

Retrieving the Equilibrium and restoring Justice: Using Islam’s Egalitarian Teachings to reclaim Women’s Rights

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https://www.amazon.co.uk/Sensible-Religion-Christopher-Lewis/dp/1409468089/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1493374586&sr=8-1.

Where there exists so much contention about the relationship between Islam and women’s rights, I am publishing the chapter here so it is accessible to as many people as possible. I welcome your comments and thoughts.

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Retrieving the Equilibrium and restoring Justice: Using Islam’s Egalitarian Teachings to reclaim Women’s Rights

Original principles

In the introductory chapter, Christopher Lewis describes sensible as reasonableness in beliefs and practices but also to ‘sensitivity, awareness, being mindful of the views

of others and responsive to the world around us, both individually and collectively.’ These religious traditions he affirms, enable people to be altruistic as well as fulfilled and this in essence was the message of the Prophet Muhammad over one thousand three hundred years ago. In the Arabian desert in a town called Mecca, this illiterate but well respected man began to call people to Islam with a message that would reverberate across the world and which continues to impact humanity today. The Prophet Muhammad’s message included belief in the one God and called followers of Islam to demonstrate that belief through action by standing up to Islam’s core values of justice, mercy and human dignity. He preached a message of respect and duty: that as human beings, our humanity lies in our social dealings with other.

As a Muslim, belief is not enough in itself, but is connected to proactive action: establishing justice (adl) and developing ihsaan (Ihsaan does not have an equivalent word in English but generally means good, selfless, tolerant, forgiving). Prophet Muhammad taught, in our relationships with our spouses: ‘the best of you are those who are best to their wives’; our parents: ‘and We have enjoined on man to be good to his parents’ (Quran 31:14), in our responsibility to our neighbour whether near or far: ‘he is not a believer, who eats his fill while his neighbour is hungry’; and even in slaughtering animals for food, the Prophet instructed the believer to ‘sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters.’ Although rituals are part of most religions, at its heart Islam stresses that worshipping God is through service to others and inspires human beings to reach the highest levels of human dignity and compassion.

At a time when slavery was part of the very infrastructure of society and female infanticide was common, in the seventh century the Prophet Muhammad radically called for the freeing of slaves and for women to be granted full and equal autonomy - in contrast to European countries who abolished slavery in the nineteenth century, and where women were granted voting rights only in the twentieth century. In times of war, morality is often considered to be the first victim. Yet, even in these difficult times of conflict, which, according to Islamic teachings should always be conducted as a defensive, proportionate and last resort, the Prophet Muhammad gave clear instructions that civilians (the elderly, the young, women and non-combatants) should not be harmed. Destroying any buildings of worship, the unnecessary harming of animals and even the chopping down of trees was not allowed, centuries before the development of the Geneva Conventions.

The word Islam is often translated to mean peace and submission to God but a far more accurate translation of Islam would be the act of peace-making. In his commentary on verse 33:35 of the Qur’an, jurist Al-Zamakhshari (d. 528/1137) explained Islam as meaning ‘entering into a state of peace after war.’ Islam by virtue of being a verb, is a pro-active word meaning the act of entering into a state of peace, in contrast to the word salaam which translates into peace. Similar to Jesus’ statement, ‘blessed are the peace-makers’ (New Testament Matthew 5:9) Islam actually means peace-making or achieving a state of peace before it means

submission, for which the Arabic is *istislam*. Striving towards achieving peace in daily life or even in war is clear in the Qu'ran, where God instructs Muslims always to incline towards peace rather than war. 'If they [i.e. your enemy in war] incline towards peace, incline also towards peace.' (Qur'an 8:61)

Fadl (2005) elaborates on this, emphasising that Islam's focus is on protecting life, not destroying it, on building flourishing civilisations, not demolishing them.

'The Islamic historical experience was primarily concerned not with war making, but with civilisation-building. Islamic theology teaches that an integral part of the divine covenant given to human beings is to occupy themselves with building and creating, not with destroying life. The Qur'an teaches that the act of destroying or spreading ruin on this earth is one of the gravest sins possible.'

Fadl expands further, that Islam's scriptures make clear that those corrupting the earth by destroying lives and property are guilty of the ultimate form of blasphemy and such people are waging war against God Himself.

