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# **FEMINISM IN ISLAM & 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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## Abstract

***“Freedom cannot be achieved unless the Women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression.” – Nelson Mandela***

Islam and feminism go hand in hand even before the term feminism came into existence. Advent of Islam placed the paradise under mother’s feet [*Ahmad, Nasai*], became the key for a father to enter paradise [*Hadith*], and made a quintessential part of husbands completing his faith [*Hadith*]. Islam made women such integral that without woman a person *Imaan* would never be completed. Islam not only liberated women from the barbarianism of pre Islamic Arabia, but also place them in epitome positions in personal and public life

Islam has never differentiated between a man and women. The Quran says:

“Never will I waste the work of a worker among you,  
Whether male or female, the one of you being from the other.” [*Al-Qur’an 3:195*]

The combination of Islam and feminism is very beautiful. *Hazrat Khadija* (R.A.), *Hazrat Ayesha* (R.A.), *Bibi Fatima* and many other women are the face of Islamic Feminism. If we talk about the Islamic Feminism they and seek with equality between men and women imbibed in Quran. Muslim as well as Non-Muslim nations have produced several female Political heads, Prime Ministers, Presidents and State Secretaries. In Islam Feminism is defined in Quran which is a direct text of Islam. Often feminism is considered as western movement but it can be traced back to Islam. In Islam feminism is not to reform or reconsider the Islamic values unlike modern western feminism but to promote the equality in given society. If we see the position of women in Islam in the words of Prophet Muhammad, “the negativity of disobeying the mother more than father.”

The concept of feminism is rather new and was developed in 1960s and 70s, but Islam has this concept in its roots from the beginning. Some noteworthy examples are, viz., (i) *Khadija bint al-Khwaylid*, who was the first wife prophet and a brilliant trader, who did manage her own business, participated in her business contracts, own an enterprise, earned from her trade, and possessed material things in her own name. (ii) *Aisha bint Abu Bakar*, who is the youngest wife of Prophet

and is credited of narrating more than 2000 Hadiths. (iii) *Nusayba bin Ka'ab al Muzaniyaa*, who fought alongside Prophet in Battle of Uhud. (iv) *Sumayyah bin Khayyat*, the first female martyr of Islam. (v) *Rufayda bin Sa'ad al Aslaniyya*, first nurse during Prophet who cared the women of Battle of Badar. (vi) *Ashifa bin Abdullah*, first women to be appointed as market inspector and manager by Caliph Umar. (vii) *Aisha bin Sa'ad bin Abi Waqqas*, a prominent jurist scholar and teacher of Imam Malik. (viii) *Fathima bint al Hasan Ibn Ali*, a master of calligraphy and known for her quality of *Isnads* (Chain of narrations). (ix) *Khawla bint Al Azwar*, female warrior during the reign of Prophet. (x) *Arwa al-Sulayhi*, longest reigning ruler of Yemen. (xi) *Zaynab al Nafzawiyah*, Queen of Berber who reigned from 1061-1107.

In Islam women wearing the “*Hijab*” (veil) or the “*Burqah*” as a practising Muslim, but often some western critiques focus more on that as contradictory to feminism. But Islam is not something which can be criticising on one or more terms. Islamic feminism is something to attempt to make a chart between them.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Islam, Muslim women, Empowerment, Equal rights

### **Feminism before Islam**

The pre-Islamic era, known as *Jahiliya*, meaning the era of darkness, barbarism, and violence. This era is also known as age of ignorance. Before Islam the society was without rules. The infanticide was on peak in these period with same fate of sick infants, physically abnormal children and girls etc. It was said proverbially, "The dispatch of daughters is a kindness" and "The burial of daughters is a noble deed."<sup>1</sup>

According to *Assyrian* law the women married were allowed to take the “veil” even if they were into prostitution but once got married can also do the same. And those who do not do used veil had to tolerate bitter consequences of beating or amputation of their ears . Prostitutes and slaves were prohibited from veiling. Veil labelled them (women) on sexual activity basis.

