# ISLAM AND GENDER JUSTICE (CHALLENGING SOCIOCULTURAL DISCRIMINATION THROUGH FAITH-BASED PRINCIPLES)

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**Abstract**
The current article explores the concept of gender justice in Islam and attempts to critically evaluate the imbalance that can be seen between religious Islamic doctrines and the actual sociocultural activities that perpetuate discrimination against women in many Muslim societies. The Islamic doctrine highlights the message of justice, equality and human dignity that can apply to both men and women; however, the significance of culture and traditions that are rooted in the male culture often overshadow these messages, generating the marginalisation of women's rights. Based on basic Islamic authoritative works and the recent academic literature, the article reveals that, in most cases, the justification of gender based inequalities is based on misinterpretations of the religious doctrine instead of basing it on the actual Islamic teachings. The comparison highlights the fact that faith and culture are two separate entities and that sociocultural discrimination is not an inherent characteristic of the Islamic religion, but that it is actually a product of certain historical, social and political conditions. The article also suggests faith-based intervention as an effective tools of contending with gender injustice, which entails religious education, textual reinterpretation, and community-based intervention. This contribution to this work by conceptualising Islam as a means of empowerment instead of being a constraining force adds to the current scholarly debate on gender justice and provides researchers, practitioners and policymakers with a culturally and religiously informed avenue of social change.
**Keywords:** Islam, Gender Justice, Women's Rights, Sociocultural Practices, Faith-Based Framework, Islamic Law, Equality

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender justice has become one of the main concerns in modern world discourse, especially in the fields of human rights, social development, and government activity. In many societies, gender inequalities persist in access to education, economic inclusion, political representation, and legal safeguards. Although the world is committed to equality through various tools like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, gender injustice has still found its way into the social systems of all countries globally (UN Women, 2022). These differences do not pertain to one particular culture or religion, but instead, they take different shapes depending on context, influenced by historical, economic, and social-cultural pressures.

Among Muslim communities, gender justice debates are frequently shaped in a religious context because, in most cases, Islam is seen as a cause of women's empowerment or is seen as a reason to discriminate. Such a biased account has led to the development of a lot of misunderstanding about the role of women in Islam. Although Islamic beliefs show that justice (*adl*), equity (*qist*), and human dignity (*karamah*) are paramount, current realities of most Muslim women demonstrate that there exist inequalities in various aspects, including inheritance, marriage, mobility, education, and placement in the public (Badran, 2009; Mir-, Hosseini, 2015). Such differences cast some serious questions concerning the interaction between Islamic values and the day-to-day sociocultural experiences that are practised by the Muslim communities.

Gender injustice is becoming a structural problem, an issue of power relations and patriarchal systems at the global level instead of the individual belief systems (Connell, 2012). According to feminist theorists, gender inequality is perpetuated by social norms, institutional structures, and laws and regulations that give men power (Walby, 1990). These dynamics are compounded by the fact that religion, culture, and colonial legacies overlap in the Muslim societies. The problem of practices, which discriminate against women, is usually blamed on Islam,

although they may be against the teachings of the main Islamic ideologies (Esposito and DeLong-Bas, 2001). Such blurring of religion and culture has led to internal opposition to change as well as external attacks that describe Islam as one that is naturally hostile to gender justice.

The matter is also critical since Islam as a religion is a very complete moral and ethical system that dictates both personal and political life. Islamic teachings shape social norms, family formations and community values, unlike secular legal systems. Therefore, the issue of gender injustice in the Muslim communities requires consideration of the religious values and not the alienation. Researchers continue to highlight that sustainable social change in religious terms will be more productive in cases based on faith-based interpretations that appeal to the local beliefs and values (Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2015; Razavi, 2011). It is dangerous to disregard the religious aspect as it is a way to support resistance and compromise the reform process.

Although Islam has strong ethical roots, it has been shadowed by sociocultural behaviors that are based on patriarchy, even though its egalitarian principles run deep. Traditional laws, tribal customs, male oriented approach to religious scriptures have served to marginalize women, especially in the rural and conservative context (Kandiyoti, 1988). In most instances, the discriminatory practices are justified by selective interpretations of scripture, with the alternative readings that are based on justice and mutual responsibility being marginalised. This has also created a disparity between the Islamic principles and social facts in which the faith is used to uphold the status quo instead of fighting against injustice.

The significance of bridging this gap cannot be overrated. The effects of gender injustice extend beyond the feminine gender to the family level, the community level and the development of the nation. It has always been shown that through the empowerment of women, there is better health provision, economic development, and societal integration (World Bank, 2020). In Islamic eyes, all types of injustice compromise the morality of the society since justice is a cornerstone of the Holy Quran's view of the world. Thus, it is a moral and a practical need to re-review the question of gender relations in a genuine Islamic context.

