



Seerah, Human Rights, & Women's Dignity: Exploring Concepts of Equality & Justice in Islam & Addressing Violence against Women

Abdul Qayyum Gondal

Ph.D. Researcher, Lincoln University College Malaysia.

Email: Qayyum.gondal@gmail.com

Prof. Dr. Matloob Ahmad (Corresponding Author)

Dean Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Email: dean.is@tuf.edu.pk

Dr. Anum Hameed

Lecturer, Islamic Studies, The University of Faisalabad.

Email: anumhameed0786@gmail.com

The Seerah, which recounts the life and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), is an invaluable resource for learning about the early Islamic ideals of equality and social justice. An analysis of these concepts' relevance to women's rights protection and gender equality is the basis of this inquiry. This research attempts to show how Islam has been a torchbearer of human dignity in general and women's rights in particular by analyzing the Seerah from historical and moral perspectives. It also aims to reintroduce these fundamental ideas into the continuing discussions around violence against women by demonstrating the relevance of previous struggles for justice and fairness to the problems of the present. A multi-method approach is used in the research to examine the interconnections between humans. This study considers how these principles might potentially solve ongoing challenges related to female violence by outlining how they should be applied while taking historical circumstances and Islamic law into account. It reveals that although the overarching goal of Islamic theology is equality and justice, its ancient story is vulnerable to contemporary circumstances. To eradicate violence against women, reform consideration is necessary in every situation as women's whole dignity and a just and equal life expectancy are at risk.

Keywords:

Social justice, seerah, women's dignity, violence against women, gender equity, human rights, women's status in Islam, Islamic teaching, Historical context of gender bias.



Introduction:

The intersection of Seerah, human rights, and women's dignity in Islam is a vital area of inquiry that requires a nuanced understanding of both historical contexts and contemporary challenges. The Seerah, which documents the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), provides profound insights into early Islamic ideals of equality and social justice. This exploration is particularly relevant in the context of addressing violence against women, a persistent issue in many societies today. By examining the foundational principles of Islam as articulated in the Seerah, we can draw important connections to the ongoing struggles for gender equality and human rights within the Muslim world. Historically, the pre-Islamic Arabian society was marked by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, where women faced severe restrictions on their rights and freedoms. Practices such as female infanticide were common, and women were often viewed as property. However, the advent of Islam in the 7th century CE marked a transformative shift in the societal paradigm. The Qur'an asserts, "And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women" (Qur'an 2:228). This verse illustrates the Qur'anic foundation for gender equity, a principle that was echoed in the actions and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). In his farewell sermon, he emphasized, "O people! It is true that you have certain rights over your women, but they also have rights over you" (Sahih al-Bukhari, 6130). This statement encapsulates the mutual respect and dignity that Islam mandates between genders, laying the groundwork for women's rights within an Islamic framework.¹

Scholarly analyses of the Seerah reveal the Prophet's progressive stance on women's rights. Fatima Mernissi, a prominent feminist scholar, contends that "Islam did not come to oppress women; it came to liberate them from oppressive traditions"². Her work argues that the teachings of the Prophet should be viewed as a source of empowerment for women rather than as a set of restrictions. This perspective is crucial for understanding how the Seerah can inform contemporary discussions on gender equity,

¹ Umami, A. I. (2021). THE MEANING OF MEN'S DEGREES ARE HIGHER OVER WOMEN (Application of Roland Barthes Semiotics Against QS Al-Baqarah [2]: 228). *Taqaddumi: Journal of Quran and Hadith Studies*, 1(2), P, 46-61.

