

Islam, Gender, and Development

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ABSTRACT

Across cultures and civilizations, gender relations remain a contested issue. Women across cultures have continued to suffer human injustices because of their gender type. Despite the fact that Islam has projected itself in all ramifications as a comprehensive way of life that encompasses all spheres of human endeavors, and as a moderate ideology, it is a common phenomenon to witness incidences of gender disparity, inequality, and/or marginalization at least between men and women in the allocation and distribution of power and opportunities. One continues to wonder who to be blamed for the inequality/injustice that pervades the human society especially as this concerns the relationship between male and female. This paper, therefore, examines the dynamics of gender relations in Islam and situate same with the contemporary discourses on identity and gender development. The paper, interrogates the imbalances in the power relations between male and female. It focuses on how power distribution between male and female has served as catalyst to underdevelopment in some nations of the world. Using Yusuf Qaradāwī's approach, the paper concludes that the world shall continue to witness peace and development only if the all-embracing/all-encompassing culture of Islam is allowed to hold sway especially when consideration is given to objective/moderate interpretation of vicegerency of humanity on earth.

Introduction

Whenever the words gender and development are mentioned, at least two mutually interdependent problematics come to mind. The first relates to how cultural constructions of gender, the notions of maleness and femaleness, have been circumscribed by contestations over access to, and allocation of, opportunities and resources among men and women since the pre-modern to contemporary societies. The second problematic relates to how those conflicts and contestations between the female and male gender function in promoting or retarding

development of human societies. These problematics appear to have become complicated the more by lack of consensus among those who speak on behalf of religion (Islam) in regard to the extent to which the female gender could be seen either as an active player in the socio-political and economic spectrum or as a passive or rather silent subject who must only be seen not heard.

Reference to religion (Islam) above is, however, meant to expand the geographies of the complicated in regard to this seemingly uncanny tripod, namely Islam, gender and development. This is because in

the contemporary period the given ideals of Islam, including its injunctions on peace-building as well as its precepts for inter-civilizational dialogue, have continued to come under close scrutiny and criticism, no thanks to the atrocious and obnoxious activities of a very vociferous few who have chosen to portray the religion as anarchic, anti-modern or antediluvian (Caitriona and Clionadh 2013). In other words, contrary to the received notions of Islam as a normative which is comprehensive in its prescriptions and regulations (Hasan Al-Banna, 2006:5) and a codified religious framework that speaks to current issues and problems confronting humanity as a whole, much still remains to be known about the religion in relation to urgent issues of interest to the world today. Here the categories of gender and development which have of recent gained the attention of scholars of different backgrounds, find relevance. This paper, therefore, proposes to explore the intersections of Islam, gender and development with a view to highlighting the unique contributions that Islam offers to human progress and advancement. It asks: how might we theorize gender and development in a world where all categories have become slippery, and exactly what are the contributions of Islam to the discourse? In other words, how might the Islamic posture in relation to gender development yield new insights on contemporary challenges facing the world of Islam in particular and the globe as a whole? These and others are the pertinent questions this paper intends to answer.

Theorizing Gender

Feminists adopted the term gender in the late 1970s (Lindsey, 2004:4) to distinguish between biological mechanisms and the social aspects of maleness and femaleness. Ordinarily, the word gender refers to those social, cultural and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts. Thus, the concept makes us *feminine* or *masculine*. It can also be defined as a social construction organized around biological sex (Susan Buckingham-Hatfield, 2000:3). Individuals are born male or female but they acquire over time a gender identity, and that is what it means to be male and female. This meaning connotes two things: first the relationship between the two genders and second, the relationship between gender and the society. In other words, the society determines what maleness and femaleness are and also determines their characteristics and roles. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), gender is said to be:

The qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally other than biologically determined. Gender includes the way in which society

differentiates appropriate behavior and access to power for women and men. Although the details vary from society to society and change over time, gender relations tend to include a strong element of equality between women and men and are strongly influenced by ideology (1996, United Nations Development Report: 258).

