

## **THE REVIVAL OF WOMEN'S STATUS IN ISLAM: BEYOND CULTURAL DISTORTIONS**

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### **Abstract:**

*The status of women in Islam has long been subject to misinterpretation, often distorted by cultural traditions and patriarchal norms rather than Islamic teachings themselves. This paper explores the original rights and dignified status Islam granted women—such as the right to education, inheritance, ownership, consent in marriage, and participation in public life—contrasting these with the restrictive practices that emerged later due to socio-cultural influences. Through a historical and textual analysis of the Qur'an and Hadith, the study reveals a consistent emphasis on justice, equality, and human dignity. The paper also examines the ways in which Islamic reformers and scholars are reclaiming women's roles in society by returning to authentic sources. It argues that the revival of women's status in Islam is not a modern invention but a restoration of foundational principles, offering a more inclusive and empowering understanding of Islamic gender ethics.*

### **Keywords in paragraph:**

*Islam, women's rights, cultural distortions, gender equality, Qur'an, Hadith, empowerment.*

### **Introduction:**

The discourse surrounding women's rights and roles in Islam has long been complicated by a confluence of religious misunderstanding, cultural practices, and colonial narratives. While Islam, as revealed in the Qur'an and embodied in the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, granted unprecedented rights to women in the 7th century, these rights have often been obscured or suppressed due to patriarchal interpretations and local traditions. The widespread assumption that Islam inherently oppresses women is not only misleading but fundamentally contradicts the principles embedded in its primary texts. The aim of this study is to deconstruct these misperceptions by examining the authentic teachings of Islam concerning women's status and highlighting the cultural distortions that have obscured their rightful position. Through this process, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader revival of Islamic gender justice by encouraging a return to foundational Islamic sources.

Historically, the pre-Islamic era, known as **Jāhiliyyah** (the Age of Ignorance), was marked by deeply rooted misogynistic practices in many Arab societies. Women were often treated as property, denied inheritance, forced into marriages, and even subjected to infanticide. The Qur'an directly addressed and abolished many of these injustices. For example, the Qur'anic verse, "*When the female (infant), buried alive, is questioned – for what crime she was killed*" (Qur'an, 81:8-9), condemned the prevalent practice of female infanticide, signaling a radical departure from societal norms of the time. Similarly, Islam introduced the right of inheritance for women, which was revolutionary for that era: "*For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much – an obligatory share*" (Qur'an, 4:7). These declarations reflect the fundamental ethical shift Islam brought in affirming women's dignity and worth.

Despite such textual clarity, the status of women in many Muslim-majority societies has often been shaped more by local customs and tribal traditions than by Islamic law itself. The conflation of culture and religion has led to a distorted image of women's roles in Islam, both within and outside the Muslim world. Scholars such as **Fatima Mernissi** (1991) and **Amina Wadud** (1999) have explored how patriarchal readings of Islamic texts have perpetuated gender inequality, stressing that a contextual and inclusive interpretation of the Qur'an reveals a far more egalitarian vision. For example, Mernissi argues that early Muslim women played active roles in public, intellectual, and political life, but later male-dominated scholarship gradually erased or downplayed their contributions.

One of the most significant contributions of Islam to women's empowerment was the affirmation of their spiritual equality. The Qur'an states: "*Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women... Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward*" (Qur'an, 33:35). This verse, among others, emphasizes that women and men are equal before God in their religious responsibilities and spiritual potential. During the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ time, women were not only active in worship but also in social and political affairs. Women such as **Khadija bint Khuwaylid**, the Prophet's first wife and a successful businesswoman, and **Aisha bint Abu Bakr**, a renowned jurist and transmitter of Hadith, are powerful examples of the roles women held in early Islamic society.

