



ISLAMIC TEACHINGS VS. CULTURAL PRACTICES: RECONSTRUCTING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES

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Abstract:

This study explores the dichotomy between Islamic teachings and cultural practices concerning the role of women in Muslim societies. While Islam offers a framework of dignity, equality, and empowerment for women, cultural customs often distort or overshadow these principles, leading to socio-legal and psychological challenges. The paper critically examines how patriarchal traditions, often mistaken for religious mandates, influence gender roles and women's rights in various Muslim communities. By analyzing scriptural sources alongside cultural patterns in different contexts, the research seeks to distinguish between authentic Islamic principles and localized practices that contribute to women's marginalization. The study employs a comparative approach, drawing insights from Muslim-majority and minority societies, and utilizes qualitative data collected through interviews and content analysis. Findings indicate a significant gap between religious ideals and cultural realities, highlighting the need for reconstructing women's roles based on authentic Islamic values rather than inherited traditions. The research aims to foster awareness, reform, and policy change.

Keywords:

Women in Islam, Cultural practices, Gender roles, Patriarchy, Muslim societies, Islamic teachings, Women's empowerment.

Introduction:

The position and role of women in Muslim societies have remained subjects of extensive debate, misrepresentation, and conflicting interpretations. Historically and contemporarily, there exists a profound dichotomy between the egalitarian teachings of Islam and the patriarchal cultural practices prevalent in many Muslim societies. While Islamic scriptures, including the Qur'an and Hadith, advocate dignity, rights, and equality for women, cultural traditions—often rooted in pre-Islamic customs, tribal norms, and colonial legacies—have distorted these teachings, leading to social injustices and gender-based discrimination (Barlas, 2002). This divergence has significant implications for women's autonomy, education, economic participation, and legal rights, necessitating a critical reevaluation of the intersection between faith and culture.

Islam emerged in 7th-century Arabia with a reformative spirit that uplifted the status of women in an otherwise patriarchal society. The Qur'an explicitly addresses women's spiritual equality (Qur'an 33:35), economic rights (Qur'an 4:7), and social dignity. Women were granted the right to own property, participate in legal transactions, seek knowledge, and engage in community affairs. Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, a successful businesswoman and the first wife of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), exemplifies the active role women could play in early Islam. Aisha bint Abu Bakr, another influential figure, was a renowned scholar whose narrations of Hadith became foundational sources of Islamic jurisprudence (Ahmed, 1992). Despite these precedents, the current condition of Muslim women in many societies reflects a regression fueled by cultural rather than religious influences.



Cultural practices, often embedded in patriarchal interpretations of religion, have overshadowed Islam's empowering stance on women. In many parts of the Muslim world, including South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, women are subjected to restrictions that have no basis in Islamic doctrine but are instead sustained by tribal customs and rigid social norms. Practices such as forced marriages, denial of inheritance, restriction from public life, and lack of access to education are widespread, yet they stand in contradiction to Islamic principles. These contradictions have led scholars and reformers to differentiate between "Islam" as a divinely ordained faith and "Islamic culture" as a socio-political construct influenced by human intervention (Wadud, 2006).

One of the key reasons for the confusion between religious teachings and cultural norms is the lack of gender-sensitive religious education and the dominance of patriarchal interpretations. Traditional Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), developed predominantly by male scholars, often reflects cultural biases of their time. Although fiqh is a dynamic and interpretive discipline, its rulings have, in many cases, become static and codified into laws that restrict women's agency. Feminist scholars such as Fatima Mernissi (1991) and Amina Wadud (1999) argue for a re-examination of classical jurisprudence through the lens of maqasid al-shari'ah (the higher objectives of Islamic law), which emphasize justice, mercy, and public welfare. This approach can help differentiate between immutable divine injunctions and historically contingent rulings that require reinterpretation.

