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Evolution of Gender Roles in Islam: Navigating Diversity, Flexibility, and Harmony within Muslim Family Values

Tahmid Al Muddassir Chowdhury[1], Abdullah Al Mahmud[2], Shafi Md Mostofa[3*]
[1, 2, 3] *University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh*

***Corresponding email:** shafi@du.ac.bd*

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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread assumptions that Islam prescribes fixed gender roles, scholarly and historical evidence reveal a far more complex reality. This study investigates how gender roles within Muslim families have evolved across time and geography, shaped by normative Islamic teachings, jurisprudential interpretation, and social practice. The objectives are to trace this evolution from pre-Islamic Arabia through classical and contemporary scholarship, to examine divergences across the four Sunni law schools and Shia jurisprudence, and to analyse the influence of colonialism and Islamic feminist thought on contemporary gender norms. The study employs a critical literature review, drawing on the Quran, authenticated Hadith collections, and jurisprudential writings of major Islamic scholars, supplemented by peer-reviewed secondary sources. It distinguishes three analytical layers throughout: normative Quranic and prophetic teachings, interpretive jurisprudential traditions, and documented social practices. Findings demonstrate that the Quran affirms women's spiritual equality and grants substantive legal and economic rights; that no single scholarly consensus exists on domestic and public gender roles; and that restrictive practices in Muslim societies reflect cultural, colonial, and political legacies more than Quranic mandates. Gender roles in Islam are flexible and negotiable, capable of grounding justice and harmony within Muslim families when rooted in equality, compassion, and mutual respect.

INTRODUCTION

Islam is often criticized for its perceived rigidity and has been thought to be unchangeable since its inception. Similar criticisms are directed towards the gender roles within Islam, with the common misconception that it oppresses women and is a patriarchal religion. This misconception is based on the belief that women are exclusively assigned domestic roles and are confined to their homes through practices, for instance, the veil system or purdah. It is worth noting that the concept of purdah is not limited to women, as men are also required to observe it (Hussain, 1987). The multifaceted and complex dimensions of Muslim societies, cultures, and various teachings and interpretations have significantly influenced these roles. To clarify, the reader must understand the normative side of gender roles in Islam and that the practices within Muslim society are diverse. Crucially, many of the restrictions attributed to Islam in popular discourse are, upon closer examination, products of specific cultural contexts, colonial histories, or particular scholarly interpretations rather than universal Quranic imperatives. Consequently, many Muslim countries practice norms and mores that are culturally specific and not necessarily prescribed by Islam. Islam arose in the Arabian Peninsula and gradually spread worldwide, undergoing many changes over time in various social and cultural contexts. The relationship between gender roles and Islam is deeply rooted in both the normative teachings and the multifarious cultural and historical landscapes of the Islamic World and Muslims. From pre-Islamic Arabia to the post-modern 21st century, the evolution of gender roles within Islamic societies has been guided by the dynamic interplay of Quranic principles, prophetic traditions (sunnah), political shifts, and the cultural diversity of specific regions. Gender roles are not static but rather fluid constructs influenced by time, place, and socio-political circumstances. This investigation explores the complex web of factors that have shaped gender perceptions and realities in the Muslim world.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How did pre-Islamic Arabian society construct gender roles, and what specific reforms did Islam introduce? (2) How have the four principal Sunni *madhāhib* and Shia jurisprudence interpreted key Quranic concepts related to gender, and where do they diverge? (3) How did colonialism and post-colonial developments reshape gender norms in Muslim-majority societies? (4) In what ways have Islamic feminist scholars reinterpreted gender roles from within the Islamic framework? (5) What does the historical and textual evidence reveal about women's participation in public, professional, and civic life in early and medieval Islamic societies? These questions allow the study to maintain its broad historical and comparative scope while ensuring analytical coherence across sections.

The scholarly contribution of this paper lies not in asserting for the first time that Islamic gender roles are flexible, a claim acknowledged in earlier scholarship (Wadud, 1999; Mir-Hosseini, 2020), but in providing a systematic, historically grounded, and methodologically explicit account that: (a) consistently distinguishes normative teachings from interpretive traditions and social practices; (b) draws on a broader and more critically evaluated corpus than most comparable studies; and (c) integrates evidence from both Sunni and Shia traditions across multiple geographical regions. Together, these features address a persistent weakness in the existing literature on Islam and gender. This article thus explores the intricate and evolving nature of gender roles in Islamic societies, spanning from the early days of Islam to the contemporary era. It delves into the religious, cultural, and historical aspects that shape gender roles, examining the influence of Quranic teachings, prophetic traditions, political changes, and regional cultures.

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METHOD

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology, guided by hermeneutic and historical-comparative analytical frameworks. These frameworks were selected because the research questions require both close textual interpretation of primary Islamic sources and a comparative assessment of how gender norms have developed across distinct historical periods, legal traditions, and geographical regions. Together, they enable the study to move between the internal logic of Islamic texts and the broader social and political contexts in which those texts have been read and applied.