Most religions have two components: a private, personal faith and a public, outward manifestation, often described as organised religion. Islam's values as mentioned earlier, enrich the lives of many, inspiring them to live sensible, meaningful and humane lives. As a counter-extremism and women's rights activist, it is Islam's message of justice, equality and dignity which drives me to defend human rights, challenge social injustices and contribute to the wellbeing of humanity. However, there is enormous debate, diversity and disagreement when Islam's beliefs are put into practice through laws and institutions by Muslims through their human interpretation of Islam's scriptures. The diversity of Islamic thought and practice is incredibly varied, yet at the same time can be problematic and confusing for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Today, many across the world question the benefit of religion and its believers, and there is much scepticism about the merit of Islam in particular. It is not an exaggeration to say that Islam is widely viewed, derided and even feared as an extreme religion of violence, intolerance and oppression. One of the worst blights on the reputation of Islam is how Islam and Muslims perceive, or are judged to perceive, women and the idea of gender equality.

In this chapter I will briefly examine Islam's teachings on women's rights and crucially the purpose of shariah as a dynamic and sophisticated process for establishing equilibrium, securing justice and serving the public interest. However I will also explore the dominance of a literal decontextualised and patriarchal interpretation of Islam's religious texts which has influenced sections of Muslim thought. I will outline the historical and contemporary reality of some Muslims, in manipulating and misusing Islam for their own authority whether political, economic or social to those Muslims who through the combined use of modern day Islamic law and international human rights law have secured the rights of Muslim women. Their struggle is not only for the protection of Muslim women's rights; it is about reclaiming the soul of Islam as a force of good and overcoming the challenges that face humanity when extremists exploit Islam.

Islam and Women's Rights

Muslim women's rights activists often comment on the surprising reality that generally Muslim women had more rights available to them back in the seventh century than they do today in many Muslim majority countries. The Qur'an not only banned female infanticide, it gave women the right to choose their own marriage partner, the right to education, to inherit, to vote, to work, to own property, to contribute on a political and social platform, the right to full sexual fulfilment and it even gave women the right to participate in war including an area of much controversy today, the right to participate on the front line.

Western feminist history continues to remain suspiciously silent about the remarkable rights given to women in seventh century Arabia. This is largely a result of late nineteenth century colonial feminism (Ahmed 1992) which deliberately focused on Islam's alleged suppression of women, while conveniently ignoring the lack of women's rights in Western countries. As Ahmed claims, the language of feminism was adopted by the colonial discourse to give an 'aura of moral justification to the assault' on Islam, so as 'to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonised peoples.' The legacy of unfair and Orientalist representations about Islam and women, continues to impact on contemporary thinking. Today, at the extreme end, the 'oppression of Muslim women' narrative is used by the far right and the counterjihad movement to further their Islamophobic agenda. More generally, numerous polls highlight that Britons, in large numbers, believe Islam to be a backward religion which subjugates women.

Far from sanctioning the mistreatment of women, the Qur'an deliberately sought to emphasise the equality accorded to men and women.

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

The idea that a woman's role could only be within the home or the private sphere and a man's responsibilities lay outside of the home was rejected by the Qur'an. Explaining the purpose of human life, 'I will create on the earth an agent/trustee' (Qur'an 2:30) God clearly states that human beings, both men and women, were created to fulfil a vicegerancy role, establishing justice and prohibiting evil. Islam does not advocate gender specific roles per se, or expect women to be confined to the private sphere but instead liberates women and men to focus on their human potential by encouraging both genders to excel in whatever they do and does not restrict one gender to one sphere over another. As trustees of earth, God demands that everyone fully utilise their potential for the betterment of themselves, for others and for society. As Badawi (1995) argues 'nowhere does the Quran state that one

gender is superior to the other. Men and women have the same religious and moral duties and responsibilities.’ This was best demonstrated by the Prophet Muhammad himself. The Messenger of God and leader of the growing Muslim empire who regularly undertook housework, did not expect women to be confined to the private sphere. Exemplifying the practical egalitarian spirit of Islam, he turned the limited traditional male/female roles on their head by focussing on everyone, regardless of their gender, playing a proactive part in family and community life.

