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## AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES AND RELATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ISLAM

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### ABSTRACT

Functionalist theory of sex roles differences was the applied method of explaining gender roles and relations. The emergence of feminist movements in the 1970s, brought about new ideas about gender and genders issues. Thus, gender refers to socially assigned roles of males and females. Gender roles show people's function and capabilities, and gender relations reflect the interactions taking place between individuals through a process that differentiates and stratifies people. This paper analyzes gender roles and relations on the basis of the principles of Islam on gender. It draws data from primary and secondary sources, and employs the theoretical method in analyzing them. The findings show that there are similarities between Islamic principles on gender roles and relations and the functionalist theory of sex roles differences. Like other cultures, Islam prescribes roles for males and females, and provides guidelines for their relations. It does not bar women from acquiring knowledge, pursuing of lawful economic ventures, or occupying administrative positions. Islam rejects cultural practices that inhibit women development and subject them to unfair treatments, including denial of rights. However, the influence of radical feminism on some Muslim women resulted in misplacing the teachings of Islam on gender issues. Thus, the prescriptions of Islam on gender roles and relations do not

subordinate women, or hinder their development. But this can best be understood, if gender issues are analyzed on the basis of Islamic norms and principles, and within the context of the Muslim society.

**Keywords:** *Islamic Principles, Gender, Roles, Relations, Socio-Economic*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gender roles are socially assigned functions performed by males and females in a given society. It is a new approach applied in describing sex roles differences and how male and female carry out social responsibilities. Gender relations, on the other hand, are manifestations of the varieties of interactions between males and females on the basis of their social roles and statuses. To maintain stability and establish social order, cultures, societies, and belief systems assign different roles to males and females. These sex roles differences theorized by the functionalists, was the applicable method of explaining gender roles and relations in sociology (Holmes 6). The theory maintains that males and females are interdependent parts whose functions within prescribed norms, contribute to social stability (Sociology of Gender 5; Holmes 11-12). This remained the basic principle of analyzing gender, until the introduction of the gender as an analytical basis, by the feminists in the 1970s (Holmes 6). Thus, the feminists generally sought to re-examine the relationship, roles and responsibilities of males and females in the society. They aim at making a case for women involvement on equal basis, with men, in aspects of life. Among the feminist movements, radical feminism challenges the functionalist theory of sex roles differences and introduces a new idea of categorizing males and females. They maintain

that the categorization of individuals into males and females is cultural not natural (GSDRC 4).

One of the central issues in feminists' discourse is that, patriarchy is the major factor leading to women's subordination in the society (Holmes 11). Women are always ranked below men in decision making. They suffer discrimination, inequality and inequity, their opinion should be considered no less important than those of men or husbands. Ranking the decision of women below those of men is discriminatory, it undermines women development, and inhibits access to education, economic right, health care and development (GSDRC 4). This thought had influenced women in different cultures and societies including the Muslims. Some Muslim women questioned what they call male dominance in the explanation of the religious scripture, an explanation that causes under-development of Muslim women. In the attempt to remove the hindrance to women development, they call for a re-examination of the scripture to actually establish the status, roles and functions of women (Baden 5-6).

Analyzing gender issues in Islam requires understanding of such issues within the context of the religion. This paper makes an analysis of Islamic principles on gender roles and relations. Its aim is to find out whether the principles of Islam on gender undermine women's right, or constitute any hindrance to their development. The paper draws data from primary and secondary sources, and applied theoretical method is applied in analyzing them. In contemporary times, gender permeates all disciplines, and methodological differences and modes of analyses across disciplines, imply

that the outcomes of researches on gender differ according to the disciplines (Holmes 4).

### **Sociological (Functionalist) Theory of Gender Roles and Relations**

Functionalism views males and females as different interdependent parts that contribute to the normal function of the whole society. This is the traditional way of explaining the assigned roles of men and women. (Sociology of Gender 5, Holmes 11-12). Social norms and cultural prescriptions define and regulate the behaviors of individuals and shape their relations. The prescribed roles and relations in cultures enable people to predict the action of others and fashion their acts accordingly. Human beings acquire basic life skills and social norms in the process of development. Boys learn those roles that prepare them for the status of adult males, and girls are prepared to function as adult females. As social actors, males and females operate within the scope of socially defined roles and functions that determine and depict the actual functions they perform. At different stages of development, individuals come into contact with social norms and values, which serve as social codes that define their roles and relations (Chinoy 38).