Looking at the ideas or notions of gender, it can be deduced that it is cross-cultural or multi-cultural. What it means and implies varies from one geographical location to another. When we talk of gender in the African context, it may not mean the same thing as in other contexts. For instance, the idea of the existence of only the female and male genders is no more universally acceptable. In the contemporary period, the existence of the third gender or the third sex category is now accepted (Habibat, 2011: 58). Citing subjects known as transgender and transsexuals as evidence, it has been argued that it is possible to have more than two sex categories and that a sex category needs to be defined by biological sex (Stryker, 1998:148). According to this study, the world is now full of a multiplicity of sex categories ranging from "FTM" (Female to Male), MTF (Male to Female), the third sex and many others.

Consequent upon the above arguments, it has been canvassed that gender placement should not be seen as universal any longer. Rather, it should be seen and referred to as cross-cultural. What is acceptable in the Western sense may not be acceptable within the African context. The intent of the discourse, argues Jeffrey, is to upset the dominant cultural codes and reveal their irrationality, partiality, and illegitimacy (Weeks, J. 1995: 104). It is equally meant to call to question the tendency to value the male and female genders differently. The latter usually leads to the preservation of the notion that women are inferior and subordinate to men. Perhaps the question may now be posed here: what exactly is the notion of gender in Islam?

Gender in Islamic Tradition

Perhaps the very first point to note is that the story of the creation of *Hawwa* (Eve) from the rib of Adam has no basis in the Qur'an. The latter is the fundamental source of Islamic law, culture and jurisprudence. Rather, the book presents the creation of man and woman from a single soul (Qur'an 4:1). This creation from a single soul points to a common origin; that the male and female gender are composed of substances that are both spiritual and physical, such as fluids, clay, and dust. Thus Islam is unique in its assertion of the equality of men and women. The argument based on sameness of origin is unarguably probably the most fundamental

as far as gender relations are concerned in Islam. In other words, the Qur'an does not in any way establish human inequality. What it does, on the contrary, is affirm the equality of the male and female genders based on social responsibilities that benefit each of the sexes within the general schema of creation. Etin Anwar says as follows:

The notion of humanity therefore, signifies humans' role to become God's vicegerents on earth with the capacity to put up their trust responsibly. They are also endowed with the knowledge, explanation, intelligence, and conscience to discern the trial of good and evil, to inquire into deception, and to feel proud of their high status as humans. These properties are not male-centered, but are also appropriate for women as well. For this reason, the universal message of Islam is inclusive of men and women (Etin Anwar, 2006: 95).

Therefore, it is important to state here that whatever we see within Muslim societies as manifestations of gender inequality/disparity or marginalization are cultural; they are contrived by male authorities who are usually in-charge of social and cultural placements in non-Western societies of today. In other words, cultural influences on many occasions usually override the all-embracing teachings of Islam in many Muslim majority societies. Given this background, the pursuit of gender equity, particularly in relation to development in Islamic settings, has become more urgent than ever before. But some thoughts need to be spared for the contemplation of the whole idea of gender equity.

Gender Equality

Gender equity refers to access to equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities for women and men, girls and boys at all times and in any given society. But here it must be noted that reference to equality does not mean that women and men are the same but that women's and men's opportunities, rights and responsibilities do not and should not depend or be hinged on whether they are born female or male. The concept, therefore, refers to a situation where the interests, needs and concerns of both women and men are taken into consideration. According to Richard Udry (1994), gender is the relationship between biological sex and behaviour. Hence, gender equality points to the fact that both male and female should be treated the same way without any discrimination and distinction.

It is common knowledge that in any given society, gender roles of women and men include diverse labour, responsibilities, decision-making processes and knowledge acquisition. But these should also be understood according to the needs of both genders

because, men and women often use and administer resources in different ways (Husinga *et al.*, 2001). In other words, gender identity and roles affect the economic, political, social opportunities and constraints faced by both men and women. Perhaps it is important to mention that, gender equality between women and men includes, but not limited to, the following elements: equality of opportunity and treatment in employment, equal remuneration for work of equal value, equal access to safe and healthy working environments and to social security, equality in association and collective bargaining, equality in obtaining meaningful career development, a balance between work and home life that is fair to both women and men, and above all, equal participation in decision-making at all levels. In particular, given the fact that women are usually in a disadvantaged position in the workplace compared to men, promotion of gender equality implies unequivocal attention to women's needs and perspectives at all times (Anker, 1997).