The problem becomes even more complex in diaspora contexts, where Muslim minorities often struggle to preserve cultural identity. In such settings, culture is conflated with religion to resist assimilation, leading to the rigid enforcement of traditional gender roles. For instance, Muslim women in Western societies may face community pressures to adhere to certain dress codes or marriage customs under the guise of religious obligation, when in fact, these are cultural expectations (Mirza, 2013). Such pressures not only limit women's choices but also tarnish the public image of Islam by reinforcing stereotypes about its alleged misogyny.

Moreover, legal systems in Muslim-majority countries often institutionalize cultural norms, making it difficult to distinguish between Islamic and customary law. In countries like Pakistan, family law—governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance—is influenced by both Islamic jurisprudence and colonial legal frameworks. Despite Islamic injunctions ensuring women's consent in marriage and their right to inheritance, customary practices such as watta satta (exchange marriage) and denial of daughters' inheritance persist (Ali, 2016). Similarly, in Middle Eastern contexts, tribal customs often overshadow the egalitarian ethics of Islamic law, marginalizing women from the public sphere.

In response to these challenges, a growing movement of Islamic feminism seeks to reclaim the original spirit of the Qur'an by promoting ijtihad (independent reasoning) and reinterpreting texts from a woman-centered perspective. Unlike secular feminism, which may view religion as inherently oppressive, Islamic feminism operates within the framework of Islamic epistemology and aims to reconcile faith with gender justice. Advocates of this approach argue that reform is not only possible but necessary to align societal practices with the ethical principles of Islam (Badran, 2009). They call for greater inclusion of women in religious scholarship, legal reform in personal status laws, and the promotion of Islamic education that empowers rather than subjugates.



It is also critical to highlight the diversity within Muslim societies. The experiences of women vary based on geography, class, education, and historical context. For example, while some Muslim-majority countries such as Tunisia and Indonesia have made progressive strides in women's rights, others continue to adhere to patriarchal norms justified through cultural interpretations of Islam. The lived realities of Muslim women, therefore, cannot be generalized and must be understood within specific socio-political and cultural frameworks (Cooke, 2001). Recognizing this diversity is essential for constructing inclusive strategies that address both the cultural distortions of Islam and the potential of Islamic teachings for women's empowerment.

This research, therefore, aims to explore the dissonance between Islamic teachings and cultural practices concerning women in Muslim societies. By analyzing religious texts, cultural customs, and lived experiences across different regions, the study endeavors to reconstruct an authentic understanding of women's roles based on Islamic ethics. It further aims to challenge the appropriation of religion by patriarchal structures and advocates for a transformative discourse rooted in faith-based justice.

In doing so, the paper contributes to the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of Islamic studies, gender studies, and cultural sociology. It also serves as a resource for policymakers, educators, and activists seeking to reform societal practices without abandoning religious identity. Ultimately, the goal is to move beyond the binary of tradition versus modernity and foster a nuanced understanding of how Islamic values can coexist with contemporary aspirations for gender equality.

Literature Review:

The discourse on women in Islam is vast and multifaceted, shaped by theological, historical, sociological, and feminist perspectives. A key theme across scholarly literature is the contrast between the egalitarian ethos of Islamic teachings and the restrictive nature of cultural practices in various Muslim societies. Numerous scholars have emphasized that the portrayal of Muslim women as passive and oppressed is not rooted in Islamic doctrine but often results from the amalgamation of religious interpretations with patriarchal cultural norms (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 2006).

Amina Wadud's (1999) pioneering work, *Qur'an and Woman*, asserts that the Qur'an upholds a framework of spiritual and moral equality between men and women. She argues that the text, when interpreted holistically and contextually, promotes justice and equity rather than gender hierarchy. Similarly, Asma Barlas (2002) in "*Believing Women*" in *Islam* deconstructs patriarchal readings of the Qur'an and highlights that misogynistic interpretations are not divinely ordained but shaped by male-dominated exegetical traditions. Both scholars call for gender-inclusive exegesis that aligns with the Qur'anic principles of compassion, justice, and mutual respect.