Primary sources consulted include the Quran, authenticated Hadith collections (specifically Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan Abi Dawud, and Sunan at-Tirmidhi), and the jurisprudential writings of major Islamic scholars across the four Sunni legal schools: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafiʿi, and Hanbali. Selected Shia jurisprudential literature, particularly within the Jaʿfari school, is also drawn upon to ensure the analysis is not confined to Sunni perspectives alone. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and chapters from edited volumes. Sources originating from blogs, non-peer-reviewed websites, and unpublished manuscripts have been excluded to maintain scholarly rigour.

A defining methodological commitment of this study is the consistent application of three analytical layers throughout the review. The first is the normative layer, which encompasses the Quran and authenticated Prophetic traditions and represents Islam's foundational ethical and legal ideals. The second is the interpretive layer, comprising the jurisprudential commentaries and scholarly opinions produced by Islamic jurists and theologians across different *madhāhib* and historical contexts. The third is the social practice layer, which captures the actual lived experiences and institutional arrangements of Muslim communities across time and geography. Keeping these three layers analytically distinct is essential because conflating them, attributing to Islam as a whole what is in fact the product of a particular scholar's reading, or a specific cultural context, has been a persistent source of misrepresentation in both academic and popular discourse on gender in Islam. By systematically separating these layers, the study can identify where normative ideals, interpretive traditions, and social realities converge and diverge, thereby offering a more precise, evidence-based account of gender roles within Muslim family values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evolution of Gender Roles in Islam

Normative and Historical Context: Pre-Islamic Arabian tribes operated as cohesive political and religious units, mirroring the structure of the ancient gens Romana. Within this society, concepts of patronage and clientele were deeply embedded, where clients were almost indistinguishably integrated into the patron's family. Tribe chiefs held pivotal roles, notably in matters of inheritance and dispute resolution. The societal fabric permitted unrestricted polygamy, treating marriage more as a transactional arrangement than a romantic union (Walton, 1906). Most married women retained ties with their tribe through blood relationships. In some cases, women received protection from their tribe in instances of abuse or mistreatment by their husbands, yet they were generally treated as secondary, akin to material possessions (Sechzer, 2004). This era relegated women and children, especially females, to the periphery, excluding them from inheritance rights. Inheritors were expected to defend assets and participate in raids. When a man passed away, his widows and possessions transitioned to the ownership of his nearest male kin. The overarching judicial framework was

steeped in autocracy, bordering on despotism. There was also a pronounced cultural bias favoring male offspring, leading to practices like the live burial of daughters, and occasionally sons, especially by families unable to support them (Walton, 1906). Male offspring, seen as potential warriors and providers, were preferred due to the harsh desert environment and the financial strain of raising children. Women's basic rights were absent in the pre-Islamic era, so their roles were predominantly domestic, and their agencies were denied in religious, social, political, and public spheres. Some women engaged in trade, including Prophet Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, but this was an exception rather than the norm. Thus, society, politics, and religious authorities were predominantly male-dominated.

Normative Reform: Islamic doctrine overhauled pre-Islamic traditions, catalyzing a profound shift in Arabian societal structures. Islamic belief holds that Islam is the completion of Judaism and Christianity. In the teachings of Christianity and Judaism, women were stigmatized with the original sin, a view removed with the advent of Islam. Islam equally blamed both Adam and Eve and punished them equally, contrasting with the Judeo-Christian tradition that solely blamed Eve, a significant departure from the views expressed by St. Paul, who suggested that only Eve was in transgression (Amiruddin, 1938). In Islamic tradition, women were forbidden from attending the mosque during menstruation and ordered not to pray, even though Islam did not find menstruation filthy or menstrual blood polluting, like in Judaism (Sechzer, 2004). Before the advent of Islam, a prominent debate concerned the existence of the soul in women and whether they were spiritually equal to men. This debate was significant in Greek and Roman traditions. However, the Quran (16:97) equates the authority and agency of women and men; in the afterlife, they will be judged for their deeds, not for their gender, clarifying that gender roles in earthly life may differ, but the reward for men and women will be the same. This verse also asserts that spiritually, women are no different from men.

In Islam, marriage is viewed as an equal partnership, granting both husband and wife similar rights and duties. Women have the right to consent to marriage, and those married by guardians in their minority can repudiate the marriage upon reaching adulthood (Amiruddin, 1938). The historical case of Sukaina bint Hussain, the great-granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad, serves as a well-documented illustration of women asserting contractual marital rights in early Islamic society (Stowasser, 1994, p. 117). Sukaina was a strong character who married under conditions she herself stipulated: she would be her husband's only wife, control her own wealth, and have freedom of movement. When her husband broke the contract, she took him to court and secured a divorce.