On the other hand, there are also significant negative effects of unequal power relations and expectations on men and boys due to stereotypes about what it means to be a male. Instead, both women and men, boys and girls, should be free to develop their abilities/potentials and be able to make their choices without limitations or hindrances set by unyielding gender roles and prejudices—that are on many occasions based on personal interests and advantages (Adepoju and Oppong, 1994).

Gender and Development

Gender identity and gender roles can be said to be a developmental issue because attitudes towards gender and gender equality can have a massive impact on a country's level of development. This is because negative attitude towards the female gender has been discovered to have great impacts on a country's level of development in many ways. According to Boserup (1970), whenever women are considered to be relatively unimportant, inadequate attention is paid to their medical needs. This, in turn, usually leads to greater mortality rate at childbirth and infancy both of which are important measures of development. Also, if women do not have the right to control their own bodies and have access to good health care in terms of reproduction, the birth rates is likely to be very high and can eventually lead to population explosion in a country. Population explosion in a very low/slow economy will in turn lead to food scarcity, job loss as well as higher mortality rate.

In addition to the above, it has been argued that a nation or society that does not give priority to the care of women and children runs the risk of suffering higher rate of HIV infections. This is because there is

the tendency that men would become promiscuous due to their excessive freedom and will develop a care-free attitude towards the needs and dignity of their wives. This may, in turn, result to men continuously having unprotected sex with their wives (who, because of their low status cannot say no to their husbands' sexual advances) even after having contracted HIV out of their (men's) promiscuities. Given all the negative effects of all these, the nations' level of development may perpetually remain low (Mason, 1994)

It is equally worthy of note that the positive effects of female education yield great outcomes that matter for development, although this argument is weaker than is commonly believed (Duflo, 2011). Doepke and Tertilt (2010), are also of the view that, female empowerment (at least within the household) yields outcomes that are impactful not only on individual families but also on the development of the larger society. The locales of such empowerment that have great bearing on development are said to include information sharing, education and training, technology transfer, financial assistance and policy development. These are said to be some of the minimum steps that need to be taken in order that existing imbalances in gender distribution of access to natural resources and opportunities may be bridged. These imbalances that have impacted on development across the world are evident from the following data:

- 66% of the world's illiterate people are women.
- Women provide 70% of the unpaid time spent in caring for family members. This unpaid work provided by women is estimated at US \$11 trillion per year – one third of the global GDP.
- Women own 1% of the land in the world.
- Women's participation in managerial and administrative posts is around 33% in the developed world, 15% in Africa and 13% in Asia and the Pacific.
- There are only 5 female Chief Executives in the 'Fortune 500' corporations, the most valuable publicly owned companies in the US.
- Worldwide, only about 14% of members of parliament are women. 7% of the world's cabinet ministers are women.
- In the UN System, women hold 9% of the top management jobs and 21% of senior management positions, but 48% of the junior professional civil service slots. (UNIFEM Statistics on Women and Development; UN Statistics Division, 2015)

The necessity to correct these imbalances led to the establishment of what the United Nations refers to as Gender Mainstreaming project or initiative. The latter has been defined as follows:

The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal (of mainstreaming) is to achieve gender equality". (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, 2006, *The World's Women 2005: Progress in Statistics*, UN: UNDP, 2000, "Women's Political Participation and Good Governance: 21st Century Challenges".)