### Objectives of the Research

The main aim of this article is to address the issue of gender justice in Islam with the intention of separating the faith-based principles and the societal cultural practices that help to discriminate against women. In particular, the article will set out to:

1. Compare the Quranic and Sunnah conceptualisation of the Islamic understanding of the concept of justice and gender equality.
2. Reflectively examine how the elements of sociocultural beliefs and patriarchal cultures pervert the Islamic doctrines concerning the rights of women.
3. Find some faith-based interventions that can be used to address gender injustice in Muslim communities.
4. Be part of the interdisciplinary discourse on the topics of religion, gender and social change by providing a context-sensitive analysis.

### Research Gap

Despite a great amount of literature available concerning Islam and women's rights, most of it operates on the two extremes. On the one hand, the orientalist and secular feminist approaches tend to portray Islamic society as tight-fisted towards women, excluding internal diversity and progressive opinion in the tradition (Moghadam, 2004). Conversely, apologetic strategies are inclined to romanticise the teachings of Islam without looking at the reality of discrimination on women. Integrative studies that critically look at how faith-based Islamic principles may be mobilised to reflect sociocultural injustices in modern settings are lacking. This article aims to fill this gap through the synthesis of normative Islamic provisions and empirical and theoretical evidence of gender studies.

### Importance of the Research

This study is important in a number of ways. It also offers a balanced analysis of the topic of gender justice academically, neither discounting religion nor idealizing it. In practice, it offers a lesson to policymakers, educators, and religious leaders interested in finding culturally acceptable approaches to ensuring that women will enjoy their rights. The article presents more inclusive and sustainable social reform approaches by explaining gender justice as an Islamic value, not as an external imposition. In addition, this study is relevant in a time when Islamophobia and its misrepresentation are on the rise, as it upholds simplistic discourse and shows the possibilities of Islam as a remedy and empowerment.

### Conceptual Background

This is because gender justice is a complex phenomenon that has gained an increasingly critical scholarly, policy-oriented, and developmental interest. In a broad sense, gender justice refers to fair and equal treatment of people of all gender identities, and thus, to similar treatment of people in terms of their rights, opportunities, and resources in social, economic, political, and legal domains (Connell, 2012). Gender justice, in contrast to formal equality, which assumes equal treatment as an imperative, anticipates substantive equality by acknowledging structural disadvantages and power disparities that systematically marginalise women. Feminist scholars believe that gender inequality lies deep in the social organization of patriarchy that legitimizes male dominance and institutionalizes gender differences (Walby, 1990). These systems work through legislation, customs, family systems, and cultural norms, thus establishing lived experiences in societies.

Gender justice on a global standpoint is conceptualized as an essential element of human rights and sustainable development. The fact that international tools, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination against Women, emphasize the need to eliminate gender-based discrimination as a precondition to social development is a fact (UN Women, 2022). The scholars are, however, concerned that universal models of gender equality often fail to consider cultural and religious issues, thus breeding opposition and influencing futility in non-Western societies (Razavi, 2011). This criticism has led to contextualised and culturally sensitive strategies that are trying to reconcile gender justice with the indigenous value systems.

In the Islamic philosophy, the concept of justice (*adl*) takes a central place and is a principle of ethics. Justice as an Islamic command and as an ethical requirement for believers is reiterated throughout the Quran regardless of gender, ethnicity, and social status. According to Islamic scholars, justice in Islam is closely connected with the concept of human dignity (*karamah*) which asserts the natural value of all human beings (Kamali, 2002). In this sense, gender justice is neither outside nor a new development but a part of Islamic ethics. Islam has a different concept of equality, which is ethical and spiritual, and considers both men and women as moral agents who should be held responsible in front of God and at the same time, functional differentiation based on social obligations exists (Esposito and DeLong-Bas, 2001).

Regardless of these ethical underpinnings, the historical and socio-political backgrounds have influenced the definition of gender roles in Islamic societies. Classical Islamic jurisprudence developed in patriarchal societies in which the dominance of males was usually assumed. The result was that some definitions of the law supported gender hierarchies, especially when it comes to the family law, inheritance, and witnessing (Mir-Hosseini, 2015). Modern scholars believe that those interpretations were actually based on local realities and not absolute religious values. Muslim reformists and feminists urge a re-reading of Islamic texts that give justice, fairness and the *maqasid al-shariah*, or superior purposes of Islamic law, inclusive of the safeguarding of honour and wellbeing (Kamali, 2008).

The existing academic discussions on the topic of Islam and gender justice are marked by varying, even contradictory views. Secular feminist authors often perceive religion, such as Islam, to be highly patriarchal and to oppose gender equality. On this ground, the religious systems are viewed as hindrances to women's emancipation and freedom (Moghadam, 2004). Islamic feminist scholars, on the contrary, question this assumption and attempt to show that it is the patriarchal practices or the male-centred approach to interpreting Islam that caused the practice. According to the researchers like Badran (2009), gender justice in Islamic feminism is achieved via faith-based arguments, and it bases its arguments on the Holy *Quran* to challenge inequality and redefine the rights of women in an Islamic context.

