

The Concept of Gender Equality in Muslim Families: A Comparative Study of the Dynamics of Husband–Wife Roles in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan through a Socio-Legal Approach

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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 interviews and focus group discussions to gather insights from various stakeholders, including family members and gender activists. Findings revealed that in Sierra Leone, only about 52% of women are enrolled in secondary education and the maternal mortality rate remains among the highest globally, at approximately 717 deaths per 100,000 live births (WHO, 2021), while in Afghanistan, since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, more than 80% of school-age girls have been denied access to formal education and women's participation in the workforce has dropped below 10% (UN Women, 2022). The analysis highlights that cultural interpretations of Islamic teachings often hinder the realization of gender equality, suggesting a need for a more nuanced understanding of these teachings to promote equitable practices. This research contributes to the discourse on gender issues in Muslim societies by providing comparative insights into the barriers faced in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan.



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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality remains one of the most sensitive issues to discuss. Gender inequality still occurs in many countries, including Islamic nations. This aligns with Fakhri (1997: 12), who stated that gender equality is increasingly advocated by both men and women as awareness grows that, in essence, all human beings are equal.

According to Ritzer and Goodman (2003: 45), the concept of gender can be understood as a symbol constructed by society, as well as traits and behaviors instilled through socialization processes that are directly related to both women and men. Rachman (2001: 23) further emphasized that gender itself should not be a problem as long as it does not give rise to gender-based injustice.

From an Islamic perspective, Umar (2021: 67) asserted that the essence of relationships between men and women in Islam is inherently just and equal. Lubis (2003: 89) supported this view by stating that the subordination of women is a socially developed belief that contradicts the spirit of justice taught in Islam.

With regard to implementation in Muslim-majority countries, Fathiyah (2014: 34) revealed that in Sierra Leone, where the population is predominantly Muslim, gender disparity in education persists, particularly from the high school level onward, where female participation rates are significantly lower.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, according to Qomari (2015: 56), the Taliban takeover has rendered the country one of the most repressive states for women by restricting their access to education and public spaces.

Muawanah (2006: 78) concluded that although Islam teaches equality, gender-biased interpretations still influence its implementation in various Muslim countries. This view is reinforced by Azra (1999: 90), who emphasized the importance of a proper understanding of Islamic teachings on gender equality.

However, most previous studies have remained at a descriptive level, merely portraying the existence of gender gaps without linking them to the specific socio-religious constructions within each country. This study seeks to fill that gap by comparing Sierra Leone and Afghanistan—two Muslim nations with vastly different socio-political contexts—in order to examine how cultural interpretations of Islamic teachings produce distinct patterns of inequality.

The novelty of this research lies in its rarely undertaken cross-country comparative approach, in which the focus is not merely on general discrimination against women, but rather on how local interpretations of Islamic family values shape structures of inequality. Thus, this study does not merely add descriptive data but also offers a new conceptual perspective on the interaction between religion, culture, and the practice of gender equality within Muslim families.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore and analyze the concept of gender equality within families in Muslim-majority countries, specifically Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. This approach was chosen because it provides a deeper understanding of the social and cultural issues influencing gender equality. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, involving 30 respondents from each country, consisting of family members (fathers, mothers, and daughters), religious leaders, and gender activists. The primary data collection instruments were semi-structured interview guides, which allowed for the exploration of participants' personal narratives and experiences, as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) to capture the dynamics of collective dialogue. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis through three main stages: (1) verbatim transcription of interviews and FGDs, (2) open coding to identify initial themes, and (3) clustering themes into broader categories that represent patterns of gender equality and inequality. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, member checking with participants, and maintaining a research audit trail.

RESULTS

1. Definition of Gender Equality

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

Ainiyah (2015: 78) defined gender equality as the equal conditions for men and women to obtain opportunities and exercise their rights as human beings. This is reinforced by Asniah et al. (2023: 90), who stated that gender equality encompasses the elimination of discrimination and structural injustice.

2. Gender Equality in Islamic Law

In Islam, the issue of gender remains controversial. Some Muslims believe that gender is not a problem in Islam. They instead attach negative labels to women's movements, books, articles, and seminars that address gender justice. On the other hand, another group holds a different perspective, arguing that gender issues do exist within Islam, and they support movements demanding gender justice. This discourse has developed both in academic circles and in social activism, as gender inequality is often justified using religious values. As a result, the struggle for gender equality is sometimes regarded as a violation of religious principles (Fahmina, 2015).