For the economic security and well-being of Muslim women, a unique aspect of Islamic marriage is the concept of Mahr (dower), in which the husband gives a gift to the wife, which becomes her independent property. This contrasts with the dowry system in other cultures, where the bride's family must provide a gift to the groom (Amiruddin, 1938). While polygamy persisted, it was restricted in Islam, with the Quran advising having only one wife and permitting up to four (Walton, 1906), though restricted polygamy existed within Islamic society, and polyandry was abolished (Sechzer, 2004). The reforms curtailed the ease of divorce, established matrimonial restrictions based on relationships, and eliminated cruel practices like the killing of children due to poverty or burying daughters alive. Mohammedan reforms also emphasized the protection of orphans and granted daughters hereditary rights and wives legal inheritance rights (Walton, 1906). The Quran (4:7) affirms women's inheritance rights, though they inherit half of what their male siblings inherit (Walther, 1993). However, inheritance in Islam is complex, with multiple cases in which female heirs inherit more than

male heirs. Inheritance inequality is justified by the claim that women are not assigned the responsibility to financially support the family and children, a role assigned to men (Amiruddin, 1938). This does not mean that women cannot play roles outside the home; they are not religiously obliged to do so. Mothers were also granted rights regarding the guardianship, care, and education of their children. These reforms collectively elevated the status of Arabian women, recognizing and bestowing upon them significant rights previously denied (Walton, 1906).

However, the elevated status of women seemed to fade away after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The life of a Muslim is controlled or advised by Sharia, or the legal system of Islam. Sharia is the legal system of Islam derived from the Quran as well as the Sunnah and Hadiths (Naʿīm, 2002), developed by Muslim jurists, especially during the first three centuries of Islam, which includes a much broader set of principles and norms than legal subject matter as such (Naʿīm, 2002). Now, the obvious question arises: is Sharia rigid or changeable, and even if changeable, to what extent?

As Sharia is derived from the Divine, it is fixed and unchangeable, whereas fiqh, the commentaries on the Sharia, can be changed according to the circumstances under which it is applied. Laws of Sharia are, for the most part, general: they lay down basic principles (Philips, 1988). But Qaradawi suggests otherwise; he argues that Islamic law comprises both specific and general rules. Specific rules include family law and inheritance, while general rules address issues not directly mentioned in the Quran and Sunnah. Al-Qaradawi's perspective suggests some flexibility in Sharia, especially regarding family law, which has traditionally been seen as sacred and unchangeable (Roald, 2001).

Interpretive Diversity: Madhahib (legal schools) provide the interpretive methodologies for Sharia in the absence of a centralized Islamic religious authority (Philips, 1988). The four main Islamic law schools (madhhab) adopt different approaches: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali. Abu Hanifa, the founder of the Hanafi school, relied less on hadith and more on ra'i (individual judgment). Maliki ibn Anas emphasized the Prophet's example and the practice of Medina's people. Muhammad ibn Idris ash-Shafi'i integrated various legal approaches and crystallized the concept of the Roots of Jurisprudence. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, the founder of the Hanbali school, focused on the literal interpretation of the Quran and the Sunnah (Roald, 2001). Shia jurisprudence, specifically the Ja'fari school, offers a distinct legal framework for gender and family law that often diverges from Sunni tradition. By emphasizing the contractual nature of marriage, Shia scholars have historically expanded women's negotiating power and facilitated broader access to khul' (divorce) (Tucker, 2008). Consequently, omitting the Shia tradition from discourse on Islamic gender norms yields a fundamentally incomplete analysis.

Islamic law, especially in family law and gender roles, varies across Islamic schools of thought. Interpretation and application (fiqh) can be adaptable, but Sharia is considered divine and mostly unchanging. The four primary Islamic legal schools offer distinct methods of interpreting Sharia, leading to a wide range of perspectives on family law and gender roles. This variability illustrates the dynamic and adaptable nature of Islamic law in different contexts. From these differences of interpretation, modernist and protectionist ulama can be distinguished. Protectionist ulama advocates a strict, traditional interpretation of Islam, emphasizing the inferior status of women compared to men. They instruct women to cover their bodies from head to toe, with exceptions only for the face and hands, and restrict their participation in certain social functions (Moaddel, 1998). In order to create a balanced family and society, they emphasized women's role as domestic ones. Maududi and Qutb are

prominent scholars who promoted the view that women should play a domestic role (Roald & Ouis, 1997), but both believed in a sense of equality between men and women. Maududi advocated education in the 20th century, when prominent Deoband ulama opposed it; he also emphasized the importance of women learning self-defense, a rare practice in the Islamic tradition. It is significant to note that these protectionist positions represent one strand of scholarly interpretation and are not coextensive with Quranic normative teaching; they reflect specific socio-political contexts in which their proponents were writing.