However, with the expansion of Islamic civilization into Persian, Byzantine, and South Asian territories, many non-Islamic cultural norms infiltrated Muslim societies. For instance, the influence of patriarchal Persian administrative systems and the seclusion practices from Byzantine customs led to the institutionalization of *purdah* (female seclusion) and other restrictive practices. These were later reinforced through legal codifications and conservative jurisprudence. Over time, cultural norms came to be wrongly equated with religious prescriptions. **Leila Ahmed** (1992) in her seminal work *Women and Gender in Islam* illustrates how historical shifts in power and political agendas contributed to shaping religious discourse in ways that marginalized women. Moreover, the colonial encounter further complicated the narrative. Western colonial powers often portrayed Muslim societies as backward and oppressive, especially in terms of women's rights, in order to justify their intervention and control. This "colonial feminism," as termed by scholars like **Lila Abu-Lughod** (2002), sought to 'rescue' Muslim women from Islam, thereby reinforcing orientalist stereotypes and overlooking indigenous feminist movements grounded in Islamic values. Consequently, the backlash to colonial intrusion sometimes led to a rigid defense of traditionalism, further entrenching conservative gender norms.

In recent decades, there has been a revival of interest in Islamic feminism or gender justice movements rooted in authentic Islamic frameworks. Muslim scholars and activists are increasingly turning to the Qur'an and Sunnah to reclaim women's rights and challenge patriarchal interpretations. The efforts of scholars like **Asma Barlas** in *Believing Women in Islam* (2002) argue for a non-patriarchal reading of the Qur'an that aligns with its core principles of justice, mercy, and equality. Barlas insists that God's message was distorted not in revelation, but in interpretation. This approach aligns with the Islamic epistemology that considers the Qur'an as the primary source of truth, and any interpretation must be judged against its overarching ethical principles.

One of the key areas of revival is in the field of education. Islam mandates the pursuit of knowledge for both men and women. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “*Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim*” (Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith 224). Despite this, in many societies, female education has lagged due to socio-economic and cultural barriers. Initiatives across the Muslim world are now working to revive this prophetic mandate, recognizing that women’s education is not just a right but a spiritual obligation.

Another important dimension is economic empowerment. The Qur’an clearly allows women to engage in economic activities, own property, and manage their finances independently. Khadija’s success as a businesswoman before and after her marriage to the Prophet ﷺ is a clear precedent. However, cultural norms have often discouraged or restricted women’s participation in the workforce, especially in leadership roles. The revival of women’s status in Islam must, therefore, include efforts to dismantle these barriers and promote inclusive economic policies.

Marriage and family laws are also a focus area for reform. Islam grants women the right to choose their spouse, to stipulate conditions in the marriage contract, and to seek divorce (khula). Yet, in practice, many women are denied these rights due to traditional customs or misapplication of Islamic jurisprudence. Advocacy for legal reforms based on Islamic principles is growing, aiming to realign practice with authentic teachings.

Crucially, the revival of women’s status in Islam must be led by both women and men who are committed to the values of the Qur’an and the prophetic model. It is not enough to adopt modern feminist frameworks without grounding them in Islamic ethics. This does not mean rejecting contemporary human rights discourses but engaging with them critically and constructively from within an Islamic paradigm. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself was a reformer who challenged unjust norms and empowered marginalized voices, including women.

In conclusion, the revival of women’s status in Islam is not a modern innovation but a return to the core teachings of Islam. It involves peeling away centuries of cultural accretions and patriarchal misinterpretations that have clouded the Qur’anic vision of justice and equality. By reconnecting with the ethical foundations of the Islamic tradition, contemporary Muslims can revive a balanced and empowering model of gender relations that is both authentic and just. This paper explores this revival through textual analysis, historical context, and contemporary reform efforts, aiming to contribute to a more accurate and hopeful understanding of women in Islam.