This was also demonstrated by the Muslim women at the time of the Prophet. They were outspoken women who made sure their voices were heard; passive or docile they were not. Their authority and testimonies were not belittled as is too often the case today. Many male scholars would deliberately seek out those women who were known to have great intellect and understanding of the faith. Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, was an outstanding scholar and expert on Islamic legislation and over 2,210 hadith are attributed to her. If her testimonies had been ignored just because of her gender, we would not have had access to many of the statements made by the Prophet today. Aisha was described by Ibn ‘Ata as ‘among all the people, the one who had the most knowledge of fiqh (juristic understanding), the one who was the most educated and compared to those who surrounded her, the one whose judgement was the best.’ (Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, in Mernissi 1991)

Many of the greatest teachers in Islam were in fact women like A'isha bint Sa'd bint ibn Abi Waqqas and Sayyida Nafisa whose pupils included Imam Malik and Imam Shafi'i respectively, the founders of the Maliki and Shafi'i jurisprudence. Nadwi (2007) highlights that, historically, the transmission of hadith (the sayings of the Prophet), has involved at least eight thousand prominent women. The world's first academic degree granting university, Al-Qarawiyin was founded by Fatima al-Fihri in 859CE and is still in operation today in Morocco. Rather than suppressing women, Islam inspired and fully encouraged them to seek knowledge and to use their knowledge to benefit humanity.

As soldiers, women also joined Muslim armies and participated in battles. Women like Umm Umara who was praised by the Prophet for her tremendous skill, fought in numerous battles including the Battle of Uhud and there are many examples like her, such as Umm Hakim who single handedly killed seven Byzantine soldiers at the Battle of Marj al-Saffar. Much has been written about Khawlah bint al-Azwar, known as the Black Knight who was a remarkable soldier. Whenever she was not in battle, she took responsibility for organising medical care to treat the wounded, thirteen centuries before Florence Nightingale did the same in Europe. Not only were there Muslim women soldiers, teachers and scholars, but they also held high political office and key leadership roles. Ash Shifa bint Abdullah was not only skilled in medicine but it was her skill in public administration which led to her appointment by Caliph Umar Ibn Al Khattab as chief administrator of the marketplace, the modern day equivalence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Throughout the centuries Muslim women also held the reins of power. Shajarat al-Dur, a ruler of Egypt who gained power in Cairo in 648/1250 took political and military power after the death of her husband. She successfully led her army to victory during the crusades and captured King Louis IX. Sultana Radia Begum who governed Delhi with a firm hand in 634/1236 was famed for fair dealing. Asma Bint Shihab al-Sulayhiyya (d480/1087) ruled Yemen with her husband. Her daughter in law, Arwa held power for almost half a century from 485/1092 to 532/1138. Both these female heads of state were so respected that the Friday sermon in mosques was proclaimed in their names, a rare honour (Mernissi 2007). More recently, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Turkey, the four largest contemporary Muslim nations, have all had women leaders. In contrast, the US Senate has had a lower proportion of women than the Iranian Parliament.

Purpose of Shariah: Securing Justice and serving the Public Interest

'A day of [commanding] justice is better than sixty or seventy years' worship,' (Saying of The Prophet Muhammad via Abu Hurayrah by Daylami and Abu Nu'aym: Kashf al-Khafa' of 'Ajluni, no. 1721). In Islam, religion is not an end in itself but its purpose is to secure justice through the fulfilment of higher objectives in life: in Islam known as maqasid al Shariah (the higher objectives of Islam's ethical, legal and moral rulings). The aim of maqasid is to achieve a perfect balance, or equilibrium between tradition and reason, where interpretations and legal opinions can and must be modified according to the time, place, local culture (urf) and context.

The human endeavour to interpret the Shariah, or the Divine Will which began in the 8th century, resulted in a great collection of juristic legal opinions known as fiqh. Imam Ghazzali stated that 'nine-tenths of juristic understanding (fiqh) is understanding your context and one tenth is mastering the texts.' (Bayyah 2011) The Muslim jurists of these early times, developed a rich intellectual tradition founded on the understanding that the essential purpose of shariah rulings and the higher objectives of the shariah were to secure justice (adl). They recognised that the aim of Islam was to prevent human beings from being deprived of their rights and to serve the public interest (maslahah.) Key to maslahah are the twin principles of the removal of hardship (raf al-haraj) and the prevention of harm (daf al-darar). Legal rulings, particularly with regard to issues unrelated to fundamental beliefs, are determined by the historical, cultural and moral environment, and are not meant to be fixed for all time, as the process of ijtihaad (understanding and deriving rules of shariah on particular issues from Islamic sources), encourages interpretations based on current political, social, economic and cultural contexts.