In the contemporary world, only certain ulamas from the Salafi strain call on women to abstain from formal higher education; mainly, scholars from the Ikhwan and post-Ikhwan trends advocate for female education as an individual religious obligation (Roald, 2001, p. 177). Protectionist ulama tend to support polygamy and criticize Western cultures for cultural 'decadence' and sexual promiscuity (Moaddel, 1998). In the 1970s, At-Turabi advocated for women's rights and argued that women's role is not confined to the domestic sphere, and later Badawi supported this view (Roald & Ouis, 1997). Islamic modernists, emerging notably in India and Egypt around the late 19th century, proposed a more progressive exegesis of the Quran that aligns with feminist ideas. These scholars argue for women's rights to education and involvement in social affairs and question existing restrictions on women. They criticize men's attitudes and behavior towards women and reject polygamy, aiming to bridge the gap between modernity and Islamic belief systems. Notable figures include Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Chiragh Ali, Amir Ali, Shibli Nu'mani, and Mumtaz Ali. Their approach is characterized by an interpretive method that re-examines traditionalist conceptions, particularly regarding polygamy and the broader treatment of women, in a modern context (Moaddel, 1998). Hussain (1987) believes that the reduction of women's status based on modesty and chastity is proof of a double standard, and he advocated for women's rights.

Social Practice: Historian Georgi Zaidan argues that the Umayyad era precipitated a moral decline and a subsequent deterioration in the social status of women. The increase in bondwomen led to a decrease in men's respect for women, eroding their self-esteem, independence of thought, and freedom. Women's value and status significantly declined during this era. This decline illustrates a divergence between historical social practice and the egalitarianism inherent in the Quran and Sunnah. Such recurring discrepancies underscore the need to distinguish among three analytical tiers: the normative, the interpretive, and the social. The Abbasid period initially continued the trends set by the Umayyads, but with gradual changes over time. Despite the remarkable progress in science, technology, and the arts, the public's adherence to modesty and the veil meant that visual representations of women became scarce (Stowasser, 1994, p. 89). After that, with the rise of dictatorships, women's rights continued to fall. Degradation in women's positions is because of collective deviations of the *ummah* from the right path of Islam, because Islam brings justice, and in the absence of Islamic practice, there cannot be any justice (Siddiqui, 1993).

Omaima Abou-Bakr (2003) provides an insightful examination of the role of women as educators in Islamic history, particularly in the transmission and teaching of Hadith literature during the 14th and 15th centuries. It challenges the common perception of women's roles in religious education during this period and underscores their significant contributions. The paper highlights the importance of muḥaddithāt, women experts and teachers of Hadith and its literature. These women played a significant role in higher education, yet are often overlooked in historical narratives. Abou-Bakr's evidence illustrates the gap between social practice and the exclusion of women from legislative posts, and between normative Islamic teaching, which contains no explicit textual prohibition on women serving in such capacities.

Due to cultural practices and state policy, women were often neglected even after they were qualified and skilled.

Colonialism and Its Impact on Interpretive Trends: Colonialism and external cultural pressures radicalized gender dynamics in Islamic societies, often catalyzing a defensive retreat into conservative interpretations of women's rights (Al-Mannai, 2010). Ulama in most Muslim-majority states saw colonial power as the enemy of the faith, and these things made them more conservative towards women. Not only women, but also the Ulama asked Muslims to boycott the modern education brought by the colonialists and reject their offers. Most of the Muslim-majority regions were in a conflict situation with the colonial power, which degraded their economic condition and further restricted gender roles.

Colonialism played an important role in the development of the Islamic feminist movement in Muslim-majority regions like Indonesia (Farid, 2015). Muslim women's active engagement in education and addressing the lack of empowerment within their communities was the reason behind the colonial influence (Salaymeh, 2020). This led to the establishment of Muslim women's organizations that used Islam as a tool for empowerment because Islamic education for Muslim girls emerged as a response to this problem and became a part of the nationalist movement against colonialism.

The Islamic Feminist Interpretive Response: Islamic feminists contend that patriarchy is not intrinsic to Islam; rather, male-centric hermeneutics have historically distorted the faith, leading to the systemic marginalization of women within Islamic societies (Tohidi, 2003). Based on pre-modern interpretations of the Sharia, we should expose the injustices caused by patriarchal laws and customs and present tenable, cogent alternatives within an Islamic framework that upholds equality and justice (Mir-Hosseini, 2020). We can see some affairs in conflict with Islam, including early and forced marriage, deprivation of education, property rights, forcing housework or outwork, in Islamic societies. Islamic feminist scholarship makes the important analytical distinction that these injustices are products of patriarchal interpretations of texts, not inevitable derivations from the texts themselves, a distinction this study maintains throughout. Women's status is one of the issues that has been occasionally affected by cruel governors, customs, ossification, and ethnic fanatics in Islamic history (Stowasser, 1994).