The other debate that is salient is on the issue of religion and culture. The anthropological and sociological studies prove that numerous practices recently ascribed to the Islamic religion, including the limitation of the movement of women or the deprivation of the right to inheritance, belong to the local traditions and tribal beliefs instead of the Muslim religion (Kandiyoti, 1988). The consequences of this conflation of religion with culture are a lot when they are subjected to the strength of discrimination being allowed to receive the moral sanction as religious requirements. Researchers claim that the problem of gender injustice and the possibility of implementing essential changes cannot be achieved without the process of de-religionization of Islam and cultural standards (Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2015).

The religion-culture gap is particularly pronounced in Muslim-dominated societies where customary law is present in the society to coexist with the formal legal systems. In these situations, the issue of women rights is often discussed in informal power networks that are controlled by males who are aged and leaders of the community. Studies have shown that women can internalize them to the extent that they view inequality as God-made, not socially constructed (Kandiyoti, 1988). This highlights the importance of educational and interpretive interventions that will enhance religious literacy and critical interventions with sacred texts.

Religious solutions to gender justice have received growing academic support as an alternative to strictly secular schemes. There has been evidence to support that reforms, which are based on religious values, tend to be more accepted in highly religious societies since they tend to appeal to the already existing belief systems and moral codes (Razavi, 2011). In the Islamic contexts, religious strategies also focus on reinterpretation (ijtihad), moral logic, and community involvement as the means of questioning gender inequality. Such strategies never deny religion but mobilise it as an empowerment source and a social change agent.

In general, according to the literature, gender injustice within Muslim societies is not understood only within a religious or a cultural framework. Instead, it is a product of a historical interpretation interaction, sociocultural norms, and power relations. An abstract framework incorporating a theory of gender and Islamic ethics provides a more detailed perspective of inequality and provides opportunities to develop directions toward reform that would be both culturally and normatively acceptable. The article expands upon this mass of literature by situating Islam as a dynamic system of moral ideology that can embody gender justice and in the process, critically review the sociocultural dynamics that act as the barriers to this.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research approach taken in this article is a qualitative and exploratory research design to discuss gender justice in Islam and also to explore how sociocultural practices perpetuate gender discrimination against women in Muslim societies. A qualitative approach is considered to be the most suitable in this case since the research problem is normative, interpretive, and context-specific and thus allows an in-depth insight into the meanings,

values, and discourses that enclose religion, gender, and culture (Creswell, 2014). It is not a measurement of variables or a test of hypotheses that this study is aimed at, but instead the critical approach to the existing knowledge and providing a conceptual synthesis based on the faith-grounded and gender justice paradigms.

The study is mainly grounded on a qualitative literature review of interdisciplinary sources, including Islamic jurisprudence, gender studies, sociology and human rights studies. The fundamental data used in this study will be academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and authoritative religious texts. It is especially focused on the articles which discuss Islamic ideas of justice, the rights of women in Islam, and the conflict between religion and sociocultural values. This methodological option allows the research to use a variety of academic views and find convergences and conflicts in the body of existing literature (Snyder, 2019).

The reviewed literature is organized and analyzed using the thematic analysis method. Using a systematic reading and coding, repetitive themes, i.e. justice (*adl*), equality, patriarchy, religious interpretation and cultural practices would be recognized and examined. The process makes it easy to equate faith-based principles and realities lived, which would indicate where the sociocultural norms do not coincide with the Islamic ethical teachings. The thematic analysis is especially applicable in qualitative studies where it is possible to be flexible and be analytically rigorous at the same time (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Besides secondary academic sources, this article interacts with the classical and modern Islamic literature to put gender justice in an Islamic ethical paradigm. The principles of the Holy *Quran*, hermeneutical traditions and contemporary reformist views are explored to provide an explanation of the diversity of thinking among Islam. This method will not consider Islam as an absolute mechanism but as an interpretive plurality. The approach by placing religious texts in their historical and social environments attempts to differentiate the normative teachings of Islamic religion and culturally specific practices (Mir-Hosseini, 2015).

Sources are chosen on the basis of scholarly relevancy, methodological soundness of credibility and contribution to the field so that the paper is credible and academically rigorous. Preference is made to peer-reviewed publications and established writers in the fields of Islamic studies, genders, and social theory. International organization reports are also referred to in order to put the discussion in a broader international discussion on gender justice.

Although in this study, no primary data is to be collected (through interview or survey), its conceptual and analytical scope is a source of limitation and strength. The lack of empirical field data implies that the results are interpretive as opposed to being generalizable. Nevertheless, this methodology has its strong points due to its ability to give a theoretically motivated and ethical analysis, which can guide future empirical studies. This article provides the foundation of the qualitative and quantitative research that can be done in the future by providing an overview of these concepts in a single article, which will enable the conceptual framework of faith-based approaches to gender justice in Muslim societies to be studied.

## Islamic Framework of Gender Justice

The Islamic approach to gender justice is based on the primary sources of the Islamic faith, i.e. the Holy Quran and the Sunnah, that point towards the issues of justice, equity and human dignity, as the key moral values. As opposed to the common belief that insinuates the Islamic faith as being discriminatory against women, Islamic doctrines are a normative vision of societal justice, which is equally applied to both men and women as a moral and legal subject. Gender justice in Islam is not a solitary phenomenon, but rather a concept that is entrenched in an extended system of ethics that upholds fairness, responsibility and accountability before God (Kamali, 2002).