Imam Ibn al Qayyim (d1351) summarised the purpose of shariah:

'The shariah is all about wisdom and achieving people's welfare in this life and the afterlife. It is all about justice, mercy, wisdom and good. Thus any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the Islamic law (shariah), even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretation.'

A ruling made in the name of religion cannot be part of Islamic law if the end result is wrongdoing or nonsense; at their core they should be sensible. This resonates with Christopher Lewis' definition of sensible as described earlier. The Qur'an is clear on the centrality of justice as an end goal, commanding believers to stand up in the name of justice even if it means standing up against oneself, one's family, or against the rich or the poor. (Qur'an 4:135)

Early traditional shariah principles developed the concepts that people were innocent of a crime until proven guilty, that proof is based on unequivocal evidence and that capital/corporal punishments must be waived if there is even the slightest doubt as to culpability. Long before the language of human rights emerged in twentieth century Western discourse, Muslim jurists in the medieval era established the idea of human rights (huquq al adamiyyin) and argued that no ruler had the power to deprive an individual of their rights. Shariah, or the rule of law was not to protect the rich or ruling classes, but was intended to secure the rights of each and every individual. As we are all equal before God, everyone was deemed equal in the eyes of the law.

Justice underpins Islamic legal theory. Adl translates as: 'placing something in its rightful place and also means according equal treatment to others or reaching a state of equilibrium in transactions with them.' (Kamali 2002) As an over-riding objective of Islam, Kamali states that justice stands next in order of priority to belief in God and the message of the Prophet. Encouraging humanity constantly to reflect on the precise regularity and equilibrium of the universe, God challenges humans to see if there are any flaws in the order of the universe. (Qur'an 67:1-5) Muslims are expected to practice moderation in all aspects of life, to respect the rights of others in order to live well-balanced lives and to recreate the universe's equilibrium among the human race. Any kind of extremism is discouraged, even in worship. 'O People of Scripture! Do not go to extremes in your religion.' (Quran 4:171)

To deny the rights of another is to transgress against the Balance spoken of in the Quran (55:7-9). 'He has set up the Balance: in order that you may not transgress the Balance. So establish weight with justice, and fall not short in the Balance.' The sources of Islamic teachings and much of the original Islamic jurisprudence repeatedly make it clear that extremism of any kind upsets the balance of the human condition. Without balance there cannot be justice and without justice there is no Islam. Muslims are obliged to seek equilibrium in all aspects of life and justice for all. How do those Muslims who resent women's participation believe such an equilibrium

can be achieved if half of humanity is prevented from fully utilising their skills and talents?

The Dominance of Literal Decontextualised Readings of Islam's Scriptures

At face value, there seem to be some undeniably unjust and deeply disturbing practices against women, most notably that a Muslim man is allowed four wives, and that a man may beat his wife. Verse 4:34 appears to condone domestic violence against women. But as Hasan states (2011) not only is a holistic reading of the verse required, but an appreciation of the social-historical context is also needed, where violence against women in the seventh century was socially perceived as normal behaviour. The Prophet himself never hit any woman and despised any form of domestic violence including forced marriage. The verse was a temporary measure which fell in line with the gradualist approach of the Qur'an with the aim of eventually outlawing domestic violence. (Hasan 2011) Other examples of this gradualist approach adopted by the Qur'an included the prohibition of slavery. The Qur'an began a process of encouraging the freeing of slaves based on Islam's belief that freedom was the natural state of affairs for human beings. It did not ban it outright immediately, because of the widely accepted and institutionalised economic and cultural dependence on slaves at the time. But it began a long term process of freeing slaves with the aim of outlawing slavery altogether and as Sardar (2011) points out, the morality of the Qur'an is not the end point of human thought but rather the beginning of morality. Hence:

'the evidence for this interpretation is overwhelming, from the 8th-century AD Mufti of Mecca, 'Ata bin Abi Rabah, who ruled that "a man may not hit his wife" to the 20th-century Mufti of the Zaytuna in Tunis, Ibn 'Ashur, who ruled that the State may ban domestic violence and punish any man who assaulted his wife.' (Hasan 2011)

Sardar (2011) points out that the moral goal of the Qur'an is to move towards a society free from domestic violence. Unfortunately, this is still a far cry today where one in four women in the UK, irrespective of faith are victims of domestic violence.