² Mernissi, F. (1991). *The veil and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam*. Perseus Books Cambridge, MA, P, 131.

particularly in Muslim societies where cultural practices often overshadow Islamic teachings. Despite the clear principles of gender equity in Islamic texts, there remains a significant gap between these ideals and the lived experiences of women in many Muslim-majority countries. Cultural norms, often misinterpreted as religious mandates, continue to perpetuate violence against women. Leila Ahmed observes, "The challenges facing Muslim women today are largely rooted in historical and cultural practices that are mistakenly interpreted as Islamic" (Ahmed, 1992). Such misinterpretations not only distort the core message of Islam but also create a climate in which violence against women is normalized and overlooked.³

The need for reform and reinterpretation within the Islamic legal framework has been emphasized by scholars like Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Kecia Ali, who argue for a critical reassessment of traditional interpretations of Islamic texts. Mir-Hosseini asserts, "We need to engage with the texts in a way that honors their ethical and moral imperatives while addressing contemporary realities" (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). This approach calls for an understanding of the Seerah that aligns with modern notions of human rights and gender equality. Such reinterpretation is essential to combat systemic issues contributing to violence against women, including harmful cultural practices and inadequate legal protections.⁴

In contrast to Western legal frameworks, which have undergone significant evolution regarding women's rights over the past century, many Islamic societies struggle with integrating the principles of equality and justice into their legal systems. For instance, in Western contexts, laws such as the Violence Against Women Act in the United States represent a concerted effort to address domestic violence and support survivors. In contrast, Muslim-majority countries often grapple with legal systems that inadequately protect women's rights, influenced by patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law. Scholars like Kecia Ali argue that a feminist interpretation of Islamic texts can provide a robust framework for understanding women's rights within Islam, allowing

³ Mernissi, F. (1991). *The veil and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam*. Perseus Books Cambridge, MA, P, 131.

⁴ Orr, T. (2020). Gender Justice In Islam: An Evaluation of Ziba Mir-Hosseini's Religious Epistemology by Examining her Interpretation of Qur'an 4: 34.

for legal reforms that align with both the spirit of the Qur'an and contemporary human rights standards.⁵

Moreover, the international discourse on human rights has increasingly emphasized the need for cultural sensitivity in addressing issues of gender and violence. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms outlined in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind," yet the application of these principles often clashes with local customs and religious beliefs. The challenge lies in finding a balance between respecting cultural practices and advocating for the universal rights of women. This is particularly pertinent in Islamic societies, where the Seerah can serve as a historical touchstone for advocating women's dignity and rights.⁶

The examination of seerah, human rights, and women's dignity in Islam reveals a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and religious factors. The foundational principles of equality and social justice articulated in the Seerah hold immense potential for addressing contemporary issues of violence against women. As we seek to reintroduce these ideals into the ongoing discussions surrounding gender equality, it is essential to recognize the role of cultural interpretations and the need for legal reforms. By engaging with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and advocating for a reinterpretation of Islamic texts, we can work towards a future where women's dignity and rights are upheld, reflecting the true spirit of Islam.⁷

Literature Review:

The Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is a key text in Islamic teachings, focusing on principles of justice, human rights, and respect for women's dignity. It pro-

⁵ Forouzanfar, M. H., Afshin, A., Alexander, L. T., Anderson, H. R., Bhutta, Z. A., Biryukov, S., Brauer, M., Burnett, R., Cercy, K., & Charlson, F. J. (2016). Global, regional, and national comparative risk assessment of 79 behavioural, environmental and occupational, and metabolic risks or clusters of risks, 1990–2015: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2015. *The lancet*, 388(10053), P, 1659-1724.

⁶ Assembly, U. G. (1948). Universal declaration of human rights. *UN General Assembly*, 302(2), P, 14-25.