During the pre-Islamic era husband had the right to pawn their children and wives as well. But the women of upper class had almost all the rights or good to say more rights than other lower status women.

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<sup>1</sup>. (Nicholson, p. 90)



## **Role and Standard of Women in Islam**

If we talk about women in Quran before that we should know about Hadith<sup>2</sup> and some other historical events which determine the status or role of women in Islam. Hadith includes the various evidences regarding women participation in various matter including communal matters. But with the passage of time scholars have changed this concept with Western influence mainly Persian and Byzantine.

From many centuries the commentators of Quran have restricted the status of women in Islam and with time such restrictions have increased. One of the main points noticeable is that- interpretation mostly suited the male interests. And surprisingly most important thing was that such interpretation varied from society to society. However, one factor which was similar in their interpretations was to keep Muslim women subordinate to the males anyhow. Any research on Muslim women should be based on the period of Qur'anic revelations and the life of Prophet Muhammad(S.A.W.). There were ideal women like *Bibi Fatima* (daughter of Prophet Muhammad & wife of Ali, the fourth caliph) *Hazrat Khadija* (first wife of Prophet and a business women) and *Hazrat Ayesha*. Prophet Muhammad rectified all the misinterpretation of female role. After his death, people misinterpreted due to their vested interests. Now question is that what is the real status of women in Islam?

*Men are in charge (or: are the protectors) of women, because God has given preference to the one over the other, and because (men) provide support for (women) from their means. Therefore righteous women are obedient ... (Chapter 4: Verse 34)*

In this often cited verse of Quran modern people find testimony that men are protectors, providers and have authority over women. And it is quite clear to understand that men are head of household and also decision maker.

However, one must not assume that women do not have equal rights and responsibilities (according to Quranic interpretation). As we have discussed above regarding vested interests, there are *Ulama's*<sup>3</sup> who always wanted to maintain their own class in alliance with people those who ruled (political rulers) in male

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<sup>2</sup>*Hadith*: The sayings and deeds of the Prophet preserved by his followers and finally recorded in book form.

<sup>3</sup> *Ulama*: the executive function under the *Shari'a* is vested solely in the just ruler or in a group of people appointed as his delegates, and responsible only to the *Shari'a* as represented by the Council of Jurists (*Ulama e Fuqaha*) in whom the legislative function of deriving laws from the Book of Allah is vested.

society. In order to understand the condition of women in Islam the analysis of Islam is necessary on few main points such as *Marriage, Divorce, Inheritance and Seclusion*.

- **Marriage**

In pre-Islamic Arabia the numbers of wives in a marriage were not settled, but it was the Quran which limited that number and emphasised on equality for each wife.

*"Ye are never able to be fair and just between women even if that were your ardent" (Chapter 4: Verse 129)<sup>4</sup>*

Quran ordained women with more power and strength and affirmed her with full legal capacity to marriage and *Mehar*.

*"And give the woman (in marriage) their dowry as a free gift." (Chapter 4: Verse 4) " . . . give unto them their portions as a duty." (Chapter 4: Verse 24)<sup>5</sup>*

- **Divorce**

In matter of divorce Islam sanctions divorce only when both parties of marriage are scared that they may not be capable to be in a marriage within the specified limits imposed by Allah in Quran. If divorce became so necessary than also Quran seeks to protect women and her right by special recommendation of "release in kindness".

- **Inheritance**

In Quran the share of a woman is equal to half of a man's share. A Muslim woman is entitled to her own property before and after marriage. They are entitled to receive marital gifts, properties and income for their own security. A Muslim woman is guaranteed support in all stages of life as daughter, wife, mother or sister. These additional advantages of women over men are somewhat balanced by the provisions of inheritance which allows a male, in certain cases to inherit more than a female. But along with that inheritance, they also inherit more responsibility financially for other females- wife, daughter, mother, sister. Though a Muslim woman inherits less but can keep all of it for investment and financial security without any legal obligation to spend any part of it even for her own sustenance.