The roles played by an individual depend on his or her ascribed or acquired status. The ascribed statuses are beyond the control of an individual they include sex, language and colour. Acquired statuses include efforts to aspire to occupy a political office, or practice a particular profession, which are achieved through direct action of an individual (Sociology of Gender 2). Though males and females share similarities in functions, there are areas where they

differ. In some cultures men are considered stronger than women, and are given priority in professions like military service and other works that require the deployment of physical power. Men are essentially responsible for taking care of the economic and consumption needs of the family. The functions of women are mainly to bear the foetus in the womb, feed the newly born, and take care of domestic chores. In these cultures, men have the authority of final decision, within the family, and by implication the society as a whole (Sociology of Gender 2, Chinoy 40).

Cultural practices and social norms play significant roles in individual's development shape the individual's personality, and prescribe the roles, relations, and values they exhibit. In addition to biological features, culture is a crucial factor in shaping human characteristics and social development (Bigge and Hunt 83-84). On the other hand, social functions such as commitment to religious organization, ties to members of the family, influence the roles and relations of members of society. Individuals seek group identity by prioritizing personal needs and social values. Through contacts with different groups, an individual develop the idea of the need for social approval to cope with the challenges of physical and socio-emotional needs, individuals need to feel the sense of belonging. The feeling of sense of belonging facilitates the development of group participation, collaboration in project, and leadership roles (Newman and Newman 256).

Societies expect their members to conform to their values, and function within prescribed norms and values. The behaviors that contradict the norms and values of the society appropriated by some members, are considered deviant. Their

practice is seen by the society as unethical and unhealthy to the survival of the society and its values (Bigge and Hunt 84). In contemporary times for instance, same sex marriage becomes an issue of human right, in some societies. But the practice remains deviant and unacceptable in other societies. The rejection of this practice is not only on the basis of religious belief, but on grounds of its violation of the societal norms and values. The practice is abhorred by cultures for its conflict with what is natural but its obstruction of normal function, of male and female. Ordinarily, societies abhor behaviors and practices that alter the expected roles of its members, in a way that conflict with acceptable norms are rejected. Changes in the normal roles and relations of males and females which leads lead to unhealthy competitions and result into conflicts is not in the best interest of the both the individual and the society.

In different cultures, members of the family function within institutional prescriptions. The prescriptions assigned different roles and functions to husbands and wives. Any change that places the burden of providing for the family on women and at the same time asks men to breast-feed will lead to tension within family structure, and the society at large. In some societies men have unlimited powers and authority over women, they decide all matters including those pertaining to female personal functions. These unlimited powers are no doubt, detrimental to the development of women. They hinder their right of acquiring knowledge, or seeking medical treatment. This denial constitutes serious violation of women's right and challenging it is not out of place. However, distorting the normal functions and roles, of males and females, in the name of fighting for women's right and gender

equality, alters the normal male and female relations and results in conflict.

### **Feminism and Gender Roles and Relations**

Feminists have the credit of propounding a new theory explaining gender as socially assigned functions of males and females (Holmes 6). Thus, in sociology of gender, concepts such as gender roles, gender analysis, gender relations, gender equity and gender equality etc. are analytical tools for understanding males and females' function. The theory of gender role is applied in explaining individual's functions, and how male or female's function to sustain values, norms, behavior and practices. Gender roles and relation are the functions performed by individuals in the process of their interaction which contribute to social stability. They portray the structures of organizations, consolidate beliefs and relationships, and affect people's functioning and capabilities. They also reflect the interactions taking place between individuals, through a process that differentiates and stratifies people (Sen, Ostlein and George 12, Reeves and Baden 4).

The discomfort of the feminists with the functionalist theory sex roles differences, led to developing ideas within the gender spectrum in the 1970s. The ideas insist on gender equality, reject passive status of women, and call for a change in global political economy and social structure (GSDRC 4, Reeves and Baden 6). They challenge the perceived subordination of women, arguing that they take the higher burden of work, but receive little benefit. They maintain that women enormously contribute in wealth creation and property development but own meager percentage of wealth and

properties. Women ensure the survival, reproduction and security of the society, but they are the less-fed, undereducated, and more restricted than men in various social functions, especially in the occupying higher political positions. In places of work, women who are employed suffer segregation, and given lower-paid and less-secure positions. The feminists maintain that there are cultural practices placing severe restrictions on female mobility and capacity. Such practices turn them into servants, instead of partners in their homes and communities. The feminists' call for greater privileges and recognition of women rights, gradually transforms into agitation for equity, and complete equality between males and females (Sen, Ostlein and George 13).

Restricting gender to women's right alone, and equality between males and females does not adequately portray actual intent of gender (Sen, Ostlein and George 13). This form of approach to gender issues has enormously influenced the minds of women in different societies. Thus, some self-styled "progressive Muslim women" adopt the approach and claim that the status of women in Muslim societies is much lower than that of men (Baden 7). The dominance of men in the societies is partly reflected in the patriarchal explanation of the scripture, subordinating women to the authority of men. They insist on the re-interpretation of the scripture, to remove the unequal relationship between females and males. The preference given to men in the explanation of the scripture affects women's economic independence, rights and political participation (Baden 5-6).