Islam and Gender Development

In 1995, a popular and foremost Muslim jurist Yusuf Qaradāwī presented a perspective on the gender gap in the world and how that has negatively impacted upon development across the globe. According to him, the forces against the female gender are not only formidable but are equally multifaceted; they are religious, political and cultural in nature. He says further:

Two different types of people have been unfair to women: the Westernized who wants to impose Western traditions, which include decadence and lack of values - especially religious, and deviation from normal nature on women; the Western who desire that women abstain from the rightly-guided path that Allah has sent Prophets and the holy books to show to the world and call them to abide by. The second type includes those who force other traditions on women, but these are the traditions of the East not the West. Those traditions are given a religious colour. Those people who made those claims made them from their sides; based on something that they understood, or a view that they initiated or preferred because it suits their views on women and their disrespect for her, her religion, her brains or her behavior (Al-Qaradāwī, Yusuf: 1995:38).

Following from the above, the nexus between the religion of Islam and gender development could be discussed along four different but mutually complementary axes. These include gender identity, education, economic empowerment and social freedom. This approach derives from the notion that the concept of development refers to a process of

economic and social transformation that is based on complex cultural and environmental interactions (Ajaegbu, 2012). Such complex cultural environmental indices which often serve as markers of development (Familusi, 2017) include freedom, peace, security, good health and high life expectancy among others. I have, therefore, identified those five axes not necessarily because they are exclusive in relation to Islam and gender development but simply because they operate at the core of development in relation to the female gender in parts of the Muslim world.

Identity and Gender Development

Perhaps the most fundamental impact of Islam on gender development is the religion's insistence that the female gender has a distinct and unique identity (Bullock, 2003). This is unarguably one of the earliest features of civilizational advancement wrought by the religion at its emergence in the Arabian Peninsula during the 7th century. Islam affirms the woman's sense of self and encourages the female gender to consider itself in relation to the opposite gender as a partner, not an inferior or an object of play and amusement as had been the case among the Arabs before Islam. The negative notion of the female identity which greatly retarded the development of the Arabian societies during the era before Islam often started with the birth of the female child. At least two different types of fate awaited her at birth: life of ignominy and scorn in the homestead of her father or burial even while still alive in order that her father may avoid the derision of the patriarchal authorities of the Arabian society for bringing a female child to the world (Qur'an 16: 59).

Thus by establishing the personhood of the female-child, and by extension, that of the woman, Islam laid the critical foundation for sustainable development. It anchors this around human dignity within which neither the male nor the female gender enjoys undue advantages. Islam therefore frees the female gender from cultural forces (Angelo Nicolaides, 2015) that considers her as an appendage to the male in nature. It says both the male and female genders are vicegerents of God on earth. Both of them are expected to maintain law and order within human societies and live in harmony.

Education and Gender Development

Having established the juridical and legal framework with which gender harmony could be achieved in human societies, Islam further emphasizes the importance of education in human development as a whole. In fact, in Islamic episteme, knowledge

acquisition is an obligation. The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said as follows:

Seeking knowledge is a duty that is incumbent on every Muslim (man or woman). (Bukhari & Bahreisy, 1981)

This tradition and many others that emphasize education as a key factor for development accentuate the Qur'anic position on education as a whole. In the latter, education is only precedent to a fulfilled earthly life; it is equally a *sine qua non* for celestial salvation. In the reckoning of the Almighty, men and women of learning occupy pedestals that are higher in creation (Qur'an 39: 9). It is their duty to guide humanity to the path of progress and development.

Thus Islam holds, as is evident in contemporary studies (Shenila Khoja-Mooji, 2018), that societies which give priority to education of women usually have substantial economic and social benefits and less health problems. Such societies are blessed to the production of human capital that is necessary for civilizational advancement. The Qur'an says:

The believing men and the believing women are close allies of one another: They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong (Qur'an, 9:71).

The Qur'an says further:

For believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise- for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward (Qur'an 33: 35).

It therefore becomes clear that the Prophet of Islam not only encouraged acquisition of knowledge by women, he equally considered it critical to the development of Muslim communities. Aishah, one of his wives (Kawan, 2005), eventually became a learned scholar in Qur'anic and Hadith studies. History equally shows that issues of jurisprudence were usually referred to her for resolution (Elsadda, 2001). Thus, as far as Islam is concerned, the whole idea of human development would remain invalid insofar as education of women and the girl-child is neglected. If this is true, it is equally arguable to say that their affiliation to Islam would become questionable those who say they are Muslims and yet live in a state of ignorance. This is particularly with reference to those women who have accepted to take the second fielder in all schemes of things. Women who have refused to exert their God's given

potentials and accept without questioning the cultural dictates of their various societies.