The Holy Quran always confirms that men and women are morally and spiritually equal. They are both said to be formed out of one soul (*nafs wahidah*), with an equal human origin and equal value (Qur'an 4:1). There are no distinctions on accountability, reward and moral responsibility on gender basis, because the verses show equal recompense to just actions carried out by both men and women (Qur'an 33:35). Researchers believe that such verses present an ethical basis of gender justice because they refute the idea of natural male superiority (Badran, 2009). In this view, inequality is not God-given but a creation of the society.

Principles of gender justice are also strengthened in the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) both in teaching and practice. The Prophet encouraged benevolence, equity and respect towards women where he described women as moral companions other than subjects. His un-involvement in the patriarchal responsibilities in the home and the fact that he consulted the women in issues of social and political concerns do violate the initial assumptions of patriarchy that would be normalised in most Muslim societies later (Esposito & DeLong-, 2001). These instances reveal that gender justice in Islam is not just a hypothetical phenomenon but it was practiced in early Islamic history.

The key element of the Islamic system of gender justice is the combination of three notions, including justice (*adl*), equality, and human dignity (*karamah*). Justice in the Islam religion is perceived as a universal moral duty that encompasses social life on all fronts. Quran teaches the Muslims to exercise justice even against the interests of the individual or community (Qur'an 4:135). To Islamic scholars, justice is not the same as uniformity but it involves fairness and balance as per the setting and accountability (Kamali, 2002). This knowledge can be used to engage in an ethical thinking process that does not reject the moral equality but takes into consideration structural inequalities.

The central place in the Islamic thinking is taken by human dignity. The Holy *Quran* confirms that God has honoured all human beings (Qur'an 17: 70), and thus, dignity became the attribute and not the privilege of gender, status, or blood. Feminist scholars say that this is an effective principle that can be used to question the practice

that dehumanises or marginalises females under the banner of religion (Mir-, Hosseini, 2015). When dignity is considered as one of the values, gender-based discrimination is something that cannot go hand in hand with the Islamic ethics.

Islam is also known to have a scope of universal rights of women that were ground breaking in the seventh-century Arabian society. These are the right to education, the right to own property, the right of inheritance, the right of consent in marriage and economic participation. Women are also recognised to be independent legal persons to own, manage and dispose property and their rights are explicitly stated in the Holy *Quran* (Qur'an 4:7). According to the scholars, the provisions were a major break with the pre-Islamic customs and made the foundation of the independence of women in law (Esposito & DeLong-, 2001). But these rights have been realised differently at different time and place, and have been limited in most cases by the sociocultural norms.

Although these principles are quite clear, the implementation of the Islamic law (*shariah*) in gender-related issues has been influenced by history and culture. *Shariah,* which can be translated as divine ideal of justice, is different to the *fiqh*, which is a human effort to interpret and apply the ideal. Numerous practices that are discriminatory against women are not the result of *shariah* but rather the result of patriarchal interpretations of *fiqh* that are made in male-dominated societies (Mir idea, 2015). This difference is crucial, which enables the chance of reinterpretation and reform without questioning the integrity of Islam as a religion.

Some of the practices that show the clash of *Shariah* and cultural traditions include the denial of women their right to inheritance, limitation of movements, and their non-participation in decision-making activities. As shown through the anthropological studies, such practices are mostly embedded in tribal practices and social norms as opposed to religious requirements (Kandiyoti, 1988). Nevertheless, when these customs are put into the context of religious requirements, they acquire legitimacy and opposition to change. According to scholars, the only way of reclaiming the moral idea of Islamic teachings about gender justice is by separating religion and culture (Badran, 2009).

Modern Islamic thought is paying more attention to the possibility of gendering with the help of ethical goals (*maqasid al-shariah*). These goals take life, dignity, intellect and welfare as their top priorities and provide a dynamic approach to understanding religious texts through changing social realities (Kamali, 2008). *Maqasid* based methods attack dogmatic and literalist interpretations that reproduce the inequality. This has contributed to the increasingly popular faith-based reform movements that are aimed at bringing Islamic practice closer to its values.

Overall, the Islamic model of gender justice is based on the principles that support equality, dignity, and justices between women and men. The gender discrimination within the Muslim societies cannot be linked to Islam as a religion but should be interpreted as the manifestation of the historical interpretations and sociocultural activities. Reviving the moral centre of Islam offers an effective basis of fighting injustice and advancing social transformation based on gender equity.

## Sociocultural Discrimination in Muslim Societies

The issues of sociocultural discrimination within Muslim societies are rather complicated and cannot be characterized only by religious doctrine. Instead, it is a product of the interplay of cultural traditions, tribal norms, and historical relations of power and selective understandings of religion. Though, Islam offers a set of norm that focuses on justice, dignity and moral responsibility on both men and women, social activities in daily life tend to deviate widely. The explanation of this divergence should be given in details through the prism of culture, patriarchy, and authority regimes that influence gender relations in the context of Muslims.