Social Practice in South and Southeast Asia: In Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority nation, mass conversion historically occurred among lower-caste Hindus during Islamic rule; however, these populations retained indigenous customs and social structures, integrating their ancestral mores into their new religious identity (Ali, 1992). As a result, non-Islamic practices like dowry have become a social norm even after Islamization. Another reason Islam spread outside the Arabian Peninsula was the Army expedition, businessmen, and religious preachers. Religious expression among the primary Muslims in those areas reflected what became the customary law and practical teachings of Islam, and in some areas, new converts introduced cultural adjustments that eventually lowered the position of women (Monsoor, 1999). This South Asian case illustrates vividly how social practice diverges from normative Islamic teaching: the dowry system, female infanticide, and restrictions on women's mobility have no Quranic foundation and reflect pre-Islamic cultural inheritances that persist under the guise of Islamic practice. The denial of citizenship rights to Muslim women is also seen as a direct result of 'cultural authenticity,' which derives from customary and religious practices and influences social policy regarding Muslim women conservatively by implying that religiosity in society cannot be taken at face value. Research indicates that religion affects gender relations and outcomes; however, the effects of particular religious affiliations differ

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due to culturally specific codes of conduct and the obligations they entail. Furthermore, outside forces unrelated to Islam, like poverty and political violence, impede policy reforms in Muslim communities that aim to improve the lives of Arab women (Abusharaf, 2006).

This is especially true of the role of social institutions, including laws, customs, norms, and codes of conduct, as these are the primary determinants of women's economic freedom and access to essential resources such as healthcare and education. Policymakers and donors need to analyze these problems in order to effectively address gender disparities; this is 'a task even more difficult than the tough exercises of increasing female enrollment rates or introducing sustainable micro-credit schemes' (Abusharaf, 2006, p. 4) because blaming and cursing religion is not going to change social norms.

Gender Relations in Islam

Normative Foundation: Analyzing Islamic gender dynamics requires examining the family unit, as this domestic sphere is the foundational microelement of the broader social structure. The positions of genders in the family reflect their societal positions, though roles can differ in domestic life and in the external world. Before delving into this, it's important to note that the Quran does not explicitly discuss gender roles except in Quran (4:34), where men were given the responsibility of financially supporting the family. The debate initiated over this verse, specifically the term 'Qawwamun ala' used within it (Roald, 2001).

'Qawwam' is generally interpreted as meaning 'in charge,' 'authority,' or 'ruler.' Parwez (n.d.) translated it as 'the man maintained the woman, fulfilled her needs, and took care to satisfy them.' Ali Abdullah Yousuf translates it as 'protector,' while Pickthal translates it as 'in charge' (Hussain, 1987). In Pickthal's view, men are assigned the role of caretakers or guardians of women. Arbary translated it as those who manage the functions of women, but Hussain (1987, p. 110) argued that this translation was misleading, as it violated women's rights to manage their contracts, earnings, and property independently. Ali justified men's role as breadwinners; according to Ali's translation, the verse reads: 'Men are the maintainers and protectors of (*qawwamun ala*) women because they support them from their means and because God has given one more strength than the other' (Ali, 1992). Abdul Aziz Jaweesh argued that superiority, even if given, is not based on natural proficiency or deficiency but on the responsibility to maintain (Hussain, 1987). Therefore, 'Qawwam' would imply to those men who maintain the needs of their families. Sharia Law stipulates that, even if the wife is wealthier than the husband, the husband is obligated to support his wife regardless of her social status (Hussain, 1987).

Interpretive Trajectories: Following her conversion, American scholar Amina Wadud critically analyzed both classical and contemporary exegetical treatments of this verse. She highlighted that the understanding of qiwama as men's control over women varies across time and place. She proposed a contemporary interpretation in which men's responsibility for women extends only to the economic support of the family. With changes in the socio-economic system, she sees potential for a more 'liberal' reinterpretation (Wadud, 1999). At-Turabi challenged the notion of men's responsibility for women's behavior, emphasizing women's right to self-determination. According to his understanding, men are in charge of women only when married, and that authority is based on the woman's consent, maintained with dignity and wisdom. The husband is responsible for the family, providing for their reasonable needs in terms of food, parenting, and education. Both spouses have authority over their children and should actively participate in running the family (Roald, 2001). The Muslim Brotherhood (1994) interprets Quranic verse 4:34 as limiting qiwama (leadership and

direction) to the economic aspects of the husband-wife relationship, emphasizing the husband's sole responsibility for financial provisions and advocating for leadership exercised with kindness and mutual consultation. This interpretive diversity, spanning from absolute patriarchal authority to strictly economic guardianship, demonstrates that the Quranic text does not mandate a singular domestic hierarchy. Instead, these social structures are interpretive constructs that fluctuate across scholarly traditions and historical contexts.