⁷ Nasir, M. S. (2020). Women's Rights in the Holy Quran in the Light of Seerah al-Nabi (PBUH). *Al-Wifaq*, 3(1), P, 23-41.

vides a comprehensive understanding of Islamic values, emphasizing fairness, equity, and protection for vulnerable individuals, including women. The Qur'an, the central religious text, emphasizes human equality and fairness, with Surah An-Nisa (4:1) highlighting the equality of men and women before God. This equality forms the foundation for human rights in Islam, emphasizing dignity and respect for all, especially marginalized groups. In pre-Islamic Arabia, women were often treated as property, facing significant social and legal disadvantages. Islam introduced revolutionary rights for women, including inheritance, financial independence, and education. It also enshrined protection from physical and psychological abuse. This transformation in women's role and status in society is reflected in the Seerah, where the Prophet's treatment of women exemplifies compassion and respect.⁸

Feminist scholars have argued that Islam's original reforms were groundbreaking in elevating women's rights within a patriarchal society. Prophet Muhammad established legal and social precedents that protected women's rights, which remains essential for understanding Islam's stance on gender relations. However, the historical development of Islamic societies saw the influence of patriarchal interpretations that sometimes overshadowed the progressive elements of Islamic law. Male-dominated perspectives gained traction during the post-Prophetic era, and in empires like the Abbasid Caliphate, patriarchal norms became institutionalized. This shift led to a gradual limitation of women's rights and roles, often diverging from the original teachings that promoted equity and respect. Political and cultural factors influenced Islamic law, embedding gender-biased interpretations that restricted women's freedom in various aspects of life. The gap between Islamic teachings on women's rights and their implementation remains evident today, with gender-based violence still pervasive in Muslim-majority societies.⁹

Islamic teachings condemn violence against women, with the Qur'an and Hadith urging for respect and fairness. Prophet Muhammad's life exemplifies kindness and protective care for women, underscoring their dignity as integral to a just society. In

⁸ Ismail, N., Firdaus, M., & Darmawijaya, E. (2024). Gender equality in the Qur'an: An Analysis of surah an-Nisa' verses 1 and 34 in the exegesis of al-Tabari and al-Rāzī. *Gender Equality: International Journal of Child and Gender Studies*, 10(2), P, 224-234.

⁹ Ahmed, L. (2021). *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. Veritas Paperbacks, P, 74.

recent years, there has been a call for reform of Islamic jurisprudence to bridge the gap between religious principles and contemporary realities. Scholars and activists urge the re-evaluation of classical fiqh interpretations to align with the original spirit of equity and protection for women. Some Muslim-majority countries have implemented successful legal reforms, proving that aligning Islamic principles with modern gender equality is achievable. Tunisia has introduced progressive laws supporting women's rights, demonstrating that effective legal systems can be established within an Islamic framework.¹⁰

The Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) provides a guide for gender equity and justice in modern Muslim societies. By reverting to the Seerah's principles, modern Muslim societies can bridge the gap between religious ideals and contemporary realities. Emphasizing the Prophet's legacy of compassion and respect is crucial for a future where women's dignity is protected and violence effectively addressed. The Global Gender Gap Report (2023) highlights the tension between cultural norms and Islamic teachings advocating for women's dignity and justice. This gap has fueled the rise of Islamic feminism, which seeks to restore the foundational principles of gender equity in the Seerah and Qur'an. Understanding the Prophet Muhammad's life through a feminist lens is essential for dismantling gender-based violence and fostering gender justice.¹¹

The Qur'an and Hadith literature emphasize women's rights and dignity, with Surah An-Nisa (4:1) emphasizing equality and the responsibilities of men towards women. Prophet Muhammad's compassionate treatment of women is also reflected in Hadith literature, with Sunan Ibn Majah stating, "The best of you are those who are best to their women." However, traditional interpretations of Islamic law often reflect a patriarchal bias, obscuring Islam's commitment to gender equity. Feminist scholars like Haideh Moghissi and Margot Badran argue for a feminist reinterpretation of Islamic texts, focusing on the original, egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an and Seerah. They argue that contemporary readings of the Seerah can help "reclaim the Prophet's example as a source of gender justice" by centering women's rights and dignity as integral to Islamic principles. Understanding violence against women in Muslim societies requires an in-

¹⁰ Abdul-Rauf, M. (1977). *The Islamic view of women and the family*. R. Speller, P, 121.