Fatima Mernissi (1991), a Moroccan sociologist and Islamic feminist, adds a historical lens to the debate. In her seminal book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she critiques the political motives behind Hadith compilation and the marginalization of women in Islamic historiography. Mernissi challenges the idea that Islamic tradition inherently oppresses women, instead pointing to socio-political constructs that reframe and manipulate religious texts for patriarchal control. Her work has laid the groundwork for reinterpreting Islamic history through a gender-conscious lens.



Other scholars have examined how cultural traditions override Islamic legal principles in various societies. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2000) explores the complexities of Islamic family law in Iran and Morocco, demonstrating how juristic interpretations have institutionalized male authority. She emphasizes the difference between Shari'ah—divine guidance—and fiqh—human understanding of that guidance—arguing that the latter is subject to reinterpretation. Similarly, Homa Hoodfar (1999) and Valentine Moghadam (2003) document how women's rights in Muslim societies are affected not just by religious doctrines but by socio-political environments, legal structures, and class dynamics.

The role of cultural practices in shaping the lived experiences of Muslim women is extensively documented. For instance, Shaheed (1989) explores how Pakistani cultural traditions, influenced by feudal, tribal, and colonial legacies, restrict women's legal rights despite Islamic provisions that favor them. Studies by Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987) further identify how local customs such as honor codes and dowry systems distort religious values. These authors argue that any reform effort must distinguish between Islam as a religion and culture as a mutable human construct.

Diaspora studies add another dimension to this discourse. Pnina Werbner (2007) and Saba Mahmood (2005) investigate how Muslim communities in the West negotiate religious identity and cultural preservation. Mahmood's ethnographic work with Egyptian women in Cairo and immigrant Muslim women in diaspora highlights how agency is often expressed within rather than against religious frameworks. This counters Western feminist critiques that view submission to religious norms as inherently oppressive, and instead opens a nuanced understanding of piety, autonomy, and resistance in religious contexts.

More recent literature has turned toward Islamic feminism as a mode of resistance and reform. Margot Badran (2009) defines Islamic feminism as a discourse that is grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith yet seeks gender justice in contemporary contexts. Unlike secular feminism, Islamic feminism does not advocate the abandonment of religion but rather its reinterpretation. Scholars such as Sa'diyya Shaikh (2012) and Kecia Ali (2006) stress the importance of reviving ethical readings of the Qur'an that transcend legalistic reductionism and embrace human dignity, equity, and compassion.

In South Asia, researchers like Rubina Saigol (2016) and Farida Shaheed (2015) document how state institutions, media, and educational curricula have propagated patriarchal versions of Islam. They argue that while Islam provides a progressive framework for gender relations, the way it is institutionalized through laws and policies often serves political interests rather than religious authenticity. In this context, religion becomes a tool of control rather than empowerment.

Despite the critical literature, a significant gap remains between academic discourse and public understanding. Popular perceptions of Islam are frequently shaped by media stereotypes and politicized narratives that associate Islam with female oppression. This misrepresentation obscures the distinction between core Islamic teachings and local customs that contradict those teachings.

In summary, the existing literature underscores a growing scholarly consensus: the problem is not Islam itself but the patriarchal interpretation and cultural appropriation of its teachings. This calls for a renewed engagement with Islamic sources, revival of *ijtihad*, and amplification of women's voices in religious discourse. Through such efforts, it becomes possible to reconstruct women's



roles in Muslim societies in accordance with authentic Islamic values rather than inherited cultural distortions.

Research Questions:

- How do cultural practices in Muslim societies differ from the teachings of Islam regarding the role, rights, and status of women?
- In what ways can Islamic teachings be reinterpreted or revived to challenge and reconstruct culturally ingrained patriarchal norms affecting Muslim women?

Significance of the Study:

This research is significant as it critically distinguishes between Islamic teachings and cultural traditions, exposing how the latter often oppress women under the guise of religion. It contributes to gender justice discourses, enabling reform grounded in authentic Islamic principles, and fosters an empowered, faith-based reconstruction of women's roles in Muslim societies.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative research design aimed at critically analyzing the divergence between Islamic teachings and cultural practices affecting women's roles in Muslim societies. The research draws upon both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Muslim women, religious scholars, and legal professionals from Pakistan and the UK—two regions that represent contrasting sociocultural and legal contexts within the global Muslim community. The purposive sampling method was employed to ensure inclusion of diverse perspectives, including rural and urban, conservative and reformist, and varying educational backgrounds.