The Prophet designated everyone as a guardian, holding them accountable for their responsibilities. The Imam (head of the community) is accountable to his subjects; a man to his family and subjects; a woman to her husband for protecting her home and children; a slave to his master for protecting his master's property. Everyone is a guardian and accountable for their responsibilities (Sahih Bukhari, Book 89:252). Quran (9:71) states that men and women are both caretakers of each other. Quran (2:228) granted equal rights to wives and husbands. The Prophet advised one of his companions to treat his wife equally in every way and to avoid speaking harshly to her (Sunan Abi Dawud, Book of Marriage, no. 180).

Social Practice: While the Quranic framework exempts women from financial maintenance obligations, it places no categorical restriction on their right to pursue independent income or contribute to the household economy. However, many scholars conclude that, because women aren't financially accountable for the family, they must provide for the family by caring for it. Wadud (1999) contends that this particular domestic role of Muslim women wasn't explicitly mentioned in the Quran. Sayyid Sabiq argued that the role of women is primarily domestic, as men are bound to economic support. Sabiq specified women's roles in housework, chores, and childcare. However, Sabiq's references in his book to support women's divine mandate for domestic work might lack clarity. For instance, the hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad advises his daughter, Fatima, and her husband, Ali, to recite praises rather than grant her request for a servant doesn't explicitly define Fatima's role as domestic. Another hadith regarding Asma bint Abi Bakr illustrates her engagement in both domestic and outdoor work, showcasing the flexibility of gender roles in Islam (Roald, 2001). Sabiq's interpretation exemplifies an exegetical expansion beyond the explicit mandates of the primary texts, illustrating a distinct interpretive layer that this study decouples from normative Quranic doctrine.

This hadith indicates that Asma bint Abi Bakr engaged in both domestic and outdoor work, highlighting the flexibility of gender roles in Islam. At-Turabi also used this hadith to emphasize that women can work outside the home. Sabiq argued that Islam establishes cooperation between spouses, assigning household management to women and earning outside the house to men. The household setup aims to prevent either spouse from dividing the household (Roald, 2001). Although there's a widespread belief, especially in the Arab world, that women's primary duties are in the domestic sphere, many hadiths regarding child-rearing address both men and women. Despite the traditional Muslim belief that women bear primary responsibility for raising children, both men and women might share childcare responsibilities (Roald, 2001).

The incident of *'ila'* in early Islamic tradition highlights gender role fluidity. Clear distinctions exist between the women of Mecca, who were more inclined towards domestic roles, and the women of Medina, who engaged in domestic roles as well as working outside the home (Wadud, 1999). Islamic tradition, as interpreted by Fatma Aliye, emphasizes that culturally, wives are expected to manage the household, while husbands are expected to bear their expenses. A wife's contribution to housework is seen as a sign of good character rather than a legal obligation. An anecdote about Caliph Umar underscores this, revealing that wives

often take on more responsibilities than are religiously obligatory, such as managing the household and nursing children, thereby creating a moral indebtedness in husbands (Katz, 2022). However, in contemporary Muslim societies, while women work outside relatively more, domestic duties are still considered their primary responsibility.

Katz (2022) in his book *Wives and Work: Islamic Law and Ethics Before Modernity* discusses the evolution of Islamic perspectives on the domestic duties of wives. Early Islamic literature on zuhd emphasizes the virtue of personal service and views desiring servants as morally dubious. Different Islamic scholars hold varying views on the legal obligations and ethical duties of wives regarding domestic labor. These perspectives range from exemption from housework to moral obligations towards it. Ibn Taymīya's views, asserting a moral obligation for wives to do housework, gained prominence in the modern era, aligning with Western domestic ideals (Roald, 2001).

Normative Limits and Interpretive Debates: The Quranic reference to physical disciplinary measures in Verse 4:34 remains a central point of contention in Islamic gender discourse. Critical to this debate is the interpretation of nushuz, variously translated as 'disloyalty' or 'rebellion', as this definition determines the specific legal conditions cited to justify such measures (Roald, 2001). Although 'nushuz' applies to both men and women, the verse doesn't imply disobedience toward the husband; rather, it addresses disputes between husband and wife (Wadud, 1999). Amina Wadud (1999) provides solutions for family discord, suggesting verbal resolution or, as a last resort, separation. The term 'nushuz' interpreted by at-Tabari focuses on a woman's sexual rejection of her husband due to a sense of superiority, outlining a gradual approach to punishment starting with verbal reproach and escalating only as a last resort (Roald, 2001). It is important to distinguish here between the normative text, which the overwhelming consensus of scholars reads as permitting only the lightest symbolic gesture as an absolute last resort, and social practice, in which domestic violence in Muslim communities is a documented problem rooted in cultural patriarchies rather than in this Quranic provision (Mir-Hosseini, 2020).