Ali, S. M. (2004). *The position of women in Islam: A progressive view*. SUNY Press, P, 67.

¹¹ Engineer, A. A. (2001). Islam, women, and gender justice. *What Men Owe to Women Men's Voices from World Religions*, P, 145-159.

tersectional approach, considering multiple layers of marginalization, such as poverty, ethnicity, and rural-urban divides. Interventions should account for these intersecting factors, as women's experiences of violence cannot be separated from broader social, economic, and cultural constraints.¹²

Scholars like Tariq Ramadan and Kecia Ali advocate for a revival of Islamic justice principles to address gender-based violence. Ramadan suggests that Muslim societies must reconnect with the spirit of justice and equity within the Seerah to create legal reforms that challenge patriarchal interpretations. Ali calls for a re-evaluation of Islamic law, questioning cultural biases that have influenced interpretations. Anjum Rahman (2018) suggests that communities must dismantle cultural barriers preventing women from seeking justice, such as societal stigma and patriarchal values. This cultural shift is necessary to bridge the gap between Islamic principles and modern society, fostering environments where women can exercise their rights without fear, aligning cultural practices with Islamic teachings on women's dignity and protection. The significance of a comprehensive strategy that incorporates legislative and cultural changes to close the gap between Islamic principles and modern practices is highlighted by this corpus of study and knowledge. To guarantee that these reforms are accepted by communities and incorporated into everyday life, cultural transformation is required as legal frameworks are reinforced. Islamic teachings support women's equality, fairness, and dignity; nevertheless, because of cultural norms, historical changes, and lax legal enforcement, these principles are difficult to implement in the modern world.¹³

Given these problems, the following possible research questions emerge:

1. In order to successfully confront gender-based violence in the modern world, how might Islamic jurisprudence adapt the Seerah and Qur'anic concepts of justice?
2. How might patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law that uphold gender inequality be dismantled by Islamic feminism?
3. In Muslim-majority nations, how does intersectionality affect women's experiences of violence, especially for those living in rural or marginalised areas?

¹² Moghadam, V. M. (2002). Islamic feminism and its discontents: Toward a resolution of the debate. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27(4), P, 1135-1171.

¹³ Abdelghany, S. (2020). *Making Space: Muslim-Americans and "Progressive" Gender Activism in Mosques after 9/11*, P, 24.

4. How much do Islamic teachings on women's rights clash with cultural norms like honor-based values, and how may these tensions be reconciled within Muslim societies?

5. How can Islamic teachings serve as the foundation for the legal and cultural changes required to safeguard women against abuse in nations with a majority of Muslims?

Islamic principles, particularly the Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad and Qur'anic principles on justice, are crucial in advocating for a just and equitable society. Addressing gender-based violence in Muslim-majority societies requires a comprehensive approach rooted in Islamic teachings, cultural transformation, and legal reforms. Reinterpreting these texts within Islamic jurisprudence can challenge patriarchal interpretations and foster gender equity. Feminist scholars like Leila Ahmed argue that re-examining Islamic texts through a feminist lens can reveal how the Prophet's practices emphasized women's dignity, challenging gender-biased applications of Islamic law. Islamic feminism is essential in dismantling patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law, arguing that patriarchal interpretations are often cultural constructs. Islamic feminists emphasize the importance of returning to the core messages of the Qur'an and the Seerah, advocating justice and compassion for women, as essential for reshaping gender roles in alignment with Islam. Intersectionality complicates the experiences of women in rural or marginalized Muslim communities, necessitating tailored interventions that address intersecting factors, such as greater legal access and support networks in underserved areas. Reform efforts should address cultural norms conflicting with Islamic teachings, particularly honor-based values. Tariq Ramadan advocates for reviving Islamic values of mercy and justice, which reject violence. Legal reforms grounded in these principles are crucial for women's dignity and equality. Integrating Seerah-based insights, feminist reinterpretations, and culturally adaptive legal frameworks can bridge Islamic principles with contemporary gender justice.¹⁴