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<sup>4</sup>Surah An- Nisaa

<sup>5</sup>Surah An- Nisaa

- **Legal Rights**

In matters of legal rights Quran guaranteed these rights equal for every individual. Women in Islam are competent to make contracts, buy and sell, to earn and to hold property, to manage that property and money. Also Quran warns the men against depriving her of her share of inheritance. As dowry is only property of women alone, which can never be taken by her husband.

As compared with pre-Islamic Arabia, Quran and Sunnah put women on equal footing to men legally. As both men and women being creation of God are considered of equal worth and value. This equality of men and women is mentioned in Quran in passages pertaining to at least three aspects of human existence.

- **Firstly, in religious matters:**

"Lo! Men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe . . . Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward."(Chapter 33: Verse 35)<sup>6</sup>

- **Secondly, in terms of ethical obligations and rewards:**

"And whose doth good works, whether of male or female, and he (or she) is a believer such will enter Paradise and they will not be wronged the dint in date-stone." (Chapter 4: Verse 124)<sup>7</sup>

- **Thirdly, in education:**

The equal right to get education can only be seen in Hadith literature. *Quran does imply the obligation to pursue the knowledge even one has to go to China for that*<sup>8</sup>.

## **Present Scenario**

The idea of feminism though embeds in the roots of Islam and emerged with emergence of Islam. But with course of time and dilution of Quranic interpretations for one's own vested interest the equity and equality values underwent a patriarchal subjugation. To remove those diluted interpretations emerged a group of

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<sup>6</sup>Surah Al-Ahzaab

<sup>7</sup>SurahAnNisaa

<sup>8</sup>Hadith

Muslim women who voiced out about the equity and equality ordained upon a women by the virtue of Quran & Hadith. Since then women all over the globe has been vocal about inequalities in equity and equality imposed upon them by virtue of vested Quranic exergies or municipal laws.

Feminist of Islam advocates about equality in these spheres e.g;

- **Public sphere:** Often it is seen that women are considered only as homemakers and are excluded from public sphere discourse. But Islam never denied any women any position in public sphere just because of gender. The gallant examples are: (i) *Nusayba bint Ka'ab al Muzaniyaa*, who fought alongside Prophet in Battle of Uhud., (ii) *Ashifa bint Abdullah*, first women to be appointed as market inspector and manager by Caliph Umar, (iii) *Arwa al-Sulayhi*, longest reigning ruler of Yemen. In modern day (i) *Benazir Bhutto* of Pakistan, (ii) *Sheikh Hasina* of Bangladesh etc.
  
- **Property rights:** It is gutting wrenching to know the fact that even in 21<sup>st</sup> century women are being denied property rights. We do not have to travel much far, but a ballagarant denial of property rights can be seen even in India, where women were denied rights to inherit ancestral property<sup>9</sup>. Islam provides for holding of property by women before and after marriage. A beautiful expression of property rights can be finding in terms of *HazratKhadija* who had her own property with all control over it. Unfortunately In Afgantistan the rights were denied in practice till beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century. With consistent efforts of *MeenaKeshwar Kamal*, founder of The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), women got their due rights in practice too.
  
- **Denial to retain wages, enter contracts & inmate legal claims:** Islam never restrained any gender from participating in any work, nor has restricted any occupation to a particular gender. The examples of such are: (i)*Khadija bint al-Khuwaylid*, who was the first wife prophet and a brilliant trader, who did manage her own business, participated in her business contracts, own an enterprise, earned form her trade, and possessed material things

