



musawah

For Equality in the Family

ISLAM BEYOND PATRIARCHY THROUGH GENDER INCLUSIVE QUR'ANIC ANALYSIS

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THEORETICAL PAPER SUMMARY*

This paper presents an interpretation of Islam that offers a vision of an active partnership of equals between women and men. This partnership will move human society towards equality and justice, which are the twin intentions of the Revelation.

The interpretation examines Islam's two primary sources, namely the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. The paper focuses on the ethical principles established by these two sources regarding the relationship between Allah and individual human beings, and between human beings.

Arguing for gender equality and justice from within the framework of the religion, the paper takes as given *'that the Qur'an is the word of Allah revealed to Prophet Muhammad'*. It quotes extensively from Qur'anic verses and Islamic ethics, and first establishes the Qur'anic vision of equality between women and men in all three stages of human life as revealed by the Qur'an: creation, the hereafter and 'the life in between' (*'aalam al-shahadah*). The paper discusses the impact of patriarchy on interpretation of the Qur'an and the practices of Muslims. It proposes the use of constructive Islamic ethical tools to end this negative influence, which restricts realisation of the Qur'anic message of equality and justice. Finally, the paper shows how this discussion relates to Muslim family law reform.

The main points of the paper are:

1. **Equality in creation** has important consequences for our daily lives. The Qur'an's repeated emphasis of creation in pairs—*'the male and the female'*—indicates that both must be equal beneficiaries of the justice inherent in the laws and policies arising out of interpretations of the Qur'an, and both must be considered responsible for the formulation of these laws and policies.
2. The Qur'an also establishes **equality in the hereafter**, with equal reward or punishment for women and men.
3. **Plurality is part of the Divine design**. The significance of one human life clearly affects other human lives. Therefore, we must think and act in ways that indicate our awareness of the interrelationship between all human life and creation as a whole.
4. **Human beings are created to be moral agents (*khilafa*)**. There is no distinction made between male and female in terms of this divine mandate.
5. **As responsible human agents, we have the free will** to choose between what is good and what is evil. Judgement of how we choose to act on this free will lies with Allah, the ultimate judge. Allah sees and knows all things, whether in the public arena or in the home.
6. **The ultimate criterion for making judgements between human beings is on the basis of *taqwa*, or their moral excellence**. Yet a common imbalance or injustice today is that Muslim

* This is a summary prepared by Musawah. For direct quotes, please refer to the original paper in the Musawah resource book, *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, edited by Zainah Anwar.

women are considered morally responsible subjects of the law without being considered equally as creators of the law.

7. **Islam was revealed into a context dominated by patriarchy but it also provides a route beyond patriarchy.** It is the duty of Muslims to follow this route and challenge patriarchy within our societies. It is also our duty to challenge the notion from outside Muslim culture that Islam does not have the tools to move beyond patriarchy. Patriarchy is not just about men, it is about presuming one way of doing things, one way of being and one way of knowing is superior and should dominate.
8. **The answer to patriarchy is through *mu'awadhah*, or reciprocity.** Women should not rule over men, nor must women do what men have been doing; instead, we move from domination to partnership. Islam provides many sources and examples on the ethic of reciprocity. The paper expands the term from its use in Islamic financial transactions, and applies it to relationships between individuals. It consists of knowing and of supporting the other person.
9. **'Patriarchy is a kind of *shirk* (ultimate violation of divine unity)'** because it denies the equality of all Allah's creation. Patriarchy rests on the Satanic notion of *istikbar* (thinking of oneself as better than another). It contradicts the Qur'anic vision of the equal and reciprocal moral relationships and responsibilities of women and men, as laid out in verse *Al-Ahzab* 33:35. It also contradicts the vision of the relationship between husband and wife, as reflected in verse *Al-Room* 30:21, which talks not of domination and competition but partnership, cooperation and affection.
10. **The major inspiration for this alternative vision of the relationship between women and men comes from the concept of *tawhid*.** This concept begins from its root word, the verb *wahhada*, 'a dynamic term emphasising the divine power to bring all things into unity or harmony'. The paper suggests that harmony means '*mu'awadhah* or mutual reciprocity, cooperation and interdependence.'
11. **According to *tawhid*, two persons will always be in a relationship of horizontal reciprocity.** This logically derives from two aspects of *tawhid*:
 - Islam understands Allah as supreme, the greatest; *Allahu akbar*. Therefore nothing else can be superior to any one individual;
 - Added to this, the Qur'an makes it clear that whenever two persons are together, Allah makes the third, or when three are together, Allah makes the fourth and so on (*Al-Mujadalah* 58:7). Since Allah is always present, and always the greatest, then no one can hold the upper level without violating *tawhid*. Patriarchy on the other hand places men as superior to women and violates the requirement that only Allah is supreme.
12. One of the simplest ways to reform the law in accordance with these ethics of the Qur'an and move societies beyond patriarchy may be to **encourage active and equal public participation by both women and men, especially in legal and policy reform**, so they are equally able to express their *taqwa*.