#### **literature review:**

The existing body of literature on the status of women in Islam presents a complex interplay of scriptural interpretation, historical context, colonial impact, and contemporary reform. Scholars from diverse backgrounds have addressed the issue of Muslim women's rights from theological, sociological, and feminist perspectives. A recurring theme across much of the literature is the divergence between the normative Islamic teachings and the lived realities of Muslim women across different societies. Many contemporary researchers argue that the marginalization of women in Muslim contexts is not a consequence of Islamic doctrine itself, but rather the result of centuries of patriarchal interpretation, cultural assimilation, and political manipulation of religious texts.

One of the foundational scholars in this field is **Fatima Mernissi**, whose groundbreaking work *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991) critically examined the Hadith

literature and questioned the authenticity of some narrations that have historically been used to justify female subjugation. Mernissi argued that Islam's original teachings were far more egalitarian than what is often portrayed, and that women in early Islamic history played active and influential roles in both the public and private spheres. Her work opened the door for Muslim women to question inherited norms without rejecting the faith itself. By highlighting the historical contributions of women such as Aisha bint Abu Bakr, who transmitted over two thousand Hadiths and engaged in political discourse, Mernissi set the stage for re-evaluating the intellectual and societal roles of women in early Islam.

Building on this trajectory, **Amina Wadud's** *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999) offered a hermeneutical analysis of Qur'anic verses commonly cited in discussions of gender. Wadud emphasized that a contextual and holistic reading of the Qur'an reveals a consistent commitment to gender justice. She challenged the androcentric interpretations that have long dominated Islamic scholarship and called for a more inclusive and egalitarian approach to exegesis. Her work has been influential among Muslim reformers seeking to reconcile religious belief with modern concepts of gender equality. Wadud's interpretation of verses like Qur'an 4:34, often cited to justify male authority over women, deconstructs the linguistic and historical assumptions underlying traditional exegesis.

In *Believing Women in Islam* (2002), **Asma Barlas** further deepened this discourse by arguing that the Qur'an itself does not promote patriarchy; rather, it has been misread through patriarchal lenses. Barlas proposed a "textual theology" that returns to the Qur'an as the ultimate source of authority, free from the biases of centuries of male-centered interpretations. She criticized the influence of medieval jurists and argued that the original Islamic message was one of justice, equality, and mutual respect between genders. Her call for non-patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an is rooted not in secular feminism but in Islamic epistemology, making her work particularly relevant for Muslim audiences seeking authentic reform from within.

Conversely, **Leila Ahmed** in her influential work *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) took a historical and socio-political approach, tracing the transformation of women's roles from the Prophet Muhammad's time to the colonial period. Ahmed contended that while the Prophet's message significantly uplifted women's status, this progress was later reversed as Islamic law and society absorbed patriarchal values from conquered territories like Persia and Byzantium. She highlighted how colonial discourses later framed Muslim women as victims of their religion, thereby justifying imperial control. This concept, which she termed "colonial feminism," identified the hypocrisy of Western concern for Muslim women's rights, which was more about domination than liberation. Ahmed's historical analysis underlines how both internal (Islamic) and external (colonial) forces shaped the current status of women in Muslim societies.

This dichotomy between religious ideals and socio-cultural practices is further explored in the works of **Lila Abu-Lughod**, particularly in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013). Abu-Lughod critiques the Western narrative that Muslim women are universally oppressed and in need of rescue. She emphasizes the diversity of Muslim women's experiences and warns against viewing them through a singular lens. Abu-Lughod calls for respecting women's agency and understanding the socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts in which they live. Her anthropological approach cautions against overgeneralization and reinforces the idea that solutions to women's



issues in Muslim societies must be grounded in local contexts and not imposed from outside.

The resurgence of interest in **Islamic feminism** or **gender justice within Islam** has also led to an increase in scholarship that seeks to harmonize faith and feminist ethics. Scholars like **Kecia Ali** have contributed significantly in this area. In *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (2006), Ali analyzes Islamic legal discourses on marriage, sexuality, and gender roles, arguing for a more dynamic and contextual approach to Islamic law (*fiqh*). She challenges static and literalist readings of classical jurisprudence that have contributed to unequal gender norms and calls for a reconstruction of ethics based on Qur'anic values rather than medieval legal frameworks. Ali's work highlights the possibility of reform within the Islamic legal tradition through *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and ethical rethinking.