The feminist stance on inequality between men and women influenced some "enthusiasts" among Muslim women, who



declared their spiritual fitness to lead congregational prayers, and preside over Muslim marriage procedure. They call for new explanation of some verses of the *Qur'an*, which according them, were done from masculine perspectives. They argue that there is no religious rule or principle barring them from presiding over religious activities like leading congregational prayers (DeLong-Bass 2-5). It must be admitted that there are explanations of the texts that inhibit women rights and portray them as inferior to men. Such explanations are not authoritative and they cannot be the basis judging the Islamic principles on gender issues. However, the idea that the problems of Muslim women are associated with their religion, reflects inadequate understanding of the principles of Islam. Thus, some women are not conscious of the fact that, taking over male functions could push them into deprived conditions, and hinder them from achieving self-realization (Arebi Vol.8, No.1, 104).

The impact of uncritical adoption of Feminism on some Muslim women led to the claim that the primary sources of Islam, allow subordination of women to the authority of men. This mode of thought comes from a style of reading of the religious texts developed by such women. They erroneously confer on themselves the right to lead and function in both religious and non-religious matters, on equal basis with men (DeLong-Bass 2). It is not out of place to challenge traditional and cultural practices that undermine the status of women, and deny them their God-given rights. It is also not a problem to challenge the textual interpretation that strips the text of its actual meaning and undermines the rights of women (al-Tabari vol.7, 563). Thus, Islam prescribes similar functions for males and females in many areas of the spiritual and

socio-economic realms. One of the areas where Islam prescribes gender equality is the issue of will. If a woman is assigned to execute a will, the presence of men does not invalidate such will. There is no religious basis or justification for cancellation or withdrawal of a will assigned to a woman, because of the presence of a male (Ibn. Kathir vol.5, 527).

### **Gender Roles and Relations in Islam**

The areas where male and female functions differ imply their differences in roles, which vary from one culture to another (University of Ottawa 7). The values of Islam, its rules and principles provide guidelines for Muslims, on the conduct of life. Muslims are obliged to observe the rules of Islam in the interactive social, economic, and political life etc (Abusulayman 7-9). Thus, Islam provides equality between males and females and prescribes functions for them in accordance with their nature. The *Qur'an* equates males and females in all aspects of spirituality (Q32:35), and in act of reward or sin (Q16:97). It states that the difference between human beings in spiritual realm is piety (Q49:13). Thus, practices such as *Zakah* and *Hajj* are carried out by the people who are rich, these practices are obligatory on females as much as they are on males (Badawi 2).

Islam takes into account human nature and individual differences to avoid superficial equality which does not consider human nature in assigning roles and functions. The equality prescribed by Islam treats people according to their natural disposition to establish justice and fairness bring stability in the society. Subjecting people generally are to a standard suitable for few persons, in the name of equality, will amount to injustice and denial of rights (Islam House 2).

However, ascribed statuses such sex, race, language, and colour, are beyond human control, and stripping humans of the roles that are compatible with their nature and statuses, will result into chaos (Chinoy 40). It is illogical to neglect the natural differences between males and females, under the claim that such differences are not natural but societal perceptions (Islam House 3).

Individuals function either as members of a family or members of society, and they in their functions and statuses on those capacities. Within the family structure, the roles and relations of the spouses revolve round their statuses as parents, children or husbands and wives. Parents are assigned the roles of training their children and taking good care of them. Thus, equal treatment, provision of education, moral training, feeding, clothing and the provision of all basic needs are the responsibilities of the parents. Children, on the other hand, are under the religious responsibility to respect and obey their parents. Children are morally and religiously obliged to take care of their parents at old age or when they are incapacitated (Q17:23) (Badawi 4). The basis of gender relations within the family structure revolves round the rights and duties of the spouses. In Islam, the husbands are under the obligation to provide for the wives. But this does not give them absolute and unlimited control over the bodies, personalities and decisions of the wives. The wives are living partners in the homes, they have the right of consultation and their views are as valid as those of the husbands. The *Qur'an* pointed out that, wives have rights similar to the duties place on them, and that husbands have a degree over them (Q2:228). This verse implies among other things, that husbands should be kind to the wives and be generous in

character, spending, and care (Qurtubi vol.3, 125). The Qur'an prescribes for women rights equal to those of men (Q2:228), it thus obliges men to treat women fairly (Q4:19), and to fulfill their obligations towards women (Q2:237). When there are mutual respect and understanding, women partner with men to play complementary roles in promoting the well-being of human society (Chapra 26).