The culture and tribe traditions are influential in shaping the life of women in most of the Muslim communities, especially in the rural and conservative areas. Such practices are frequently based on the pre-Islamic traditions that were assimilated into the social life and were later accepted as the part of the religious tradition. The anthropological studies indicate that the norms pertaining to honor, family reputation and female modesty, are often imposed by informal social means, instead of by religious injunctions (Kandiyoti, 1988). The bodies and behavior of women in tribal society's metamorphosis to be a symbol of group honor which results in limitation of movement, education and involvement in the community. These kinds of practices do not exist due to the insistence of Islam to practice them, but simply because it is the best way to perpetuate the status quo of power.

The use of religion to justify acts of discrimination is considered one of the most challenging issues when it comes to the issue of gender injustice. The wrong interpretation of religious laws tends to be used as a way of justifying the power of men and the inferiority of women. According to scholars, these interpretations are selective, literalist, and not based on the larger ethical interests of Islam (Mir-Hosseini, 2015). The revelations of the verses in certain historical frameworks are often generalized in all times and places, whereas the Quranic concepts of justice, compassion, and reciprocity are pushed to the periphery. This is a process of instrumentalization of religion where religion is used as a social control mechanism instead of a moral guide.

The interpretive power of religious texts has always been monopolized by male institutions, which uphold the patriarchal interpretation of Islam. In this regard, feminist researchers point out that there has been a lack of voice of women in the classical traditions of jurisprudence, which leads to the legal and ethical traditions that represent the experiences and interests of the male gender (Badran, 2009). Consequently, gender biased interpretations gain religious authority, and therefore, they are hard to confront in societies where the religious authority holds high moral authority. It is a dynamic that adds to the idea that the inequality between the genders is a divine law and makes it inappropriate to oppose and change anything.

The issues of patriarchy and power systems are the key to sociocultural discrimination. Patriarchy does not exist in an individual way alone, but it also exists within institutions, like family, legal systems, and community leadership systems. Walby (1990) theoretically defines patriarchy as a system of social relations that facilitates men to dominate, oppress women and exploit them in various spheres of life. Kinship, inheritance and division of labour based on gender are common ways of enhancing patriarchal power in Muslim societies. These institutions are designed in a way that favours men and restricts the rights of women to resources and power to make decisions. Socioeconomic aspects like poverty, illiteracy, and political instability are other factors that define power relations. Women of oppressed origins go through several dimensions of discrimination with gender overlapping with class, ethnicity and geographical settings (Moghadam, 2004). In these societies, cultural norms are very much strictened as a mode of upholding the social order. Any attack on gender roles is seen as a threat to the family institutions, as well as cultural identity. That is why the reforms associated with the rights of women are often reluctantly accepted by referring to the defence of tradition or religion.

The effects of sociocultural discrimination to women are multidimensional and extensive. Lack of freedom in education and employment suppresses the economic independence of women and creates dependency cycles. The research continuously demonstrates that women lack access to education, which makes them less able to engage in the life of society and defend their rights (World Bank, 2020). Unequal power relations in family environments expose women to domestic violence, early marriages, and the inability to make their own choices of marital partners. There is a tendency to make these experiences commonplace and insignificant using cultural discourses that glorify female sacrifice and compliance.

The internalized discrimination may influence both agency and self-perception in women psychologically. Literature indicates that women can learn to accept their marginalization as a moral and unavoidable process, especially when the idea of inequality is presented as a religiously determined phenomenon (Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2015). This is one of the most disastrous consequences of the sociocultural discrimination in question, since this internalization of injustice compromises the ability of women to envision alternative ways of how their lives can be. Copyrighting of such ingrained beliefs must take more than legal changes and should involve changes in religious interpretation and cultural discourse.

Social cohesion and development are undermined at the community level by sociocultural discrimination. The exclusion of women in decision-making eliminates their talents, insight and input in societies. Researchers in development believe that gender inequality is detrimental to economic development and social resilience, especially in situations where conflict and instability have to be dealt with (UN Women, 2022). In Islamic ethical insight, inequality against women goes against the Quranic vision of balanced and ethically responsible communities.

The necessity to separate Islam with those cultural practices that promote inequality is an issue that has gained more attention among scholars and activists in the recent decades. This would include reclaiming religious discourses that underline justice, shared accountability and dignity of human beings. As the sociocultural origins of discrimination are revealed, it is then possible to question the Patriarchal norms and not blame Islam as the issue. Rather, faith could be used as a tool of criticism and change, providing culturally valid ways of achieving gender justice.

To conclude, a way of life, patriarchal authority, and religious misunderstandings entrap sociocultural discrimination in Muslim societies. It does not only affect women on the legal inequality issue but also on the social, economic, and psychological levels. To tackle these issues, a delicate strategy that acknowledges the difference between faith and culture and challenges the conditions of power that make gendered realities must be approached. This is one of the approaches that should be adopted in the promotion of gender justice in an ethical and socially significant manner.

