



# The Concept of Gender Equality in the Family in Muslim Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Sierra Leone and Afghanistan from an Islamic Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores the concept of gender equality within families in Muslim-majority countries, specifically comparing Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. Despite the teachings of Islam advocating for equality between genders, significant disparities persist in both nations. The research employed a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with 25 participants and focus group discussions involving 5 groups to gather insights from various stakeholders, including family members and gender activists. The data analysis approach followed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to gender equality. Findings revealed that Sierra Leone faces challenges such as lower educational participation among women and high maternal mortality rates, while Afghanistan has experienced severe restrictions on women's rights since the Taliban's takeover, including limited access to education and public spaces. The research further shows that the cultural interpretations of Islamic teachings often hinder the realization of gender equality, with several interviewees pointing to traditional practices that contradict Islamic principles. This study provides comparative insights into these barriers and contributes to the discourse on gender issues in Muslim societies by offering a detailed exploration of the specific challenges faced in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan.



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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender equality is one of the most sensitive topics to discuss. Gender inequality gaps continue to persist in many countries, including Islamic countries (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Despite the growing awareness of the need for equality between genders, significant disparities remain in several regions, particularly in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. This highlights a critical research gap, as the intersection of gender inequality and Islamic cultural interpretations has not been sufficiently explored in the context of these countries. Fakhri's (1997: 12) view states that gender equality has increasingly been voiced both among men and women as awareness grows that, substantively, all humans are equal.

The concept of gender, according to Ritzer and Goodman (2003: 45), can be understood as a symbol created by society, as well as the traits and behaviors instilled through the socialization process that are directly related to the gender of both women and men. Rachman (2001: 23) adds that the issue of gender does not become a problem as long as it does not lead to gender injustice.

From an Islamic perspective, Umar (2021: 67) emphasizes that the fundamental spirit of the relationship between men and women in Islam is one of fairness (equality). Lubis (2003: 89) supports this view by stating that the subordination of women is a belief that developed in society, which is inconsistent with or contrary to the spirit of justice taught by Islam.

However, the implementation of these principles is often hindered by socio-cultural norms and misinterpretations of Islamic teachings. Regarding the current situation in Muslim-majority countries, Fathiyah (2014: 34) reveals that in Sierra Leone, a predominantly Muslim country, gender inequality in education still exists, especially at the senior secondary school level, where the female participation rate is notably lower. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, according to Qomari (2015: 56), since the Taliban's takeover, the country has become the most repressive for women by restricting access to education and public spaces.

Muawanah (2006: 78) concludes that although Islam teaches equality, gender-biased interpretations still affect the implementation in various Muslim countries (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). This study aims to fill the gap in understanding the specific barriers to gender equality in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, offering comparative insights into how cultural and Islamic perspectives shape gender dynamics in these regions. This is reinforced by Azra (1999: 90), who emphasizes the importance of a correct understanding of Islamic teachings on gender equality.

## RESEARCH METHODS

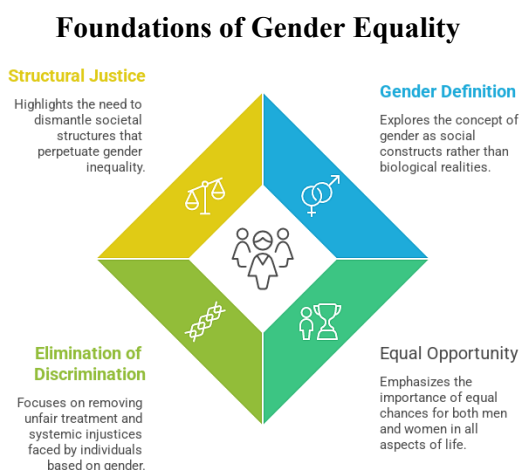
This study employs a qualitative approach to explore and analyze the concept of gender equality within families in Muslim countries, particularly Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. This approach was chosen because it provides an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural issues that influence gender equality. The qualitative approach allows for a nuanced exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions, which quantitative methods may not fully capture. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, including family members, gender activists, and community leaders. Participants were purposively selected based on their involvement in gender-related issues within their communities to ensure rich and relevant insights. In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with groups of 6-8 participants to facilitate interaction and explore diverse perspectives. The data collected from both interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the data and identifying recurring themes related to gender equality and cultural interpretations of Islamic teachings. This method was chosen because it allows for the identification of patterns and the construction of meaningful insights from qualitative data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Definition of Gender Equality

Ahmadi (2013: 56) explains that the term "gender" does not actually exist in the Indonesian language. In his analysis, Abdullah (2009: 34) emphasizes that gender refers to the apparent differences between men and women in terms of values and behavior.

Ainiyah (2015: 78) defines gender equality as the equal opportunity and rights for both men and women as human beings. This is reinforced by Asniah et al. (2023: 90), who state that gender equality involves the elimination of discrimination and structural injustice.



## **Gender Equality According to Islamic Law**

In Islam, gender issues remain controversial. Some Muslims believe that there is no gender issue in Islam. They even label the women's movement, books, articles, and seminars discussing gender justice negatively (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). However, another group with a different viewpoint argues that there are gender issues in Islam, and they support movements that demand gender justice. This discourse develops both at the academic level and through social actions because gender injustice is often justified by religious values. As a result, the struggle for gender equality is seen as violating religious values (Fahmina, 2015).