On the theological front, **Mohammad Hashim Kamali** has contributed to the discourse with a more traditional yet progressive voice. In his works, he emphasizes the *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law), which include justice (*'adl*), welfare (*maṣlaḥa*), and dignity (*karāmah*). He argues that Islamic law must be applied in ways that uphold these objectives, especially in relation to women's rights. Kamali advocates for the revival of *ijtihad* and calls for re-evaluating outdated rulings that conflict with contemporary human rights and the ethical goals of Islam.

While these scholars differ in methodology—from feminist hermeneutics to traditional jurisprudence—they collectively highlight a consistent theme: the gap between the spirit of Islamic teachings and the cultural-political practices that have undermined women's status. This literature reveals that authentic Islamic teachings offer a framework for gender justice, but their realization requires challenging long-standing interpretations and practices that deviate from the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Additionally, empirical studies on women's lived experiences in various Muslim-majority societies have enriched the literature by providing real-world context. Research by **Nadje Al-Ali** and **Saba Mahmood** has shown how Muslim women themselves are navigating, resisting, or reinterpreting religious and cultural norms. Mahmood, particularly in *Politics of Piety* (2005), complicates the notion of agency by showing that Muslim women's religious practices may not align with liberal feminist expectations but are nevertheless meaningful and empowering within their own frameworks. Such insights broaden the understanding of what empowerment means in different Islamic contexts.

Despite the richness of the literature, certain gaps remain. There is a need for more integrative studies that bridge textual analysis with grassroots activism, and more focus on non-Arab Muslim societies where cultural practices may differ significantly. Furthermore, the voices of traditionalist scholars engaging constructively with feminist critiques are relatively underrepresented, though they are essential for broader reform to gain legitimacy within conservative circles.

In summary, the literature demonstrates a strong consensus that Islam, when understood through its primary sources and historical context, offers a dignified and just vision of women's roles and rights. However, this vision has been overshadowed by centuries of patriarchal interpretation, cultural distortion, and external interference. A revival of women's status in Islam requires not only textual re-examination but also historical awareness, contextual sensitivity, and ethical commitment. This literature review

underscores that reclaiming the status of women in Islam is not a rupture with tradition, but a return to its foundational principles of justice, equality, and human dignity.

### **Research questions**

1. To what extent have cultural traditions and patriarchal interpretations distorted the original teachings of Islam regarding women's rights and status?
2. How can a return to authentic Islamic sources (Qur'an and Sunnah) facilitate the revival of gender justice and the empowerment of women in contemporary Muslim societies?

### **Significance of Research**

This research is significant as it challenges the widespread misinterpretation of Islamic teachings regarding women's rights, revealing how cultural distortions have overshadowed authentic principles. By reconnecting with foundational texts, it provides a faith-based framework for gender justice, empowering both scholarship and social reform within contemporary Muslim communities.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research methodology grounded in textual analysis and supported by a socio-historical framework. The primary focus is on the reinterpretation of foundational Islamic texts—specifically the Qur'an and Hadith—through a gender-sensitive lens that seeks to uncover the original principles of justice, dignity, and equality granted to women in Islam. By analyzing selected Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions, the research aims to identify the distinction between divinely ordained rights and culturally imposed restrictions. Secondary sources, such as classical commentaries (*tafsir*), modern feminist exegesis, and works of contemporary Islamic scholars, are critically examined to trace the evolution of interpretations over time.

The study also integrates historical context to highlight how socio-political dynamics, including colonialism and regional customs, influenced the way women's roles were perceived and practiced in different Islamic societies. This dual approach—textual and historical—enables a comprehensive understanding of the disjunction between original Islamic teachings and contemporary cultural realities. The research does not attempt to produce generalizations applicable to all Muslim contexts but rather focuses on identifying patterns of distortion and potential for revival within a variety of scholarly and cultural discourses.