## Faith-Based Approaches to Challenging Discrimination

Religious intercessions have become viable solutions in curbing gender discrimination in the Muslim civilizations as they have learned to view Islam as a system of empowerment and justice as opposed to being a system of oppression. In situations of South Asia, including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the religious institutions and community networks play a central role in shaping societal norms. With the involvement of these structures using the faith-based processes, new opportunities to advance women's rights, increase social equality, and reduce discriminatory practices can be realized (Badran, 2009; Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2015).

## Islam as an Empowerment Tool

Gender justice is firmly supported by the ethical and moral foundations of Islam. It is said in the Holy Quran that men and women are moral equals and equal before God: "To men and women who do righteous acts, they shall be alike in their reward (Qur'an 33:35, translation). This value highlights the possibility of Islam as a tool of empowerment, especially in the areas where secular and rights-based strategies can be unpopular. With gender equality as a divine command, the communities are able to enforce the reforms that are acceptable and religious at the same time.

Empowerment campaigns attract attention to the rights previously unknown to history which Islam granted women including the right to own property, inherit wealth and other economic and educational activities (Esposito and DeLong-Bas, 2001). In the South Asian Muslim societies, patriarchal traditions or distortions of *Shariah* often negate these rights. Religion interventions may also help to re-establish the initial moral motives of the Islamic doctrines, reminding societies that injustice is not approved by religion but misguided by socio-cultural abuses.

## Religious Reinterpretation (*Ijtihad*)

Religious reinterpretation or ijtihad is an important part in challenging discriminating norms. The classical jurisprudence (*fiqh*) emerged within historical settings where patriarchal influence prevailed where it usually limited agency to women. According to modern observers, ijtihad allows the dynamic interpretation of the texts to respond to the social realities of the modern world without betraying the ethical principles of justice (*adl*) and human dignity (*karamah*) (Kamali, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 2015). Indicatively, Quran 4:32 confirms equal access to resources by women: Do not envy that by which Allah has made some of you surpass others (translation). These verses give religious backing to the empowerment of women in education, employment, and societal lives and are fighting cultural practices that restrict women to these rights.

Ijtihad in the Indian subcontinent has helped in the production of discourse in the area concerning Muslim personal law, the right to inheritance and women leadership. Enlightened thinkers support the reinterpretation of *fiqh* of discrimination rulings in a manner that supports the *maqasid al-shariah* (higher objectives of Islamic law) like life, intellect, property, and dignity (Kamali, 2008). This strategy anticipates that the issue of gender justice is not a contemporary or Western issue but a natural aspect of Islamic morality.

## Community-Based Faith Initiatives

Religious programs in communities cannot be practiced without community-based faith programs to enhance the translation of religious concepts into social action. South Asian mosques, madrassas, and religious organisations are used as a source of education, civic participation, and advocacy. Women-led and imam-led, and community leader-led programs have achieved positive results in creating awareness of women rights under an Islamic context (Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2015). As an example, the ethics of justice, fairness, and agency to women through workshops can be used to transform the attitude of both male and female members of the community, becoming the bridge between knowledge of religion and its practical application.

Those efforts also challenge patriarchal construal's that have established themselves in the form of a local custom. According to an anthropological research, in rural South Asian areas, the low involvement of women in family and community decision-making is usually explained by religiously imposed decision-making as tribal/cultural decision making (Kandiyoti, 1988). By focusing on true scriptural doctrines, faith-based programmes offer a way of enabling communities to critically analyse such norms and embrace gender-equal practices.

## Education and Religious Literacy

Faith-based empowerment is also preserved through education and religious literacy. Literacy initiatives enable confidence and agency through the provision of knowledge that enables women to interpret religious texts. Programs combining the Holy Quran teaching, the study of Hadiths, and religious reasoning make women demand their rights in the marriage, inheritance, and civic life (Siddiqui, 2017). Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stressed that it is the duty of every Muslim to pursue knowledge, both men and women (Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith 224) and therefore the teaching of women, of the Islamic religion, is necessitated by religion.

Moreover, it is also important to ensure that men are educated in order to minimize opposition to gender-equitable behaviors. Patriarchal norms are conscious in their community curricula, which is informed by ethical leadership, fairness, and justice. Such programmes have been observed to promote women in Indian Muslim settings through increased support on their roles in local governance, economic and social services (Rizvi, 2019).

## Integration of Faith-Based Approaches

The combination of ijtihad, community involvement, and religious literacy proves that religion could be used as a driver of social transformation. Faith-based strategies, unlike external-imposed secular frameworks, tap into culturally appealing values, which boost legitimacy and sustainability. This makes reform more acceptable and effective because the communities able to tackle issues associated with discrimination do not have to face the religious beliefs regarding gender justice, which are deeply held (Mir-, Hosseini, 2015; Kamali, 2002).

## Implications for Gender Justice and Social Change

The decision to deal with gender discrimination in Muslim cultures requires a complex approach that balances the moral codes of Islam with the current social, legal, and policy provisions. The gender justice implications are widespread across the policy sphere, religion, grassroots and the agency of women, thus highlighting structural and cultural routes to change.