Globalization and Western cultural patterns have influenced contemporary Islamic scholars, including al-Ghazali, Abu Shaqqa, and al-Qaradawi. Their works reflect a tendency towards change influenced by experiences in the Arab world and awareness of Western perceptions of Islam as hostile to women. The selection and interpretation of hadiths by these scholars have been likened to a selective approach that responds to external cultural influences (Roald, 2001, p. 169). It's commonly agreed among scholars that resorting to the 'scourge' (beating of the wife) is the last and most extreme option. Furthermore, the problem of domestic violence among Muslims today is not rooted in this Quranic passage, as the goal of such actions is harm rather than harmony (Wadud, 1999).

To conclude this section, hadiths like Sunan at-Tirmidhi (Book of Foster Relationship, no. 1083) mentioning the beating of the wife when she is 'evidently adulterous' and the hadith narrated by Aisha bint Abi Bakr, wife of the Prophet Muhammad, stating that the Prophet never hit any of his wives, illustrate that hitting a wife in Islam is not encouraged. It's considered an extreme measure to mitigate family disruption, and there's no justification for domestic violence in the Quranic verse mentioned above.

Public Sphere Equality

Early Islamic women exercised significant agency and freedom of movement; notably, the wives of the Prophet continued to access public marketplaces even following the institutionalization of seclusion. Once, Sawdah bint Zama, one of Prophet Muhammad's

wives, went out at night to fulfill a need. 'Umar ibn al-Khattab noticed her and remarked on her presence outside. Upon her return, Sawdah reported the encounter to Prophet Muhammad while he was eating. Subsequently, the Prophet received a divine revelation, after which he informed the women that Allah had permitted them to go outside for their necessities (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Book 67, Hadith 170). This hadith clarifies that if the Prophet's wives were ordered to speak to men only from behind a screen, then it applies in a greater measure to ordinary Muslim women who are not issued such an order, and in the Islamic era, they used to go outside for their necessities.

The expansion of female administrative roles reached its apogee during the Caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, who appointed Ash-Shifa bint Abdullah as the market controller (al-Muhtasib) in Medina. This strategic appointment vested her with significant judicial and executive authority over the capital's primary commercial center (Mulia, 2014). Samra bint Nuhayk of the Asad clan was appointed to the same post in Makkah by Umar, and he gave her a whip to punish anyone who cheated or gave short measure (Al-Haythami et al., 1988, Vol. 3, p. 185). As markets are busy places, if women were not allowed to go outside their homes or work outside, how would these women be appointed? Even these women were in a position to take on judicial and executive responsibilities. The Prophet's wife, Zainab, was renowned for being the most giving person. She earned money by tanning her skin and donated the proceeds to charitable causes (Mulia, 2014). The Prophet Muhammad was also reported to have received a visit from a woman named Qilat Ummi Bani Anmar, who wanted advice on purchasing and selling. Zainab bint Jahsy also took an active part in tanning animal hides. Abdullah ibn Mas'ud's wife, Raithah, was also a highly productive worker; her participation was because, at that time, her spouse and child were unable to support the family (Musta'id, 2023). In the early days of Islam, Khadijah bint Khuwailid, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, was noted for her success in business management (Musta'id, 2023).

During the Prophet's lifetime, women played a vital role in Madinah's Islamic society, participating with men in all facets of social life. The practice of gender-neutral social greetings is firmly established in the prophetic tradition; notably, Al-Bukhari's Sahih dedicates a specific chapter to the reciprocal exchange of greetings between men and women. The numerous hadiths compiled therein effectively dismantle arguments favoring gender-segregated social etiquette (Yamani, 2005). Women at the time of the Prophet Muhammad also attended taklim assemblies with men in the mosque of Madinah (Al-Qardhawi, 2007). An authentic Ḥadith is related by Muslim in his Saḥiḥ anthology, in which Fatima bint Qays responded to a call to participate alongside men at a general meeting in the mosque of Medina (Yamani, 2005). Aisyah once praised the Ansar women who dared to ask questions about junub, baligh dreams, big baths, menstruation, and istihadhah. During the time of the Prophet Muhammad, women begged him to set aside a special day for them, a day when men would not dominate, because many of his male companions were vying for their attention (Al-Qardhawi, 2007).

In the early days of Islam, Muslim women were highly enthusiastic about demonstrating their skills and tried to surpass men, especially in the realm of knowledge. This assumption is supported by the fact that 1,232 women received and narrated the hadith (Takunas, 2018), and no fewer than 298 hadith narrators received the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad from them and passed it on to the next generation. Among them, 67 are female narrators (Machasin, 2019). Aisha bint Abi Bakr was a prominent hadith narrator and is one of the seven people dubbed the 'treasury of hadith' because she narrated many hadith, almost 2,200 in total. Because of her intelligence and extraordinary memory, she was considered a reliable source of hadith (Musta'id, 2023).