Methodology:

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how cultural practices in Muslim-majority cultures interact with Islamic teachings on gender justice. It examines

¹⁴ Ali, Z., Anjum, G. M., Iqbal, J., & Ahmad, I. (2024). The Role of Islamic Values in Promoting Social Justice and Community Welfare. *International Research Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 5(1), P, 575-585.

discrepancies between Islamic doctrines and societal norms through literature and debate. UN Women and Amnesty International reports as well as feminist reinterpretations by academics such as Tariq Ramadan, Fatima Mernissi, and Leila Ahmed are important sources. Semi-structured interviews with Islamic feminists, legal experts, and activists will be used to gather data. Historical literature and current legal frameworks will also be studied. Confidentiality and informed permission for delicate subjects are ethical issues nonetheless. Potential biases, limited generalisability, and difficulties reaching different viewpoints in conservative situations are some of the study's drawbacks. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the research seeks to illuminate the complex relationship between cultural norms and Islamic principles, pointing to strategies for promoting gender equity that are consistent with the Qur'an and Seerah.¹⁵

Results and Discussions:

The study reveals a complex relationship between Islamic teachings on gender justice, cultural practices, and the reality of gender-based violence in Muslim societies. The Seerah and Qur'anic teachings emphasize women's dignity, protection from harm, and justice, but the gap between these principles and current social practices in Muslim-majority societies is significant. Islamic feminism has the potential to counteract patriarchal interpretations by reclaiming gender-equitable ideals present in the Seerah and Qur'an. Scholars argue that Islam is not inherently patriarchal but has been shaped by male interpretations over centuries. This perspective challenges traditional frameworks and calls for a reassessment of Islamic law (fiqh) that considers the historical and contextual realities women face today. Islamic feminist approaches propose a return to the Prophet's treatment of women, which emphasized respect and justice, as a model for contemporary gender relations. Qur'anic verses emphasizing justice and equality are often overlooked in favor of interpretations that uphold male dominance. However, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law have historically undermined women's rights, and misapplication of Islamic teachings can exacerbate gender-based violence.¹⁶

¹⁵ Koburtay, T., Syed, J., & Haloub, R. (2020). Implications of religion, culture, and legislation for gender equality at work: Qualitative insights from Jordan. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 164(3), P, 421-436.

¹⁶ Bakar, A. A., & Sahman, S. (2024). The Renewing of Usul al-Fiqh: Challenges, Limitations and Future Directions. *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Economic Law*, 1(2), P, 105-122.

The study highlights the role of cultural norms in perpetuating violence against women, particularly in countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Egypt. Honor-based values often clash with Islamic principles that prioritize women's dignity and autonomy. For example, honor killings in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Egypt are justified as protecting family honor, which contradicts the Qur'an and Seerah. This disconnect between cultural norms and religious teachings suggests that addressing violence against women in these societies may require a cultural shift that aligns societal values with the ethical core of Islam. Intersectional factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographic location significantly influence women's experiences of violence in Muslim societies. In rural areas, where poverty and limited access to legal resources prevail, women face higher risks of violence and fewer opportunities to seek justice. Addressing these intersectional issues is essential for creating a holistic approach to gender justice in Muslim societies. The weak enforcement of existing legal frameworks designed to protect women from violence in Muslim-majority countries is another significant issue. Studies by UN Women (2020) and Amnesty International (2019) reveal that enforcement agencies often fail to take violence against women seriously due to ingrained cultural biases. This situation is particularly evident in countries where women face social stigma and institutional barriers when reporting violence. Feminist scholar Anjum Rahman emphasizes the need for comprehensive reforms that strengthen legal frameworks and promote gender-sensitive training for law enforcement and judicial personnel.¹⁷

