
An Islamic Perspective on Gender Equality Controversy in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper aimed at assessing the gender equality controversy in Nigeria from the Islamic point of view. The researcher intends to distinguish between the myth and reality of gender equality from the Glorious Qur'an and sayings of the noble Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The study also look at the participation of Muslims women in governance, where and how they can contribute their quota socially, politically and economically. The findings of the study is that Islam equalizes both man and woman in so many issues except in leadership, be it marital, religious or political. Others include acceptance of witnesses in terms of judgment in courts and in inheritance sharing. The method used in generating data for this research is mainly library materials.

Introduction

Throughout recorded history, women have been dehumanized, disposed, diminished, degraded, marginalized, disenfranchised, secluded, subjugated and silenced. In ancient India, widows were forced to be burnt alive on the pyre of their dead husbands. In pre-Islamic Arabia, female infants were buried alive. Female infanticide still occurs in many countries today (Galloway 1).

It is well recognized all over the world that gender issues one about the society constructed part that reflects appropriate roles of both female and male in the society. Government are responsible for the sharing, protecting, supporting, fulfilling the needs of every citizen, male or female, poor or rich accordingly without discrimination. Many authorities like United Nations organizations declared as an international day for women every March 8 to be precise. The amended 1999 constitution of Nigeria in section 42 guarantees rights to freedom from discrimination (Khadijat 155)

Within the Islamic theology (Kalam), biological differences between men and women are recognized and the supreme of motherhood is extolled, but for the Holy Qur'an biology is not destiny. The Holy Qur'an expresses the moral and spiritual equality of men and women by balancing virtues and rewards for both genders in identical terms, therefore, contemporary Muslim elite are of the strong opinion that Islam is inherently gender neutral and promotes gender equality (Galloway 5 - 6)

In addition, Islam's egalitarian message guarantees unalienable rights to Muslim women, namely the right to life, the right to obtain education, the right to conduct business, the right to inherit and maintain property. (Badran 2) Muslim scholars held divergent views as to whether the women should participate in public life or not. (Rafatu 69) Doi opines that, in the area of economic pursuit, Islam does not requires women to participate in trade, vocations or professions unless it is very necessary. As for those women who are highly talented and have the opportunity to go to university for higher education, these women according to him , can render great services for the upliftment of the society. He considers the teaching profession as the best suited for women. Here again, he prefers the women to teach only pupils or grown up women (Doi 177 – 180).

Theoretical framework

Islam, as a religion, is built upon a strong ideological and theological (Kalam) framework which its adherents believe makes it the last perfect religion. The teaching of Islam encompasses the essence of economics, well-being, and the development of Muslims at the individual, family, society, and universal levels. (Galloway 14). As a comprehensive religion that governs the lives of Muslims,

Islam is guided by six articles of faith. (Tawhid) 1. Belief in one God, 2. Believe in all prophets from the first to the last (Adam AS-Muhammad (SAW) b. Belief in the books of faith, the Towrat, Zaboor, Injil and the glorious noble Qur'an. 4. Believe in the day of atonement and life after death, 5. Belief in angels and 6. Belief in destiny (good or bad).

Through the theoretical framework, the researcher attempted to examine and explore the meanings, structures, and essence of lived experiences of Muslim women seeking gender equality via Islamic tenets and principles. The glorious Qur'an is divine, therefore, Islamic feminist theoretical core is grounded in Qur'anic interpretations or tafsir.

Clarification of Concepts

Islam: Defined by a core set of beliefs and practices, Islam the second largest religion in the world, is a monotheistic religion based on revelations received by the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the seventh century, which were later compiled together as a book Qur'an. Islam is "Din wa dawla" both a system of individual faith and conduct, and a comprehensive guide for the organization of society and state. Islam is an action oriented worldview that encompasses social cultural and political elements including religious and secular reasoning (Barazangi 3) whose adherents are called Muslims. Islam is the most perfected religion while valuing free individual choice to belief or disbelieve. Islam a name given by Allah (the Almighty) and derived from the Arabic root "Silm" stresses three fundamental principles. 1. The requirement of truth and transparency. 2. The moral dimension and the priority of values and 3. The importance of respect of man and the norms of balance (Barlas 78).

