom to marry. And they have the right to forbid their husband from marrying other women through a marriage contract. This is stated in the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Divorce is also allowed and can be authorized by both parties (Porokhova, 2022). However, at the same time, there are some passages in the Koran that are sometimes interpreted as proof of the superiority of men over women. For example, Surah 4 states that men are “higher than women”. According to many scholars, this means that men are allowed to lord it over women. And in the same surah, men are allowed to admonish 'disobedient women', to avoid them in the marriage bed and even to strike them lightly” (Porokhova, 2022).

#### **5. Tradition often decides, not the Koran**

The daily lives of Muslim believers, like Christians, are characterized not only by religious texts but also by centuries-old traditions. This is why theory and practice diverge in many areas of life and many women are much more constrained by cultural traditions in their daily lives than the Qur'an provides.

The main difference can be traced back to schooling. According to the Koran, God has given men and women equal rights. According to the Koran, God commanded both men and women to pursue education. “The pursuit of knowledge is the duty of every Muslim, male or female”, said Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. But in reality, many Muslim girls are still denied a full school education. Longer school attendance, especially in rural areas, often means girls have to move to another town, which means they are no longer under the care of their families. Tradition also often dictates that girls can only be taught by women. So in countries such as Afghanistan or Pakistan, girls usually only go to the local school for a few years. After that, they stay at home to help their mother and learn everything they need to know about running a household and raising children until they are married off between the ages of 16 and 20 (Interview mit Wolfgang Schaeuble, 2009).

## 6. Conclusion

Thus, the study allows us to conclude, as trivial it may sound, that Muslim women and men are of equal value and have the same right to education, employment, active participation in the public life of the country of residence, all in full agreement with the sayings of the Koran.

Any form of oppression, abuse and mistreatment is an evil that must be combated. Women are constantly confronted with problems embedded in society itself, namely, in matters of child rearing and education, family traditions and distribution of household duties, advantages and benefits in employment, promotion - literally everything is considered in the interests of men and women can only adapt to this system, which rejects them and does not take them into account. A woman has to work extremely hard to achieve an equal position with a man. The question of equality between man and woman remains to this day the main focus of the emerging new feminist movements.

The issue of the family is also significant in the women's movement in the West. The first and most important step in this direction is education, as a result of which Muslim women become financially independent and self-confident. It is worth noting that Muslim women in Western countries are becoming more and more active against injustice and discrimination. They see their freedom in building their lives independently and confidently and insist on the legal right to participate in the public activities of the country and make their best constructive contribution there.

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