In chapter 4 verse 34 the *Qur'an* shows that men are responsible for the care of women because Allah provides them and gives them the means. Thus, the responsibilities of the husbands include feeding and provision of at least the basic needs of life to the family including the wives (Qurtubi vol.3, 169). The verses cited above do not give husbands unrestricted authority over their wives. They imply kind treatment and generosity to the wives, as partners in life, whose opinions and decisions are valid. The verses show that Islam places the responsibility of providing to the wives and taking care of them, on the husbands. As part of the wives' duties and the rights of the husbands, women in marriage relation are expected to hold their husbands high esteem (Badawi 4). The overall responsibility of the home is placed on the husbands, they carry out services to cater for the family. But this does not give them absolute powers or restrict women from participating in social functions within the rules of Islam. Thus, the social norms and values of Islam regulate multi-dimensional aspects of life. They never suppress human nature, or bar a male or a female from carrying out responsibilities and social interaction provided they conform to the teachings of the religion of Islam (Haq 60-61).

Outside the family structure, males and females function in various capacities actively taking part in different services and professions. They participate in different economic ventures, acquisition of knowledge, and serve in both private and public sectors. Islam does not relegate women to a subsidiary status in the circle of the learned. Throughout the history of Islam, women acquired and excelled in various branches of knowledge and professions. Muslim women had gained expertise in *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, law, theology and medicine. Many had achieved prestige and served as administrators, orators, builders of mosques and other public places (al-Khattanivol.1 350;Essa and Ali 9). They took part in decision making through consultation from family level to the wider society. This consultative practice applied to all believers, as shown in the *Qur'anic* accounts of the Queen of Sheba (Q27:29-34).The young lady that suggested to her father to employ the service of Prophet Musa (AS),is another case in point (Q28:26).In modern times, women function as physicians, legal practitioners, judges, parliamentarians, teachers, administrators, and chief executive officers etc. It is not in record that women were denied the right to practice any profession not prohibited in Islam, neither were they barred from accumulation of wealth through lawful means (al-Raysuni 8).

Islam does not allow the denial of healthcare, education and right ownership of wealth for women. It does not restrict them in pursuing business, access to education or health care neither does it inhibit them from all activities that facilitate their development. Such understanding comes up, when gender issues within Muslim societies, are evaluated devoid of Islamic principles. For a fair and objective analysis of gender roles

and relations, the analytical basis must be within the context of the nature of the society in question. It must not be within a theory developed in the context of completely different cultural pattern and world view. Thus, analyzing gender roles and relations within the Muslim society, must be based on a theory that encompasses the principles of religion of Islam and the experience of the members of the Muslim society (ArebiVol.8, No.1, 105). Gender issues in Islam, should be treated in line with the teachings of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* of the Prophet (SAW). Assessing gender issues within the Muslim society using non-religious principles result in providing inadequate information. A better understanding of gender issues in Islam, can be achieved, if the analysis is devoid of the un-Islamic or non-Muslim values, and unjust *status quo* prevalent in many Muslim societies (Badawi 11).

## **CONCLUSION**

Different societies have prescribed rules and values which their members are expected to observe. The rules and values shape the relations between the members and prepare them for future statuses and roles. Boys are expected to acquire the roles of adult males in the process of growth, likewise girls acquire the roles of women. The differences in roles and functions of males and females vary according to society. Gender as social construct used in describing assigned roles to male female is not new, throughout the human history, but they varied according to cultures and worldviews. In some cultures males have unlimited control over the females, other cultures imposed limits to the powers exercised by males over the females. However, conferring excessive power to either males or females will lead to crisis in the society. There are functions that can only be performed by females because of

their physiological nature, assigning such functions to males will result in chaotic conditions.

Islam prescribes equality between males and females in the spiritual and material aspects. It does not prevent a male or female from acquiring education, practicing lawful professions or engaging in the public service. Its rules and codes of ethics are what regulate the roles and relations of people engaging in one activity or another. Islam does not prohibit women from access to healthcare, acquisition of education and wealth generation through lawful means. The principles of Islam on gender roles and relation do not inhibit women development. Analyzing gender roles and relations within Islam, from feminist's perspective, amount to distorting the actual teachings of the religion on gender issues. Such analysis will not fair and objective, because its bases were not developed within context of Muslim experiences and the principles of their religion. However, adoption of idea that erodes social values, and misplaces established religious principles is counterproductive. This is the result of adopting radical feminists' ideas on gender issues, which misinterpret, distort and misplace the teachings and values of the religion of Islam.

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