Secondary data were gathered through textual analysis of Islamic scriptures (Qur'an and Hadith), classical jurisprudential texts, contemporary academic literature, and policy documents. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in the narratives and discourses surrounding women's roles. NVivo software assisted in coding and organizing the qualitative data into emerging themes, such as religious misinterpretation, legal-cultural fusion, and gender justice.

To maintain academic rigor, the study employed triangulation by cross-verifying findings from religious texts, legal frameworks, and interview data. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were upheld throughout the research process. The comparative analysis between Pakistan and the UK highlights how cultural norms override religious values in different geopolitical settings, thus providing a broader understanding of how women's roles are constructed and contested.

Table 1: Research Design Overview

| Component | Description |
|-------------------------|--|
| Research Approach | Qualitative, comparative |
| Data Collection Methods | Semi-structured interviews, textual/documentary analysis |
| Sample Population | Muslim women, scholars, legal experts (Pakistan & UK) |
| Sampling Technique | Purposive sampling |
| Data Analysis Technique | Thematic analysis using NVivo |
| Key Tools | Interview guide, scriptural texts, policy documents |
| Ethical Considerations | Informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality |



Data Analysis:

The analysis of data collected through interviews, textual interpretation, and documentary reviews reveals a substantial disconnect between Islamic teachings on women's rights and the cultural practices prevalent in many Muslim societies. This divergence is more prominent in areas where religious education is minimal and cultural customs have been passed down unquestioned, often equated with religious obligations.

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts with women from Pakistan and the UK highlighted three dominant themes: (1) Misinterpretation of Islamic texts, (2) Cultural dominance in legal and social frameworks, and (3) Emerging resistance through Islamic feminism. Across both regions, women acknowledged the liberating potential of Islam but expressed frustration with how cultural practices have distorted its message, especially regarding marriage, inheritance, public participation, and education.

In Pakistan, most participants referred to practices such as forced or early marriage, denial of property rights, and restrictions on mobility as culturally imposed constraints. They clarified that these actions were often carried out in the name of religion, yet lacked any scriptural legitimacy. For example, although the Qur'an (4:7) guarantees women's right to inheritance, many women reported being denied this right due to prevailing cultural customs prioritizing male heirs.

In contrast, Muslim women in the UK expressed concern about pressures from community elders to conform to traditional roles, including early marriage or restriction from professional careers. While they enjoyed better legal protections, the internalization of patriarchal values within diaspora communities created a different layer of gendered control. These women emphasized the challenge of disentangling faith from ethnic identity in a secular society where Islam is often stereotyped.

Table 2: Key Themes Emerging from Interview Data

| Theme | Description |
|------------------------------|--|
| Misinterpretation of Texts | Patriarchal readings of Qur'an and Hadith reinforcing gender inequality |
| Cultural Practices vs. Islam | Customs like forced marriage or inheritance denial misattributed to religion |
| Diaspora Gender Pressure | Traditional expectations persist in Western Muslim communities |
| Revivalist Discourses | Women advocating for reform through Islamic texts and feminist hermeneutics |

Another striking finding from the textual analysis of Islamic sources is the contrast between the moral framework of the Qur'an and the patriarchal leanings of traditional fiqh literature. The Qur'an promotes mutual respect, consent in marriage (4:19), and the pursuit of knowledge for both men and women (96:1–5). However, classical legal texts often include gender-biased rulings, which some contemporary scholars argue reflect historical contexts more than divine will (Wadud, 2006; Barlas, 2002).