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<sup>9</sup>Rachel Gorge, “ Women are being denied he Right to Inherit Land in India”, available at <https://www.mic.com/articles/51687/women-are-being-denied-the-right-to-inherit-land-in-india>

in her own name, (ii) *Nafisa bint al Hasan*, who was master of Islamic Jurisprudence and teacher of *Abu Abdullah Muhammad Idris Al-Shafii* and *Ahmad Ibn Hanbal* who later on established *Shafii* School of thought., (iii) *Khawla bint Al Azwar*, female warrior during the reign of Prophet. Islam has ordained for a fair payment of wages. The Quran says:

*“Then if they give suck to the children for you, give them their due payment” (Chapter 65: Verse 6)<sup>10</sup>*

Hadith says:

*Ibn Maajah (2443) narrated that ‘Abd-Allaah ibn ‘Umar (may Allaah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Give the worker his wages before his sweat dries.” Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Ibn Maajah.*

Entering into contract is quintessential for running business, similarly suing and to be sued in the name is also sine qua non for a mercantile agreement. Such is recognised in to-to by modern Mercantile legislations. But such right was ordained upon by Islam long before without any discrimination of the basis of gender.

- **Dress Code:** The most controversial piece of clothing in the realm of feminism, and as per the standards of feminism set by the Western world is none other than Hijab. Hijab is often considered as a symbol of oppression in the Western society. Verily it is used as a co relative as subjugation to the patriarchal norms of society.

But indeed it is true that West is no God, neither it should be allowed to set standards which are universally applicable. We disown the set standards of feminism by the West, and their attitude towards Hijab and Burqa. Hijab in its etymological meaning means “a covering worn in public by Muslim women”<sup>11</sup> i.e. a kind of veil. However, the point to be noted is that- Hijab is not prescribed for only women in Islam, but men as well.

The Quran says:

*“Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and not display their ornaments except*

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<sup>10</sup>Surah Al-Talaq

<sup>11</sup> Hijab, [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/hijab](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/hijab)

*what appears there of, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their or name except to their husbands..." (Chapter 24:Verse 30-31).<sup>12</sup>*

From the above context it is deduced that, no one should be allowed to set standards for Islam and practicing Muslims who are unaware of its fundamentals. We should not subscribe to the ideas of liberation set by the West, because Islam has already provided for its own standards of liberation. There are currently 16 countries in the world, which have banned Burqa. They are Austria, Denmark, France, Belgium, Tajikistan, Latvia, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Netherlands, China, Morocco and Sri Lanka.<sup>13</sup> These bans have blazed debates all round the world ranging from "itis a means to oppress women"<sup>14</sup> to "politicians calling into question of national loyalty of Muslim women who wears Hijab"<sup>15</sup>.

On the other hand, there are even countries around the world where wearing a Hijab is compulsory or if not compulsory is customary or a rule. They are Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia.<sup>16</sup> Islam is not a religion of compulsion. Islam does not coerce practicing Muslims to fulfill rite and obligations. It paves an ideal path for a Muslim to follow.

The Quran says:

*"There is no compulsion in religion" (Chapter 2: Verse256)<sup>17</sup>*

Hijab therefore does not signify oppression, nor is forceful, rather it is a symbol of empowerment, choice, identity, faith and culture. Hijab serves as a part of feminist politics which has been bluntly ignores by the Western political ideology. According to Public Broadcast Service "for many Muslim women wearing a headscarf has become a feminist act, serving as a symbol of their identity

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<sup>12</sup>Surah An-Noor

<sup>13</sup>Alexzandria, Gouveia, "Countries Where Women are Forbidden to Wear the Viel", available at <https://emirateswoman.com/10-countries-women-forbidden-wear-veil/>

<sup>14</sup>AsraQ. Nomani, "Wearing the Hijab in Solidarity Perpetuates Oppression", available at <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/01/06/do-non-muslims-help-or-hurt-women-by-wearing-hijabs/wearing-the-hijab-in-solidarity-perpetuates-oppression>

<sup>15</sup>Jeanine Pirro, Forx News Statement on March 11, 2019, available at <https://deadline.com/2019/03/jeanine-pirro-fox-news-rebuke-ilhan-omar-hijab-1202573258/>

<sup>16</sup>Mukeshrawat, "Burqa ban debate: Countries that proscribe veils, and those who make it compulsory", available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/countries-that-ban-burkha-hijab-niqab-1514673-2019-05-02>

<sup>17</sup>Surah Al-Bakara

and way to counter cultural imperialism.”<sup>18</sup> Muslim women are defining and developing feminism on their own terms .