The practice of polygamy was widespread in pre Islamic times and was drastically limited by the Qur'an. The relevant verses in the Qur'an are about offering the protection of marriage to those widowed or orphaned after battle, but restricts the number of wives a man can have to a maximum of four (Qur'an 4:2-3). However, the same verse states that if men cannot treat them equally resulting in injustice, then they should only marry one. A later verse (4:129) then states, 'you shall never be able to do justice among women, no matter how much you desire to do so.' God is in fact declaring that men will never be able to be just between wives and therefore it is best that men practice monogamy. Some jurists fundamentally rejected the view that the Qur'an advocated polygamy but instead supported monogamy as the Islamic

norm. 'The goal of the exercise is a transformation: to move a polygamous society to a monogamous one.' (Sardar 2011) These days, the overwhelming majority of Muslim men only have one wife.

One of the current crises facing Muslims today is the dominance of literal, decontextualised readings of Islam's scriptures and a misuse in the application of doctrines and traditions of Islamic law in the contemporary age. Whilst ignoring the overall spirit of the Qur'an, both Islamo-fascists and Islamophobes, select literal readings of singular verses of the Qur'an in isolation of their historical, cultural and moral contexts. This has led to extreme, puritanical sects first breaking away from, and then bullying, mainstream Islam and Muslims. The Qur'an, it must be pointed out, was revealed over a period of twenty three years and was often speaking directly to the early believers and to their political and social circumstances. A literalist reading fails to distinguish between general rulings that were addressed to all Muslims, and ones that were supposed to be restricted in application to the particular circumstances of the early believers. These extremists justify fierce intolerance, aggressive sexism and even terrible atrocities in the name of religion. As Fadl (2002) wisely observes, 'the text will morally enrich the reader but will only be as moral as the reader. If the reader is intolerant, hateful or oppressive, so will be his interpretation of the text.'

In past centuries, the violent puritanism of extreme offshoots, such as the Khawarij were rejected by mainstream Islam. However, the contemporary supremacist puritanism of Wahabi-Salafi ideology that rejects women's autonomy and promotes the complete marginalisation of women in public, has come to hold much sway over Muslim thought. The state sponsored spread of Wahhabism by Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the unprecedented scope of the internet means this extreme version of Islam now reaches Muslims all over the world. Other ideological strands such as Deobandi and Barelvi thought originated in countries where deep chauvinism is the norm. A fusion of patriarchal culture, pre-modern legal rulings and literal decontextualised readings of Islam's texts has in part resulted in highly conservative interpretations of the position of women in Islam. Due in large part to a stagnation in ijtihaad, and an absence of religious authority and of institutions which were pivotal in rejecting extreme interpretations, together with the modern phenomenon of globalisation, Muslims find themselves living in unprecedented times.

Patriarchy: Silencing the Female Voice

From the very beginning, there was widespread resistance to the Prophet's campaign for women's rights, even while he was alive. Patriarchy and chauvinism were ingrained in the cultural attitudes of the time and were hard to change. The Prophet himself had to challenge gender-based inequalities directly. Knowing the tensions that existed around treating women with dignity, he repeatedly warned his followers throughout his life and even at his final sermon to treat women justly. When, for example, men tried to prevent women from attending the mosques or

denying them inheritance rights, the Prophet explicitly ordered them not to deny women their rights in these and many other areas. It is inexcusable that today, even in the United Kingdom, male dominated mosque leadership has prevented women from sitting on committees and, in some cases, have even denied them entry into the house of God.

Inheritance rights are an interesting example. In pre-Islamic Arabia, it was the norm for women to be denied any share in inheritance, especially as one of the criteria for qualifying for inheritance was to participate in battle. As more and more women began to participate in battle, they began to demand their share in inheritance, whereas the men in Medina insisted that women should continue to be barred from qualifying for inheritance. However God ruled in women's favour.

After the Prophet's death, many men felt they could revert to previous cultural norms that viewed and treated women as lesser beings. Ibn Umar refers to this move in a remarkable statement: 'When the Prophet was alive we were cautious about speaking and dealing with our women in fear that a revelation would come from God concerning our behaviour. But when the Prophet died we were able to speak and deal with them more freely.' (Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani in Fadl 2008) Since the earliest days of resistance to the development of women's rights, a practice of silencing women and in particular of preventing them from interpreting Islamic law and pushing them out of the public sphere, has been in play. As Tucker (2008) writes,

'the process of silencing them in the following centuries represented a historic defeat for women, where the development of the law, and in particular, the interpretation of Islamic law was left in the hand of male interpreters. The impact of this can still be felt today, where "the Woman as silent" both shaped and was shaped by Islamic legal discourse.'

