
Islamic Teachings on Gender Justice and Their Role in Promoting Social Balance: A Contextual Analysis for Pakistan

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Abstract

This article explores the foundational principles of gender justice in Islamic teachings and examines their potential to foster social balance within the Pakistani context. Drawing upon the Qur'an, Sunnah, classical jurisprudence, and contemporary scholarly interpretations, the study argues that Islam provides a comprehensive ethical and legal framework that upholds the dignity, rights, and responsibilities of both men and women. The article critically analyzes how these principles have been interpreted and implemented in Pakistan's socio-legal landscape, highlighting both progressive developments and persistent challenges. It contends that a contextual and holistic understanding of Islamic gender ethics—grounded in justice ('adl), equity (qist), and compassion (rahmah)—can serve as a powerful catalyst for social harmony, inclusive development, and national cohesion. The paper concludes with policy-oriented recommendations for aligning national legislation, educational curricula, and public discourse with authentic Islamic principles of gender justice.

Keywords: Gender Justice, Islam, Social Balance, Pakistan, Qur'an, Sunnah, Women's Rights, Islamic Ethics

Introduction

Pakistan, as an Islamic Republic, derives its constitutional and moral foundations from the teachings of Islam. Article 2 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan declares Islam as the state religion, while Article 31 mandates the state to enable Muslims to order their lives in accordance with the fundamental principles and basic concepts of Islam.¹

Within this framework, the question of gender justice assumes critical importance—not only as a matter of human rights but as a theological and social imperative rooted in Islamic revelation. Despite significant strides in women’s education, political participation, and legal protections, gender disparities persist in Pakistan across economic, social, and cultural domains.²

These disparities are often rationalized through selective or decontextualized interpretations of Islamic texts, which obscure the religion’s core ethical commitments to justice and human dignity.

This article contends that authentic Islamic teachings offer a robust and dynamic framework for gender justice that is not only compatible with modern notions of equality but also uniquely suited to address the specific socio-cultural realities of Pakistan. By returning to primary sources—the Qur’an and the Sunnah—and engaging with classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship, this study seeks to reclaim a vision of gender relations grounded in mutual respect, complementary roles, and shared moral responsibility. The concept of “social balance” (tawāzun ijtimā’ī) is central to this vision, as it emphasizes harmony, stability, and collective well-being as outcomes of just gender relations.

The methodology employed in this research is qualitative and interpretive, combining textual analysis of Islamic sources with contextual examination of Pakistan’s legal and social landscape. The article is structured as follows: first, it outlines the theological and ethical foundations of gender justice in Islam; second, it

examines key domains—education, economic participation, family law, and public life—through the lens of Islamic principles and Pakistani realities; third, it addresses common misconceptions and interpretive challenges; and finally, it offers recommendations for policy and practice that align national development goals with Islamic ethics of justice and equity.

I. Theological and Ethical Foundations of Gender Justice in Islam

At the heart of Islamic teachings on gender lies the Qur’anic affirmation of the ontological equality of men and women. The Qur’an states: “O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest among you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous.”³

This verse establishes two foundational principles: first, the shared origin and equal dignity of all human beings regardless of gender; and second, that moral excellence (taqwā), not gender, is the criterion for superiority in the eyes of God. This theological equality forms the bedrock of Islamic gender ethics.

Further, the Qur’an explicitly recognizes women as moral and spiritual agents with full accountability before God: “And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer—those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged [even as much as] the speck on a date stone.”⁴

This verse, among others, dismantles any notion of inherent spiritual or intellectual inferiority of women. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reinforced this principle through his teachings and personal conduct. He emphasized the importance of treating daughters with kindness, stating, “Whoever is tested with daughters and treats them generously, they will be a shield for him from the Fire.”⁵

He also declared, “Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim,” a hadith that classical scholars interpreted as inclusive of both men and women.⁶

Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) developed detailed rulings on women's rights in marriage, inheritance, testimony, and economic agency. While some classical rulings reflect the socio-historical contexts of their time, the underlying objectives (maqāṣid) of Islamic law—preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property—apply equally to men and women. Contemporary scholars such as Amina Wadud and Khaled Abou El Fadl argue that a maqāṣid-based approach allows for dynamic reinterpretation (ijtihād) that upholds justice in changing contexts.⁷

In the Pakistani context, where traditional interpretations often dominate public discourse, revisiting these higher objectives is essential for advancing gender justice without compromising Islamic authenticity.

The concept of 'adl (justice) is central to the Qur'anic worldview. God describes Himself as “the Most Just of judges”, and commands believers: “Indeed, Allah orders justice ('adl) and kindness (iḥsān) and giving generously to relatives. He forbids indecency, wrongdoing, and oppression. He advises you, so perhaps you will be reminded.”⁸

Justice in Islam is not merely procedural but substantive—it demands fairness in outcomes and the removal of systemic barriers to human flourishing. Gender justice, therefore, is not a modern import but a divine imperative embedded in the very fabric of Islamic revelation.