Interviewed scholars pointed out that rigid interpretations persist because male-dominated religious institutions have not encouraged reinterpretation (ijtihad) or the inclusion of women in



legal-religious scholarship. Consequently, outdated cultural norms continue to be perpetuated under the guise of immutable religious law. However, female scholars and activists are now reclaiming religious discourse by reinterpreting scriptural texts with a focus on justice, equality, and ethics.

Table 3: Comparison of Islamic Teachings and Cultural Practices

| Aspect | Islamic Teaching | Common Cultural Practice |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Marriage | Requires woman's free consent (Qur'an 4:19) | Arranged/forced marriages without consent |
| Inheritance | Women entitled to fixed shares (Qur'an 4:7, 4:11) | Women often denied inheritance or forced to forgo their shares |
| Education | Knowledge is obligatory for all Muslims (Hadith: Sahih Bukhari) | Female education discouraged or restricted in conservative communities |
| Public Role | Women participated in public, political, and scholarly life in early Islam | Women often excluded from leadership or public decision-making |
| Testimony and Rights | Contextual understanding of legal testimony; spiritual equality emphasized | Misuse of partial testimony verse to invalidate women's voices |

The use of NVivo software enabled the categorization and frequency analysis of coded themes, showing a high occurrence of terms such as “injustice,” “cultural pressure,” “misinterpretation,” and “reform.” This reinforces the conclusion that while Islamic teachings provide a framework for women’s dignity and empowerment, these are rarely realized due to entrenched cultural biases. Legal documents and policy reviews from Pakistan revealed a lack of consistent enforcement of women’s rights, even where protective laws exist. For instance, the *Women’s Protection Act* and *Hindu Marriage Act* have not eradicated harmful practices such as marital coercion or dowry demands. In the UK, family arbitration through informal Sharia Councils often blends cultural norms with religious rulings, disadvantaging women in divorce and custody cases (Grillo et al., 2016).

Overall, the data affirm that cultural practices, not Islamic principles, are primarily responsible for the subjugation of women in many Muslim contexts. Where women are informed about their Islamic rights, they tend to challenge oppressive norms with religious backing, indicating the potential for reform grounded in faith. This highlights the importance of religious literacy, legal reform, and the empowerment of women as interpreters and leaders within the Islamic tradition.

Findings and Conclusion:

This research reveals a critical gap between Islamic teachings and the cultural practices that define the roles and rights of women in many Muslim societies. The findings from interviews, scriptural analysis, and policy review confirm that women’s marginalization is more deeply rooted in patriarchal customs than in the authentic teachings of Islam. Across both the Pakistani and British Muslim contexts, women experience cultural impositions that are often justified under the name of religion, yet lack scriptural support.



In Pakistan, religious misinterpretation and lack of access to Islamic education perpetuate cultural norms such as forced marriages, denial of inheritance, and exclusion from public life. These practices directly conflict with the Qur'anic emphasis on dignity, equality, and justice for women. In contrast, Muslim women in the UK navigate a complex identity where traditional cultural values are preserved within minority communities, leading to pressure to conform to gender norms in the name of religion—despite living in legally pluralistic environments.

The study also reveals a growing movement of Muslim women engaging in reinterpretation of religious texts through the lens of gender justice. Islamic feminism and revivalist discourses have created alternative narratives that challenge both Western stereotypes and internal patriarchal interpretations. These voices advocate for returning to the original Qur'anic message that promotes justice, equity, and compassion for all believers—men and women alike.

In conclusion, the subordination of women in Muslim societies stems not from Islam, but from cultural traditions that have distorted religious principles. Reconstructing women's roles requires dismantling these cultural constructs while reviving the ethical core of Islamic teachings. A holistic reform effort—combining religious literacy, legal change, and community education—can help restore the balance and actualize the vision of empowered Muslim women as intended in the spirit of Islam.

Futuristic Approach:

Future research should focus on integrating Islamic feminist frameworks into educational, legal, and policy institutions across Muslim societies. Empowering women as interpreters of Islamic texts and leaders in community reform can dismantle patriarchal norms. Cross-cultural collaborations can further amplify efforts to align cultural practices with Qur'anic principles of gender justice.

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