Economic Power and Gender Development

Perhaps one way to gauge the revolutionary impacts of Islam on the Muslim societies is to explore the extent to which its regulations on gender identity and education have led to improvement in the economic circumstance of Muslim women. Theoretically, there are provisions in Islam that are designed to ensure and assure equity in the access to opportunities in human societies. For example, since it recognizes and affirms the identity and dignity of each gender, Islam grants equal ownership rights to men and women with respect to what they earn through their own efforts or through any other legitimate means. The Qur'an alludes to this in the following lines:

....to men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn; but ask Allah of His bounty. For Allah hath full knowledge of all things. (Qur'an 4:32).

Two different trends have resulted from this Qur'anic prescription in Muslim communities across the world. The first features conscious efforts being made by Muslim nations to facilitate access to education to women. This has been followed up with the growth in job opportunities for women. In states where this has been achieved, Muslim women have proven to be highly resourceful and innovative. They have added extra value to the task of ensuring sustainable development for their individual nations and world at large. Such has been the case of the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) that was established in 1985. The Association has discovered the value of social mobilization and has embarked on radical steps to empower its membership through the introduction of adult literacy and skills acquisition programmes. The impacts of these efforts on human and material development of the Nigerian nation are greater than critics may be willing to acknowledge.

But subjacent to the above positive trend is the opinion that women are not under any obligation to contribute to economic development of their nation. This opinion, contrary as it is to the Qur'anic prescription and injunction, is rife among Muslims that have affiliation to or are sympathetic to violent extremist groups in sub-Saharan Africa (Sulemana, 2015). Thus Islamic normativity comes into conflict with reality; ideals which promote gender development in Islam are imperiled by Muslims whose interpretations of Islamic codes call to question the religion's positive postures and injunctions.

Social Freedom and Gender Development

Going by the above analyses, it should be evident that a religion that emphasizes recognition of the subjectivity of the female gender and makes knowledge acquisition an obligation has established the necessary framework for social equality. Thus, there can be no gainsaying the fact that, in addition to all of the above, the social system prescribed by Islam recognizes the difference in gender make-up and consequently prescribes rules that would make for gender harmony. These rules are unique in that they emphasize gender complementarity not oppression (Qur'an 49:13). They are equally comprehensive in nature. The operating principle is such that recognizes women's agency and subjectivity. "The woman shall not be engaged in marriage" the Prophet says, "until she approves it, and the virgin girl shall not be given out in marriage until she allows it." (al-Bukhari, hadith no. 4741). She is free to keep her maiden names even after having entered into a wedlock.

The overall import of these social principles put in place is that Islam desires an egalitarian society where the female gender would be treated not as things but entities with rights and dignity. It is that which considers women as partners in the transformation and development of their societies. Whenever trends which negate these principles are seen in parts of the Muslim world such must have resulted not from contradictions in Islamic texts but from slippages in the interpretive interventions from scholars of the religion.

Conclusion

What this paper has attempted to do is to explore some salient issues that nest under the tripod of Islam, gender and development. Apart from offering perspectives to the concept from different fields of human endeavour, it is evident from the above analyses that the notions of gender and development are very slippery indeed. The category of gender is particularly more engaging in view of the conceptual differences it has generated across cultures and civilizations.

This paper has, however, gone beyond that to examine the relationship between these two categories and Islam. It has shown that the religion of Islam is not only gender-friendly but also that it is one which seeks to use gender equity as a tool for human advancement and progress. This, the paper argues, could be appreciated in the religion's posture and prescription in gender identity, education, economic empowerment and social placement. It is equally clear from the above analyses that the realization of the ideals of Islam on gender development, laudable as they may appear, have however been impeded by elements within Islam

whose refusal to creatively interface with modernity has resulted in continued oppression and deprivation of the female gender in some parts of the Muslim world.

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