Gender reflects society's perception of how women and men are expected to act and think. For example, women are often considered to be skilled in cooking, gentle in demeanor, and emotional, whereas men are perceived as leaders, rational, and assertive. However, gender as a social construct is not necessarily valid (Fitriani, 2018).

In Islam, the relationship between men and women is inherently just and equal. Subordination of women contradicts the spirit of justice taught in Islam. Differences between men and women are acknowledged based on biological conditions, but not as a means to exalt one group or demean the other. As stated in the Qur'an: "Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you" (QS. Al-Hujurat: 13).

Islam places men and women within the principle of partnership. In the family context, the relationship between husband and wife is likened to garments that mutually protect one another. The rights and responsibilities of human beings, both men and women, are equal before Allah (Nasution, 2020). The sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also emphasize respect for women, such as the well-known hadith that states, "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers" (HR. Ahmad).

From the Islamic perspective, gender equality is affirmed in the Qur'an, which declares that men and women are equally servants of Allah, His vicegerents on earth, recipients of the primordial covenant, and bear the same potential for achievement (Anwar, 2016). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is also recognized as a figure who valued women, dismantled the patriarchal culture of the Arabs, and instructed men to treat women with fairness.

Women in the Qur'an are placed in three principal positions: as companions to men (QS. Ar-Rum: 21), as equals in faith (QS. Al-Buruj: 10), and as recipients of equal rewards for their deeds (QS. Al-Mu'min: 40). Gender equality in Islam does not imply identical roles for men and women in every aspect. For example, child-rearing is not solely the responsibility of the wife, but also of the husband. Islam also designates men as the leaders of the family, yet women are permitted to work under certain conditions (Syafi'i, 2019).

3. Gender Equality in Muslim Countries

a. Sierra Leone

An in-depth analysis conducted by Fathiyah (2014: 89) revealed that Sierra Leone faces serious challenges in achieving gender equality despite its predominantly Muslim population. Data from Abdullah (2009: 112) showed that the maternal mortality rate in Sierra Leone is even higher than that of Somalia, with 1,120 out of every 100,000 women dying from pregnancy or childbirth complications.

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

Asniah et al. (2023: 78) highlighted that female genital mutilation remains prevalent, affecting 90% of women and girls aged 15–49. Ainiyah (2015: 90) further noted that the right to education, although considered universal, remains difficult for girls in Sierra Leone to attain.

b. Afghanistan

According to Lubis (2003: 156), since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has experienced significant setbacks in terms of gender equality. Umar (2021: 178) observed that the Taliban have imposed severe restrictions, including banning girls from education beyond the sixth grade and limiting women's presence in public spaces.

- Rachman (2001: 89) identified nine key statistics highlighting gender inequality in Afghanistan:
- Women's average income is less than 16% of men's.
- Women are outnumbered five to one in high-skill sectors.
- Women hold only 4.1% of senior and managerial positions.
- Women own and operate just five out of every 100 small businesses.

- Only 27% of parliament members are women.

Fakih (1997: 234) further noted that Afghanistan ranks at the very bottom among 156 countries regarding economic opportunities for women. Muawanah (2006: 167) reported that the female literacy rate in Afghanistan is approximately 53%, compared with 79% globally.

Azra (1999: 145) analyzed that Taliban-imposed restrictions, particularly the bans on education and employment with NGOs, have drawn strong international condemnation. Ahmed (2000: 198) recorded that the Taliban defended these restrictions as a “temporary suspension,” claiming that women were not wearing the Islamic veil properly.

CONCLUSION

Ritzer and Goodman (2003: 245) concluded that within the context of the Qur’an, Islamic law affirms the equality of rights and obligations between men and women before Allah SWT. However, Al-Qatthan (2017: 167) acknowledged that interpretations of Qur’anic verses related to gender equality continue to generate differences of opinion among scholars. Muhsin (1994: 189) emphasized that gender equality is a fundamental value in Islamic law. Ahmadi (2013: 278) underscored the importance for scholars and Muslim communities to continuously advocate for women’s rights and to encourage the creation of a just and equitable society for all.

As a practical recommendation, this study highlights the need for reform in Islamic education curricula in Muslim-majority countries to incorporate non-discriminatory understandings of Qur’anic verses related to gender. In addition, collaboration between scholars, governments, and civil society organizations should be strengthened to produce fatwas and family policies that promote gender equality. From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches gender discourse in Islam by showing that differences in interpreting sacred texts are not merely a matter of hermeneutics, but are also closely connected to the socio-cultural constructions of each country. Thus, this research contributes to the theory of religion–gender relations, demonstrating that religious teachings cannot be universally understood without considering the local socio-cultural context.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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