## Policy Implications

The policy frameworks are at a strategic position in promoting gender justice as they help in operationalising the religious principles into enforceable rights and protection. South Asian governments and policymakers, in particular, have the responsibility of making sure the legal frameworks that regulate inheritance, marriage, education, and employment reflect both Islamic moral requirements and global human rights principles (UN Women, ¯, 2022). Social cultural barriers that limit female agency can be alleviated by setting policies that specifically protect women against domestic violence, guarantee property rights, as well as support access to education. More importantly, these policies have to be developed in liaison with the local communities to ensure that there is a cultural resonance to overcome resistance to the implementation (Moghadam, 2004).

## Role of Religious Scholars and Institutions

Religious institutions and scholars (*ulema*) have significant power with regard to the interpretation of Islamic teachings and the social norm formation. It is imperative that these actors are involved in the reform efforts to bring about gender-justice goals and theological legitimacy. Scholars can establish challenges to the patriarchal readings of the Holy *Quran* and the Sunnah that justify discrimination by encouraging interpretations of the Quran

and Sunnah that anticipate equality, dignity *(karamah)*, and justice ('*adl*) (Kamali, 2002). An example of this is that the Prophet Muhammad emphasized on treating women fairly in all levels, along with the social, economic, and family matters, hence confirming that ethical demands are gender-neutral (Sunan Abu Dawood, Hadith 1823). Religious institutions can also increase awareness of women rights under the Islamic system through educational programmes and seminars that would help create community acceptance of the reforms (Badran, 2009). The counterattack to this can be conducted in mosques, madrassas, and Islamic educational centres: including the discussion of ethics, justice and social responsibility in religious curricula can help instil the culture according to which the rights of women are perceived as part of Islamic values (Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2015).

## Grassroots Level Change

The change requires the involvement of grassroots at the most appropriate level, where the patriarchal norms are mostly rooted. Stakeholder-oriented programs like women self-help groups, literacy programs, local advocacy networks, are some practical ways of applying faith based gender justice strategies. These programmes often work in partnership with the religious leaders and develop culturally attentive solutions to women empowerment (Rizvi, 2019). The involvement of the grass-root will make reform look naturally arising as opposed to the top-down or imposed type. In addition, such initiatives disrupt the existing power structures and encourage collaborative methods of developing the society by encouraging dialogue between men and women (Kandiyoti, 1988). Religious literacy among women is also strengthened through grassroots education, and women are able to critically discuss Islamic readings and demand their rights. Empirical research on the South Asian settings shows that women attending such programmes are more likely to make independent decisions in the family, obtain higher education, and become involved in local politics (Siddiqui, 2017). These results show that education support, community involvement and ethical grounding is most effective when these three are combined.

## Women's Agency

The key element of social change is the empowerment of women per se. The agency refers to the ability of women to make informed choices, bargain over social norms, and affect the dynamics of families and communities. Faith-based empowerment approaches complement agency by equipping the women with knowledge, as well as theological legitimacy to confront the discrimination process without necessarily ostracizing religious authorities and community members (Mir-Hosseini, 2015). The Holy *Quran* emphasizes on the moral and social responsibility of women numerous times, noting their possible status of an independent actor: to men and women who believe and do good deeds, to them is forgiveness and a very great reward (Qur'an 33:35, translation). Recognizing women as agents of morality and sociality is a response to cultural discourses regarding subordination as some tradition or religion dictates. Agency in women also reflects itself in the area of wider social and economic participation; empowered women work towards the welfare of their families, community and making decisions at different levels. When women are agency building, the communities are seen to experience the positive ripple effect, such as improved educational results of children, fairer distribution of resources, and more effective civic participation (World Bank, 2020). In turn, the advocacy of women's agency is a moral as well as a developmental necessity.

## Integrated Approach

The implications of faith-based approaches on gender justice highlight the need to have integrated approaches. Reformations of the law, reformulations of religions, institutional involvement, and mobilisation at the grassroots should act in unison to create the atmosphere where equality would thrive. A typical example of why single-pronged approaches are not enough is in the example of South Asian Muslim societies that have a complicated interaction of culture, religion, and socioeconomic influences. Through their synthesis, policy actions, scholarly critique, community action, and individual empowerment, societies could develop gender justice that is sustainable, context-appropriate, and ethically-grounded.

## Future Research Directions

Although much academic literature has been devoted on gender justice in the Muslim societies, there are still various areas that are under researched. Further research questions should be focused on filling gaps in empirical evidence, comparing research findings under different cultural and national settings and determining how effective faith-based intervention can be in promoting human rights in women. Even though there is existing literature that anticipates the ethical and theoretical approaches that are used to ground gender justice in Islam, field-based research that determines how the concepts are understood and applied by communities in practice is limited (Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2015).

Comparative research can provide useful details on differences in gender norms, legal practices and social performance in contrasting Muslim societies. To explain, a comparison between rural and urban societies, South Asian and Middle East context, may help to clarify how sociocultural and institutional factors impact the achievement of gender justice. Through such research, best practices and transferable strategies can also be identified as ways of balancing Islamic principles with the wider human-rights goals (Mir-Hosseini, 2015).