Gender: Is defined as distinct from sex in that it refers to the social and cultural constructs which, while based on the biological sex of a person, defines his or her roles in society (Mosse 93).

Misconceptions of Nigerian Muslim women elites

In 1985 when the military coup took place in Nigeria and the government headed by General Ibrahim Babangida thereafter his wife lunch her programme called the better life of rural women, which in her slogan she made mention what man can do woman can do it even better. With this propaganda, Nigerian

women started agitating for equalization with men in all sectors, socially, economically, politically and what have you.

Unfortunately Muslim women in Nigeria especially the elites were brain washed and are trying to defend gender equality from the Qur'an and Sunna to make them feel equal with their male counterparts. Example (Rafatu 70 – 73) after she enumerated the contributions of the early prominent women of Islam, like Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, Aisha bint AbuBakar, Rumaysah bint Mithan, Rufayda al-Aslamiyya. She follow it up with the Nigerian women's contribution to national development. Women like, Queen Amina of Zaria, Monsurat Sunmonu, Gbemisola Ruqayyah Saraki, Zainab Alkali Ruqayyatu Ahmed Rufa'i etc. This comparison is faulty because there is no basis of comparing who operates in pure Islamic setting and the one in multi-religions society.

On the issue of leadership, Islam is very clear about who is to lead either in the family at home, salat in congregation or Administrative leadership that can comprise both men and women. An authentic hadith reported by Abubakar (RA) in Sahih al-Bukhari narrates that: Nation can never prosper which has assigned it reign to women. However, (Khadijat 157) challenged the authenticity of the hadith which according to her that modern scholars has rejected the hadith on the strength of its isolationist posture and that its authority is in question. The only people can question the authority of a hadith are those people that were authorities in the science of Hadith and they do so if its chain (Isnad) or text (Sanad) is faulty. The above hadith is recognized by Shaykh Albany in his compilation of authentic traditions called "Silsilatil ahadith as saheeha".

Some Selected Verses used for the Equality

The Nigerian Muslim Women elites were found of selecting some Qur'anic verses to backup their arguments on gender equality on their mission to prove or sale their ideology of both men and women are equal, nothing like superiority or inferiority. These selected verses includes the following:

The Believers Men and women, are protectors of one another. They enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil, they observe regular prayer (Salat) practice regular

charity (Zakat) and obey Allah and his messenger on them Allah pour His mercy, for Allah is exalted in power, Wise. Allah has promised to believers men and women, gardens (Aljannah) under which rivers flow to dwell therein and beautiful mansions in Garden of everlasting bliss. But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of Allah, that is the supreme facility (Qur'an 9:71 – 72).

The above verses confirm that the fact that in Islam the society is to build by two sexes each complementing and supporting the other. (Rafatu 69)

And so amongst men and crawling creatures and cattle are they of various colours. Those truly fear Allah amongst His servants are those who have knowledge, for Allah is exalted in might oft-forgiving (Qur'an 35;28)

The above verse does not restrict the acquisition of knowledge to men. God's servants, both males and females are to seek for knowledge especially the knowledge of religion so as to know God and how to worship Him. (Rafatu 74)

O mankind We have created you from a male and female and made you in to nations and tribes that you may know one another, verily the most honourable of you with is that (believer) who has attaqwa (ie one of the pious) (Qur'an 4:13).

The above verse shows no discrimination between to avoid evils and be abide by rules and the regulations of Allah and His messengers. (Khadijat 155).

The believers men and women are Auliya'u (helpers, supporters, friends, protectors of one another, they enjoy on the people) Al-ma'aruf (good deeds) and forbid (people) from Al-munkar (Bad deeds of all kinds that Islam has forbidden) they perform prayers and give zakat (charity) and obey Allah and His messenger (Qur'an 9:71 – 72).