II. Education: An Islamic Imperative and a National Priority

Education is a cornerstone of Islamic civilization and a fundamental right for both genders. The first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the command “Read!”, underscoring the centrality of knowledge-seeking in Islam. Historical records show that women played active roles as scholars, teachers, and transmitters of hadith in early Islamic society. Aisha bint Abu Bakr, the Prophet's wife, was a renowned jurist and narrator of over 2,000 hadiths, consulted by male companions on matters of law and theology.⁹

In Pakistan, despite constitutional guarantees of free and compulsory education (Article 25-A), significant gender gaps persist, particularly in rural areas. According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) survey 2019–20, the literacy rate for women stands at 49%, compared to 71% for men.¹⁰

This disparity contradicts both Islamic principles and national development goals. The Qur'an's emphasis on knowledge as a collective duty implies that denying education to half the population undermines the ummah's intellectual and moral capacity.

Islamic teachings do not differentiate between male and female in the pursuit of knowledge. The Prophet's statement, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim," uses the gender-neutral term "Muslim," which classical scholars like Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani interpreted as inclusive of women.¹¹

In fact, the Prophet encouraged the education of women, instructing his companions to teach their wives and daughters. Contemporary Pakistani scholars such as Dr. Javed Ahmad Ghamidi affirm that there is no Islamic basis for restricting women's access to education, including higher and professional education.¹²

The state's role in promoting education is reinforced by the Islamic principle of hisbah (public accountability), which obligates rulers to ensure the welfare and moral development of citizens. Pakistan's National Education Policy 2021 recognizes gender equity as a strategic objective, yet implementation remains weak due to resource constraints, cultural resistance, and inadequate teacher training.¹³

Aligning educational policy with Islamic ethics would require not only increasing enrollment but also revising curricula to reflect the contributions of Muslim women in history and to promote values of mutual respect and shared responsibility.

III. Economic Participation and Financial Autonomy

Islam grants women full economic agency—a revolutionary concept in seventh-century Arabia. The Qur'an affirms: "For a man is a share of what they earn, and for a woman is a share of what they earn."¹⁴

This verse establishes the principle of individual financial ownership, independent of marital status. Women have the right to own, inherit, buy, sell, and invest property without male guardianship. The Prophet's first wife, Khadijah, was a successful merchant who employed him before their marriage—a testament to women's economic leadership in early Islam.¹⁵

In Pakistan, women's labor force participation remains low at approximately 22%, with significant underrepresentation in formal sectors.¹⁶

Cultural norms, mobility restrictions, and lack of childcare support are major barriers. Yet Islamic law provides mechanisms to support women's economic inclusion. The concept of mahr (dower) is not a "bride price" but a woman's exclusive property, intended to provide financial security.¹⁷

Similarly, inheritance laws, though often misunderstood, guarantee women fixed shares that cannot be denied—a right enshrined in Pakistan's Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961.¹⁸

Critics often cite Qur'an—which mentions men as qawwāmūn (maintainers/protectors) over women—as justification for male dominance. However, classical exegetes like al-Razi and modern scholars like Fazlur Rahman interpret qiwāmah not as authority but as responsibility—specifically, the duty of financial maintenance in the marital context.¹⁹ This interpretation aligns with the Qur'anic principle that rights and responsibilities are reciprocal: "And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness."²⁰

Thus, economic participation by women does not negate qiwāmah but complements it, especially in contexts where dual incomes are necessary for family welfare.

Islamic finance principles also support women's entrepreneurship. Interest-free microfinance models, inspired by Qur'anic injunctions against ribā (usury), have empowered thousands of Pakistani women through organizations like the Akhuwat Foundation.²¹

Such initiatives demonstrate how Islamic ethics can be operationalized to promote inclusive economic growth.

IV. Family Law and Marital Relations

The family is the nucleus of social stability in Islam, and marital relations are governed by principles of mawaddah (love), rahmah (mercy), and ta'āruf (mutual understanding). The Qur'an states: "And among His signs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy."²²

This vision of marriage as a partnership of equals contrasts sharply with patriarchal interpretations that reduce women to subordinate roles.