Some of the thinking of early male jurist's was conditioned by their being male. Their jurisprudence was not influenced by malicious misogyny but rather by patriarchal assumption stemming from the culture norms of the time. (Ali 2008.) Some legal interpretations prevailed because they were more politically, socially and culturally acceptable as opposed to being more authentic.

The establishment of the Abbasid dynasty in 750 and for four centuries thereafter played a crucial role in developing institutions and shaping thought on all matters relating to Islam including gender. As Ahmed (1992) argues, the Abbasid dynasty's 'interpretive and legal legacy has defined Islam ever since, heard only the androcentric voice of Islam and they interpreted the religion as intending to institute androcentric laws and an androcentric vision in all Muslim societies throughout time.' Unlike the early Muslim believers, where women actively participated in the public sphere, whether in the battlefield or in the mosques, 'in Abbasid society women were conspicuous for their absence from all arenas of the community's central affairs,' where 'the most significant differences distinguishing Abbasid society from the first Islamic society in Arabia lay in the view that elite men had of women and the relationship in which they stood to them....the marketing of people and particularly

women, as commodities and as objects for sexual use was an everyday reality in Abbasid society.’ (Ahmed 1992)

Islam Empowering Women Strengthening Societies: Today’s Gender Jihad

Religion is not the only factor impacting on our ability to live sensibly. Britain, for example, has fallen from 33rd to 60th place out of 190 countries in global league tables in relation to women’s access to power and representation in politics (Centre for Women and Democracy 2013). It is well known that a lack of education, employment and other socio-economic indicators acts as a barrier to anyone living a free and independent life and fully realising their human potential. A recent report (Gallup 2012) suggested that one of the greatest challenges facing women in the Arab world is not religion, but a lack of economic and social development and security. The same report also highlighted that the more men are thriving, are in employment and are educated, the more they support women's rights. This is not just a problem in the developing world; having worked with British Muslim women for the last twenty years, I have witnessed the socio-economic obstacles affecting both men and women here.

For women to be free to live as they choose, to participate in the public sphere and to be on an equal footing with men, as prescribed in Islam, is not just right or fair, it is beneficial for society as a whole. Development studies have repeatedly proved that proactive women play a critical role in economic progress, good governance and healthy civil society. Educated women in social, political and economic roles are essential to reducing poverty, improving health (including decreasing the transmission of HIV/AIDS), and improving a country’s long-term economic growth rate. Women’s empowerment, through education and participation in society, is widely recognised as a powerful development objective in its own right and as Coleman(2010) highlights, among the Millennium Development Goals, women’s empowerment is considered so essential that it underpins all of the other goals.

Coleman notes, (2010)

‘societies that invest in and empower women are on a virtuous cycle. They become richer, more stable, better governed, and less prone to fanaticism. Countries that limit women’s educational and employment opportunities and their political voice get stuck in a downward spiral. They are poorer, more fragile, have higher levels of corruption and are more prone to extremism.’

Kristof and WuDunn (2012) suggest that empowering girls is key to disempowering terrorists and that ‘the countries that nurture terrorists are disproportionately those where women are marginalised.’ The skills of women as mediators and decision makers who can effectively come together to form networks and settle disputes has also been highlighted. Their efforts are ‘frequently dismissed as irrelevant or are not sufficiently value.’ (Cardona, I. Justino,P. Mitchell, B. and Müller, C 2012) ‘But research demonstrates that at the local level, women continue to build peace within their homes and communities and come together collectively to create change.’

The message is clear and contrary to the assertions of the chauvinist, Muslim or otherwise: it is not women's active participation in public life but the lack of educated, employed women and the marginalisation and silencing of women's voices which contributes to the weakening of families and societies. As we have seen, Islam respects the full independence and autonomy of women and encourages both men and women to make use of their full potential for the betterment of humanity.