Gender is the societal view on how a woman or a man should act and think. For example, women are often expected to be good at cooking, gentle, and emotional. On the other hand, men are seen as leaders, rational, and assertive. Gender as a social construct is not always accurate (Fitriani, 2018).

In Islam, the relationship between men and women is considered equal. Subordination of women contradicts the spirit of justice taught in Islam. The differences between men and women are acknowledged based on biological conditions but are not meant to exalt one side or degrade the other. As stated in the Qur'an, a person's superiority is measured only by piety: "Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you" (QS. Al-Hujurat: 13).

Islam places men and women in a partnership principle. In the family context, the husband and wife relationship is likened to clothing that protects one another. The rights and responsibilities of humans, both men and women, are the same before Allah (Nasution, 2020). The Hadith of Prophet Muhammad SAW also emphasizes respect for women, stating that heaven lies beneath the feet of mothers (HR. Ahmad).

From the Islamic perspective, gender equality is affirmed in the Qur'an, which states that both men and women are equal as servants of Allah, vicegerents, recipients of the primordial covenant, and possess the potential for achievement (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Prophet Muhammad SAW is also known as a figure who respected women, challenged the Arab patriarchal culture, and instructed men to treat women justly.

Women in the Qur'an are placed in three main positions: as companions of men (QS. Ar-Rum: 21), possessing equal faith (QS. Al-Buruj: 10), and receiving the same reward for their deeds (QS. Al-Mu'min: 40). Gender equality in Islam does not mean standardizing the roles of men and women in all aspects. For example, the task of taking care of children is not solely the responsibility of the wife but also of the husband. Islam also designates men as the leaders of the family, but women are allowed to work under certain conditions (Syafi'i, 2019).

## **Gender Equality in Muslim Countries**

### **a. Sierra Leone**

An in-depth analysis by Fathiyah (2014: 89) reveals that Sierra Leone faces serious challenges in gender equality despite having a Muslim majority population. Data from Abdullah's research (2009: 112) show that the maternal mortality rate in Sierra Leone is even higher than in Somalia, with 1,120 out of 100,000 women dying due to pregnancy or childbirth complications.

Qomari (2015: 67) identifies that although Sierra Leone has enjoyed relative peace for the past 20 years, gender-based violence remains a harsh reality. Riadi (2024: 45) reports that only 45.8% of women in Sierra Leone feel safe walking home at night in their communities, and most women receive less than three years of education.

Asniah et al. (2023: 78) highlight that female genital mutilation is still widespread, affecting 90% of women and girls aged 15-49. Ainiyah (2015: 90) adds that the right to education, although considered universal, is still difficult for girls in Sierra Leone to attain.

**b. Afghanistan**

According to Lubis' analysis (2003: 156), since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has experienced significant setbacks in gender equality. Umar (2021: 178) notes that the Taliban has imposed severe restrictions, including a ban on education for girls above grade six and restrictions on women in public spaces.

Rachman (2001: 89) revealed nine critical statistics regarding gender gaps in Afghanistan:

- The average income of women is less than 16% of that of men.
- Women are outnumbered five to one in sectors requiring high skills.
- Women hold only 4.1% of senior and managerial positions.
- Women own and operate five out of every 100 small businesses.
- Only 27% of parliament members are women.

Fakih (1997: 234) adds that Afghanistan ranks at the bottom among 156 countries in terms of economic opportunities for women. Muawanah (2006: 167) reports that the literacy rate for women in Afghanistan is only around 53%, compared to 79% worldwide.

Azra (1999: 145) analyzes that the restrictions imposed by the Taliban, particularly the ban on education and NGO employment, have received strong international condemnation (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Ahmed (2000: 198) notes that the Taliban claimed the restrictions were temporary due to women not wearing the Islamic hijab properly.

**CONCLUSION**

The conclusion of this study highlights several key findings regarding gender equality within Muslim-majority countries, specifically Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. First, despite the Qur'an affirming the equality of rights and duties between men and women in the presence of Allah SWT, as noted by Ritzer and Goodman (2003: 245), significant cultural and societal barriers persist in both countries, hindering the full realization of this equality. Al-Qatthan (2017: 167) acknowledges that interpretations of Qur'anic verses related to gender equality continue to spark differing opinions among scholars, which can lead to divergent practices and policies regarding gender roles. Muhsin (1994: 189) emphasizes that gender equality is a fundamental value in Islamic law, yet traditional and cultural interpretations often undermine these principles in practice. Ahmadi (2013: 278) stresses the importance of scholars and the Muslim community continuing to advocate for women's rights and encourage the creation of a just and equitable society for all. This research suggests that to address gender inequality in Muslim-majority countries, policy reforms must focus on promoting a more nuanced and inclusive interpretation of Islamic teachings, integrating gender equality into education, healthcare, and social policies. Furthermore, gender activists and policymakers should collaborate to challenge cultural practices that restrict women's rights and opportunities. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on gender equality in Islamic societies and provides a basis for policy recommendations aimed at promoting gender equity in the family and society.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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