Pakistan's family law framework, primarily the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO) 1961, incorporates several Islamic safeguards for women, including restrictions on unilateral divorce (talaq) and mandatory arbitration councils.²³

However, implementation gaps and customary practices (such as forced marriages and denial of inheritance) continue to undermine women's rights. The concept of wilāyah (guardianship) is often misapplied to justify denying women autonomy in marriage decisions, despite clear hadith evidence that the Prophet annulled a marriage conducted without the bride's consent.²⁴

Islamic law recognizes women's right to stipulate conditions in the marriage contract (nikāh), including the right to seek divorce (tafwīḍ al-talāq) or to pursue education and employment. Classical jurists like Ibn Qudamah acknowledged these stipulations as valid if they do not contravene Islamic principles.²⁵

In Pakistan, awareness of these rights remains low, and legal literacy programs grounded in Islamic ethics could empower women to negotiate equitable marriages. Polygyny, permitted under strict Qur’anic conditions, is often practiced in Pakistan without adherence to the requirement of justice (‘adl) between wives. The verse itself concludes with the caution, “But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one,” suggesting monogamy as the normative ideal.²⁶

Pakistani courts have increasingly recognized this, with the Federal Shariat Court emphasizing that polygyny without justice violates Islamic law.²⁷

V. Women in Public Life and Political Participation

Islam does not prohibit women from participating in public and political life. Historical examples abound: Umm Salamah advised the Prophet during the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah, and Shajarat al-Durr ruled as sultana in 13th-century Egypt.²⁸

The Qur’an praises the Queen of Sheba for her wisdom and consultative governance, offering a model of female leadership.

In Pakistan, women’s political participation has been constitutionally guaranteed since 1956, with reserved seats in Parliament and local governments. The 18th Amendment (2010) devolved power to provinces, creating opportunities for women’s local leadership.²⁹

However, cultural barriers and security concerns limit substantive engagement. Islamic principles support women’s political agency through the concepts of shūrā (consultation) and amr bi-l-ma’rūf (enjoining good), which are collective duties not restricted by gender.

The Prophet’s statement, “The best of you are those who are best to their women,”³⁰ implies that societies that empower women are morally superior. Pakistan’s National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) and subsequent frameworks recognize this, yet societal attitudes remain a challenge.

Religious scholars and institutions can play a pivotal role in reframing public discourse to highlight Islamic precedents for women's leadership.

VI. Misconceptions and Interpretive Challenges

Several misconceptions hinder the realization of gender justice in Pakistan. One is the conflation of culture with religion—practices like honor killings, dowry demands, and purdah (seclusion) are often wrongly attributed to Islam. The Qur'an condemns murder unequivocally, and the Prophet declared, "There is no obedience to a creature in disobedience to the Creator."³¹

Thus, cultural practices that violate Islamic ethics must be challenged.

Another challenge is the selective citation of texts without regard for context (asbāb al-nuzūl) or holistic interpretation (tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr). For example, Qur'an on testimony is often cited to claim women's testimony is "half" that of men, ignoring that the verse addresses a specific commercial context and that women's testimony is accepted as equal or superior in other areas (e.g., childbirth, family matters).³² Classical jurists like al-Tabari recognized the situational nature of this ruling.³³

The rise of digital media has amplified both progressive and regressive voices. While online platforms enable access to diverse Islamic scholarship, they also spread literalist interpretations that lack historical and ethical nuance. Educational institutions and media regulators must promote balanced discourse grounded in classical usūl al-fiqh (principles of jurisprudence).

VII. towards a Contextual and Just Implementation

Realizing Islamic gender justice in Pakistan requires a multi-pronged strategy:

1. **Legal Reform:** Harmonize family laws with Qur'anic principles of justice, ensuring effective enforcement of women's inheritance and divorce rights.
2. **Education:** Integrate gender-just Islamic ethics into school and madrasah curricula, highlighting the roles of women in Islamic history.

3. **Religious Leadership:** Train imams and scholars in gender-sensitive tafsīr and fiqh, empowering them to counter patriarchal misinterpretations.
4. **Economic Empowerment:** Expand Islamic microfinance and vocational training for women, aligned with ethical finance principles.
5. **Public Awareness:** Launch media campaigns that frame gender justice as an Islamic imperative, using Qur’anic verses and Prophetic examples.

The Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) and the Federal Shariat Court have pivotal roles in issuing guidance that balances textual fidelity with contemporary justice. Recent CII recommendations against child marriage and for women’s inheritance rights demonstrate this potential.³⁴

Conclusion

Islamic teachings on gender justice are not relics of the past but living principles capable of guiding Pakistan toward a more balanced and harmonious society. The Qur’an’s vision of human dignity, the Prophet’s example of compassion, and the rich tradition of Islamic jurisprudence provide a solid foundation for addressing gender disparities without compromising religious identity. In a nation where faith is central to public life, framing gender justice as an Islamic obligation—not a Western imposition—can mobilize broader societal support. By embracing a holistic, contextually aware interpretation of Islamic sources, Pakistan can fulfill its constitutional commitment to enable Muslims to live according to the true spirit of Islam, where justice for all is both a divine command and a national necessity.

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