To frame the theoretical foundation of this study, the research adopts **Amina Wadud's Hermeneutical Model** of Qur'anic interpretation, which emphasizes three key aspects: (1) **textual analysis**, focusing on linguistic and contextual meaning of the verses; (2) **historical context**, to understand the social conditions at the time of revelation; and (3) **ethical orientation**, aligning interpretation with the Qur'an's overarching moral principles such as justice (*'adl*) and compassion (*rahmah*). This model is particularly suited for the objective of reviving women's rights in Islam from within its own epistemological framework, without resorting to external or secular paradigms.

Through this methodology, the study aims to offer a scholarly yet accessible pathway for rethinking gender roles in Islam, enabling reform that remains faithful to Islamic tradition while addressing the realities and rights of women in the modern world.

### **Table 1: Descriptive Statistics – Knowledge of Islamic Rights for Women**

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Women have the right to inheritance	4.6	0.70	3	5
Women can own property in Islam	4.8	0.45	4	5
Women have the right to education	4.9	0.31	4	5
Women can participate in politics	3.9	0.85	2	5

**Interpretation:** Most participants have a high awareness of women's rights in Islam, especially education and inheritance, but are less certain about political participation.

**Table 2: Cross-tabulation – Gender vs. Belief in Cultural Influence on Women's Roles**

Belief that culture distorts religion	Male	Female	Total
Strongly Agree	22	35	57
Agree	15	10	25
Neutral	8	4	12
Disagree	3	1	4
Strongly Disagree	2	0	2

**Chi-square Test ( $\chi^2 = 9.87$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ):**

There is a **significant relationship** between gender and the belief that **culture distorts Islam**, with females more likely to strongly agree.

**Table 3: Correlation – Religious Knowledge vs. Support for Women's Empowerment**

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Knowledge of Islamic rights	0.65	0.000
Support for reform in education	0.59	0.001
Support for legal reform	0.53	0.003

**Interpretation:** There is a **strong positive correlation** between religious knowledge and support for reforms that empower women in Islam.

**Table 4: Frequency – Sources of Religious Understanding**

Source of Religious Knowledge	Frequency	Percentage
Qur'an and Hadith	40	40%
Local Imams/Scholars	30	30%
Family Tradition	20	20%
Social Media/YouTube	10	10%

**Interpretation:** While most participants rely on textual sources, a considerable number still base religious understanding on local scholars or family traditions—often where cultural distortions are embedded.

#### **Findings / Conclusion:**

This study concludes that the diminished status of women in many Muslim societies is

largely a result of cultural distortions and patriarchal interpretations rather than the authentic teachings of Islam. Through a careful textual and thematic analysis of the Qur'an and Hadith, supported by modern reformist scholarship, it becomes clear that Islam, at its core, upholds the dignity, equality, and agency of women. The research highlights a significant gap between the rights granted to women in Islamic sources—such as the rights to education, inheritance, legal autonomy, and public participation—and the realities faced by many women due to socio-cultural and historical influences. The data further reveal that greater religious literacy among Muslims correlates with increased support for women's empowerment. This underscores the importance of returning to authentic Islamic sources and applying a gender-sensitive, contextual hermeneutic model to revive women's status within Islamic frameworks. Moreover, the study challenges both internal patriarchal traditions and external orientalist assumptions, advocating for a balanced and faithful revival of gender justice in Islam. By deconstructing inherited misconceptions and promoting Qur'anic ethics, the revival of women's rights can become a meaningful and transformative part of Islamic reform in the 21st century.

**Futuristic Approach:**

Future research should focus on integrating Islamic gender justice into educational curricula, legal reform, and community discourse across Muslim societies. Empirical studies on women's lived experiences and engagement with faith-based empowerment models will further bridge theory and practice, promoting sustainable and authentic revival rooted in Qur'anic ethics and social equity.

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