## **Muslim Women Who Broke Stereotypes**

### **1. Nadia Helmy Ahmed<sup>19</sup>**

Nadia is a professional boxer hailing from Egypt. She has represented her country in Nationals. She also runs a school of self-defence in which she teaches girls how to protect themselves. She is also a boxing coach beside being a self-defence instructor. Under her instructorship several students have played for regional level. She hails from such a region where boxing is considered to be a typical men sport and women are not allowed to enter the arena.

### **2. Zainab Khan<sup>20</sup>**

Zainab is an Audience Strategy Editor at The New York Times. Her position includes the responsibility for on and off platform audience strategy across The New York Times video department. She develops creative content, and does deep data analysis. She plans long term strategic planning, and set up goals for the Publishing Agency. Her internal leadership makes sure that impactful journalism reaches the audience at the most accurate times.

### **3. BonshraAlmntawakel<sup>21</sup>**

Bonshra is professional photographer hailing from Yemen. She was honoured with the title of First Yemeni Photographer in 1999. She pursued her photographic studies from World Studio Foundation, Atlanta, USA. She won distinguished awards for her photographs including Gold in South Show, Graphics New Talent

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<sup>18</sup>Raffia Zakaria, “Headscarves have evolved as a symbol of identity”, available at <https://www.asianage.com/opinion/columnists/060918/headscarves-have-evolved-as-a-symbol-of-identity.html>

<sup>19</sup>Nadia Helmy Ahmed, available at <http://muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/stories/define-limits-and-courage-strive-more>

<sup>20</sup>Zainab Khan, available at <https://www.apollo.io/people/Zainab/Khan/5b25611ea6da98e7c73f8f6f>

<sup>21</sup>BonshraAlmntawakel, available at <https://www.boushraart.com/>

Design Annual Award. Her work was featured in Yemen Times, Yemen Observer, Yemen Today, Artasiapacific Almanac 2011, El Pais, Muse, Yo Donna, De L'air. Her landmark works includes Great Middle East Photo, Mrs. Deane, The Rachel Maddow, Slates Behold, Culturphiles. She has worked with United Nations, CARE International, The Royal Netherlands Embassy, The Social Organisations for Family Development, Outlook, Yemen Today.

#### **4. Miisa<sup>22</sup>**

Miisa is a professional cosplayer from Kangar, Malaysia. Miisa gained her fame and identity as a HijabiCosplayer. Her makeup skills, innovations in using Hijab, her love for fictional anime characters, and her faithfulness to the characteristics looks gave her an international fame among the fraternity of Cosplayers. She is the one who invented Hijab cosplay and inspired a new generation of cosplayers.

#### **5. Hera Mirza**

Hera is an unmatched equestrian hailing from Azamgarh. She became India's first girl who represented India in Open Junior International Tent Pegging Championship, 2017. She secured fifth position among 140 Army Horse Riders in National Equestrian Championship in the event of Sword Tent Pegging. She has been awarded with Mala Award in Horsemanship. She started her Equestrian career at the age of 14 and reached the epitome at the tender age of 17. She had bagged over a dozen Gold Medals in various events of Horse Riding. She has qualified Regional Equestrian League (REL) at the tender age of 16 and moved her way up to the Nationals Workshop on Equestrian Championship.

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<sup>22</sup>Miisa, available at <https://designyoutrust.com/2019/04/meet-miisa-a-kawaii-hijab-cosplayer-from-malaysia/>