Musta'id (2023) discusses the prominent role of women in the early medieval Muslim world, particularly during the era of the Tabi'in. It highlights several notable female figures who were scholars, writers, poets, doctors, and teachers. They were Hafsah bint Sirin, 'Amrah bint 'Abd al-Rahman, Umm al-Darda' al-Sughra, and Nafisa, who was respected in hadith knowledge to the extent that the renowned Imam Shafi'i attended her lectures. Other notable figures include Shaikha Shuhda, a lecturer on literature and rhetoric in Baghdad, and Zainab Ummul Muwayyid, a legal expert. Musta'id (2023) emphasizes that there was no prohibition on women seeking knowledge in the Muslim world at that time, and education was encouraged. These women are presented as highly respected and equal to their male counterparts, serving as evidence that Muslim women were urged to pursue education for their betterment and societal contribution. This historical evidence speaks directly to the normative level: the classical tradition's treatment of these women scholars as authoritative figures demonstrates that intellectual and public participation by women has deep Prophetic and early Islamic sanction, regardless of the more restrictive social practices that emerged in later periods.

Musta'id (2023) also describes changes in the status of women in Islam as influenced by the Prophet Muhammad, particularly regarding Islamic law and the stipulations of 'Iddah, the waiting period before a woman can remarry after divorce or the death of her husband. This period is set at three menstrual cycles for divorced women to confirm they are not pregnant, and four months and ten days for widows. The 'Iddah serves not only to confirm pregnancy but also to protect the woman's means of earning a living during this time and to ensure support for any potential child. These changes highlight the evolution of women's rights and social protection within Islamic teachings.

Women in Military Contexts: Yamani (2005) elucidates the pivotal, yet frequently marginalized, contributions of women to military expeditions during the Prophetic era. Women were not obligated to fight but could volunteer for military service and were duty-bound to defend Muslim lands during an attack. They typically provided support by tending to the wounded and supplying water, but, when necessary, they engaged in combat. The Sahabah took their wives with them on the Ubullah campaign, despite having only 600 fighters. The military leader, Utbah ibn Ghazwan, implemented a strategy involving the women in the army, instructing them to hold up flags and throw dust in the air. As the Muslim army advanced, the women held up flags and threw dust from behind. The enemy army became afraid and retreated, allowing the Muslims to achieve victory without any loss.

Yamani (2005) also highlights examples of women who displayed remarkable bravery and combat skills, for example, Nasibah bint Ka'b, who fought in several battles and was notably active in defending the Prophet during the Battle of Uhud. Other notable figures include Umm Sulaym, who was armed and ready to fight in the Battle of Hunayn, and Umm Ayman, who shielded the Prophet from arrows. After the Prophet's time, women like Asma bint Yazid and Umm Haram also demonstrated significant martial prowess. The text emphasizes that while combat is not a religious duty for women as it is for men in Islam, there is no religious prohibition against their participation in armed forces, provided Islamic principles are upheld, ensuring their protection and respect (Yamani, 2005). At the normative level, this evidence demonstrates that women's exclusion from military and civic roles in later Muslim societies reflects social and political choices, not Quranic mandates.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that gender roles in Islam are best understood as dynamic constructs shaped by multiple layers: the normative ideals of the Quran and Sunnah, the interpretive traditions of diverse jurisprudential schools, and the lived realities of Muslim societies across time and geography. While the Quran affirms women's spiritual equality and grants them substantive rights in marriage, inheritance, and economic participation, interpretive diversity among Sunni and Shia scholars has produced varied applications of these principles. Historical developments, including the decline of women's status during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, colonial encounters, and the rise of modernist and protectionist ulama, further illustrate how cultural and political contexts often overshadowed the egalitarian spirit of Islamic teachings. Islamic feminist scholarship underscores this distinction, arguing that patriarchal practices stem from interpretive distortions rather than scriptural mandates, thereby reclaiming justice and equality within an Islamic framework.

Looking forward, future research should expand comparative studies across regions and traditions, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, where cultural inheritances, including dowries and restrictions on women's mobility, persist under the guise of religiosity. Greater attention to women's historical contributions in education, jurisprudence, and civic life can enrich our understanding of Islamic gender dynamics and highlight overlooked legacies. Scholars should also investigate how contemporary socio-political challenges, such as poverty, political violence, and debates over feminism, interact with Islamic principles to shape gender norms today. By consistently distinguishing among normative ideals, interpretive traditions, and social practices, future scholarship can identify reform pathways that align with Islam's foundational values of equality, compassion, and justice while addressing the cultural and political realities that continue to shape Muslim family life.

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