Tariq Ramadan (2009) aptly wrote that 'Islam has no problem with women, but Muslims themselves do clearly appear to have serious problems with them.' It is important to note that not all Muslims, men in particular, deny women their rights. Many Muslim men and women true to their faith are engaging in a 'gender jihad,' a struggle to reclaim women's rights guaranteed by Islam. Using the egalitarian teachings of Islam, a number of individuals and organisations across the world from Morocco to Indonesia, from Pakistan to Egypt, as well as here in the UK, are working to reclaim Islam's spirit of justice for all. For such change to take place, it is essential for Muslim women and men not to reject Islam, but to master and then arm themselves with Islamic teachings. A genuine understanding of Shariah law and how it has developed provides the tools for undermining patriarchal practices that are usually, ironically, protected and strengthened in the name of Shariah law.

A good example of how Shariah law and women's rights have been proved not to be mutually exclusive is the reform of the family code (mudawana) in Morocco. In 2004, with backing from the king and in response both to a civil society campaign led by grassroots activists and to the collection of one million signatures from ordinary Moroccans, a new family code was passed by Parliament. The reformed mudawana restricted polygamy, raised the permitted marriage age for girls from fifteen to eighteen, gave women further guarantees in marriage, prevented divorces from taking place outside of court and granted women greater financial autonomy.

Musawah is a global movement that calls for equality and justice in the Muslim family by challenging dominant decontextualised interpretations of Islamic law. The Musawah approach involves a critical feminist perspective while working within the tradition of Islamic legal thought, fully utilising Islam's scriptures to help secure justice for women and families. This powerful combination of feminism and Islam can help combat patriarchy effectively in Muslim majority countries and communities.

Not only are Muslim women campaigning against violence, there have been numerous initiatives set up by Muslim men, such as the Muslim Men against Domestic Violence initiative and the Muslims for White Ribbon Campaign. Through reference to the Qur'an and to the example of the Prophet, Islam is used as a tool to help tackle domestic violence in Muslim communities. My own organisation, Inspire, is a human rights organisation which works to re-liberate Muslim women from injustices experienced not only by those who distort Islam's teachings but also within wider society, where Muslim women are significantly disadvantaged. Inspire campaign for the rights of Muslim women, using both British equality legislation and the egalitarian Islamic tradition. The empowerment of Muslim women is a key focus of our work. Having not been provided with a good Islamic education, many British Muslim women struggle to provide contextualised religious guidance to their children who often dismiss their parents as weak or ignorant of Islam. Some of these children have been shown to be vulnerable to extremist ideologies found on the

internet, or to hateful propaganda taught by intolerant Muslim preachers. Inspire runs workshops all over Britain to equip women not only with an understanding of their rights and how to secure them, but also, crucially, a sound knowledge of Islam is also imparted to them to help them to keep their children within mainstream Islam and to reject extreme ideas.

The success or failure of this gender jihad is one of the main challenges facing Muslims in the twenty-first century, particularly since the 'Arab Spring'. It remains to be seen whether ruling Islamist parties appreciate that the empowerment and full representation of women in all areas of life is a prerequisite to strengthening their countries, politically, economically and socially. As God says (Qur'an 9:71) 'men and women are protectors and supporters (awliya) of one another: They enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil.' This Qur'anic verse suggests mutuality, interdependence and equality between men and women who should rely on, support and respect one another in order to cooperate in all aspects of life whether private or public.

Both faith-based and non-faith feminists know that despite the achievements made over time the road to full gender equality is a long one. However, the gender equality movement is an influential one; the fear of being accused of discrimination against women is significant in the twenty first century. This politically correct practice is used effectively by many Muslim women's rights activists and cautiously by the international community in order to apply pressure on communities and countries. The language of gender equality will continue to become customary among Muslims, as is evident among so many ordinary believers. This movement, fused with an egalitarian Islam, should be embraced by all those who believe in justice and should be fully supported by Muslims so as to bring effective change for women. While being faithful to Islamic tradition it is imperative to recognise and filter out patriarchal interpretations in order to meet the higher objectives of shariah that Islam calls for: to retrieve the equilibrium that is lost whenever women's rights are repressed.

Christopher Lewis asserts that following the religious path is a sensible response for many in the world, and that 'the vast majority of religious people are leading ordinary loving lives.' This is true for Islam, but many Muslims, and Muslim women in particular face tremendous challenges. Help can be found within Islam. Societies as a whole would benefit hugely from the genuine empowerment of Muslim women. The climate is ripe. The time is now. We can, through a combined struggle of religious, scholarly and activist endeavor fulfill Islam's promise to women and to humanity.

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