The development and maintenance of order in the society is assign to both gender which implies equality. The verse indicates for the successful

development of the society both should collectively work towards positivity. (Khadijat 155 – 156)

Surely, men who submit themselves to God and women who submit themselves to Him, and believing men and believing women, and obedient men and obedient women, and truthful men and truthful women, and men steadfast in their faith and steadfast women, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms, and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who are chaste and women who are chaste, and men and women who remember Allah much, Allah has prepared for all of them forgiveness and a great reward . (Qur'an 33:36)

The above verse, makes no statement about the constructed superiority of men over women in the Muslim world. If gender is to be understood as a social construction of sexual differences, the question becomes, what explanation(s) can be given to posit an understanding of the differences in gendered identities across cultures and or over time? (Galloway, 9)

The controversy of gender equality

In their own view a great number of Muslim women have contributed to the present day development in Nigeria. They are claiming to have contributed from different spheres of life. These include Socio-economic and political contributions. they are always proud of the programmes that were initiated by the wives of the former presidents in Nigeria as some of the Muslim women achievements in terms of development. Some of these programmes include the “Better Life for Rural Women” by Late Maryam Babangida, “Family Support Programme” (FSP) by Maryam Abacha, “Women Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) by Fati Abdulsalami Abubakar etc. They quote some Qur’anic verses where Allah the Almighty equalizes man and woman in terms of receiving reward or punishment as their evidences of gender equality.

Islamic jurist (Fuqaha) condemned the assertion of the Nigerian Muslim women elites that are trying to justify the gender equality from the Qur’an and Sunnah,

they accused them to be selective, selfish and self centered. These scholars maintain that men are superior to women as implies in the following verse:

Men are in charge of women by (Right of what Allah has given one over the other and what they spent from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient. Guarding in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. But those (wives) from whom you fear arrogance, advise them, (then if they persist), forsake them in bed, and (finally), strike them. But if they obey you (once more) seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand (Qur'an 4:34).

The above verse is very clear on the issue of either man is superior to woman or they are of equal status. In relation to inheritance Allah the Almighty says:

For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much an obligatory share. (Qur'an 4:7) – Man has double share of that a woman.

Islam allows women half the inheritance share available to males who have the same degree of relation to the deceased. This law of inheritance from the Qur'an clearly shows the difference of man and woman, they are not the same and they can never be the same. And any one try to equalizes man and woman in this sharing is to be considered as an exit from the fold of Islamic religion. The Ulama (Islamic clerics) are also using the verse in the chapter of cow. Qur'an 2:282, which also clearly stated that in terms of bringing witnesses to court for an evidence, then one should look or bring two male witnesses, if he lacks them then he should present one male and two females that is to say one man is equivalent to two women. For Muslims that believe in the teachings of the glorious Qur'an, believing in gender equality is unacceptable to them.

Conclusion

The Nigerian Muslim women elites that were fighting for gender equality assumed that they have a great role to play especially where the women cannot be reached in elected or appointed positions, their representation and the power

assign to them would be used to voiced out the problems of women and their children. The Fuqaha have consistently condemned the act of women in terms of equality with men and some women were of the opinion that anything man can do woman can do even better. The Ulama cited some clear verses of the glorious Qur'am which shows that man and woman are not and will not be equal.

The history of Islam since the early 7th Century A.D. to the present day is full of records of Activities of notable Muslim women who have contributed, not only to the progress of Islam, but also to the general well-being of the societies in which they lived. Such women made their marks as dutiful wives, affectionate mothers and active participants in the task of maintaining the welfare of the society. However, Ulamas rejected these comparison of the so called contribution of women in contemporary Nigeria, socially educationally, economically and politically with the notable Muslims women that operates in a society that was guided by the shari'a.

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