The study suggests integrating Islamic feminism principles into educational and legal reforms to promote gender-sensitive understanding of Seerah and Qur'anic teachings. This approach would prioritize gender justice and equality, ensuring women's rights are acknowledged and upheld. This could inspire new legislative frameworks reflecting Islamic values of justice and equity. Community-driven initiatives are also needed to address cultural factors contributing to violence against women. Engaging in education about Seerah's principles of compassion, justice, and dignity could significantly reduce gender-based violence. Islamic leaders and scholars can play a crucial role in promoting interpretations of Islamic teachings that condemn violence and sup-

¹⁷ Baryar, M. Z. (2023). Contrasts and Commonalities: Understanding Western Feminism and Islamic Women's Rights. *Tanazur*, 4(2), P, 13-28.

port women's rights. Including women in religious scholarship can provide a more balanced perspective on Islamic law. The study highlights the importance of an Islamic feminist approach in addressing gender-based violence, suggesting a return to the Prophet's example as a source of justice. To bridge the gap between Islamic ideals and contemporary realities, a combination of legal reform, cultural transformation, and intersectional understanding is required.¹⁸

Conclusion:

The study explores the role of seerah, human rights, and women's dignity within Islam, highlighting the transformative potential and challenges of aligning Islamic principles with contemporary gender justice. Islamic teachings emphasize gender equity, respect, and justice, but cultural practices and patriarchal interpretations have often overshadowed these ideals in many Muslim societies. The conclusion calls for a shift towards "Islamic feminism," a framework that reclaims gender justice within Islam and insists on reinterpreting religious texts with the same spirit of fairness and dignity shown by the Prophet.¹⁹

The analysis reveals that violence against women, often justified under the guise of cultural and familial honor, contradicts both Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings. Honor-based violence, including practices like honor killings and forced marriages, has no basis in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad condemned violence and advocated for mercy and justice. Islamic feminism provides an innovative solution to this problem, proposing a re-education of Muslim societies to understand the Seerah in ways that promote gender equity and dismantle harmful cultural norms. Addressing violence against women within Islamic societies requires not only legal reforms but also a cultural shift grounded in Islamic principles.²⁰

The implementation of gender justice in Muslim-majority countries requires robust legal reforms that align with the teachings of Islam. While many countries have implemented laws against gender-based violence, weak enforcement and cultural re-

¹⁸ Sattar, N. Verse 4: 34-a comparative analysis of variant interpretations. In.

¹⁹ Ehsan, A. (2023). Intersection of Modern Feminism and Islamic Societies: Evolving Perspectives, Debates, and Societal Impacts. *Al-Salihah (Journal of Women, Society, and Religion)*, 2(01), P, 30-39.

²⁰ Payton, J. (2019). *Honor and the Political Economy of Marriage: Violence Against Women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. Rutgers University Press, P, 94.

sistance undermine their effectiveness. A solution proposed is the integration of gender-sensitive training in legal and law enforcement institutions, as well as involving religious leaders and scholars to advocate for interpretations that protect women's rights.²¹

This could reduce the gap between gender justice ideals and the realities of Muslim women's lives. Intersectionality is also crucial in addressing gender-based violence, as women in rural and marginalized communities often face discrimination. A holistic approach that recognizes the unique needs of diverse groups of women and aligns them with Islamic principles of compassion, equity, and justice is necessary. The study calls for a reclaiming of the Prophet's Seerah as a foundational framework for gender justice in Muslim societies, challenging patriarchal norms that contribute to gender-based violence. This approach involves active enforcement of legal reforms and cultural re-education aligned with Islam's core values.²²

²¹ Karimullah, S. S. (2023). From Tradition to Mainstream: Understanding the Integration of Islamic Law in Various Global Settings. *Justicia Islamica*, 20(2), P, 214-240.

²² Mokhtar, H., & Chaudhry, T. (2022). Becoming Allies: Introducing a Framework for Intersectional Allyship to Muslim Survivors of Gender-Based Violence. *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice*, 4(1), P, 34-50.