The empirical imperative spills over specifically to the judging of faith-based programs, religious literacy programs and community based interventions in as far as women empowerment is concerned. The lived experiences of women, the evaluation of the changes in social attitudes, and the measurement of the progress in the spheres of education, economic, and political engagement can be reflected through surveys, interviews, and participatory methods of research. Longitudinal studies would also increase the knowledge about the sustainability and long-term consequences of these interventions (Siddiqui, 2017).

Future research must also consider the intersectional aspect, examining the role of a combination of gender and class, ethnicity, and the regional factors in defining the experiences of women of justice and discrimination. By filling these empirical gaps, researchers will be in a position to provide solid evidence with which they can inform policy, inform religious scholars and religious institutions as well as support grassroots efforts to promote gender equity in Muslim societies.

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored the complex connection between Islam and gender justice, both in the theoretical basis and the actual problems of advancing the equality of women in Muslim societies. The ability to establish gender justice in the context of the moral and legal implications of Islam helps the study to illustrate how discrimination patterns are usually a cultural construct, its interpretations over the centuries, and how patriarchy creates this context instead of being the religious texts themselves. Ethical values of justice (ʿadl), dignity of man (karamah), and moral responsibility of both men and women are consistently affirmed in the Quran and Sunnah, therefore, offering a solid basis of gender-equitable social transformation (Kamali, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 2015).

One of the main contributions of this article is the difference between religion and culture. Although cultural and tribal norms in most Muslim societies and especially in South Asia continue to limit women in their educational opportunities, movements, and economic activities, they do not derive their support in the Islamic religion. Transformational tools of empowerment can thus be based on faith-based approaches that focus on authentic scriptural interpretation, community work and religious literacy (Abu-Raiya and Pargament, 2015). Through repossessing the moral essence of Islam, communities are given culturally appealing approaches to fight against discrimination without necessarily being seen as an importer of foreign values.

Another critical aspect of gender justice that is highlighted in the article is the contribution of religious reinterpretation (ijtihad). The rulings made in classical jurisprudence were in most cases restrictive to the agency of women and were developed during patriarchal societies. The current academic research shows that the application of dynamic interpretations based on the maqāṣid al-sharaha (higher objectives of Islamic law) facilitates justice, fairness, and human dignity and hence harmonizes the teachings in religion with those of human-rights practices in the modern society (Kamali, 2008). This reinterpretation does not only increase access of women into education, economic involvement and legal rights but also justifies their social agency in the religious contexts.

Another important avenue of facilitating gender justice is mentioned as community-based faith initiatives. The participation of the religious scholars, madrassas and local institutions aids in the translation of the ethical principles into practical application and hence generates awareness of both men and women. Integrated programs of religious education, moral reasoning, and leadership training make women capable of claiming their rights and becoming contributing members of families and communities in the decision-making processes (Badran, 2009; Rizvi, 2019). Grassroots interventions also enhance the women agency by providing women with a safe space in which they can discuss and mentor, as well as mobilize and advocate together, asserting that social change is best practiced where faith, knowledge and community are integrated.

Faith-based gender justice also has some policy implications. In enacting and implementing rights that are in line with the Islamic ethical teachings, governments, legal institutions, and civil society organisations have a central role to play. To guarantee the rights of women to inheritance, their access to education and protection against gender-related violence, it is necessary to not only change the law but also to have culturally-competent implementation strategies (UN Women, 2022). Making faith based solutions and policy solutions go hand in hand strengthens legitimacy, lowers opposition and facilitates the long-term change in societies that have religious affiliation as the core of social existence.

Notably, the article serves as an addition to the general discussion on gender justice because it demonstrates how faith can be used as a tool of empowerment, and not oppression. The acknowledgment of women as moral and social agents, who can make their own choices and be leaders contradicts the traditional patriarchal narratives. The Quranic values repeatedly reiterate the responsibility and dignity of women and their ability to act in a morally upright way: to men and women who believe and do good works, forgiveness and a great reward to them (Qurʹan 33:35, translation). Gender equity can be anchored to these texts of origin by placing it in a textual context, making reform initiatives ethically and socially acceptable.

Lastly, the article determines the future research areas, which include use of empirical research, comparative research in various Muslim societies, and faith-based intervention scrutiny. The comprehensive insight into women's lived experiences, the evaluation of the effectiveness of community programmes, and interactions between gender, class, and ethnicity will give evidence that can help shape policy and practice. This kind of research plays a vital role in maintaining faith-based approaches which are contextually sound and socially effective (Siddiqui, 2017; Mir-Hosseini, 2015).

To sum up, the article shows that gender justice in Muslim societies can be achieved if ethical principles, interpretation of religion, involvement of communities, and policy initiatives are combined in a balanced manner. The gap between faith and justice can be eliminated by realizing once again the moral vision of Islam, fostering education and religious literacy, and enhancing the agency of women. The originality of the chapter is that it offers

a conceptual, analytical and practical roadmap of faith-based gender justice with implications not only to scholars but also policymakers, religious leaders and even practitioners within their community.

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