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The Role of Islam in Establishing Women's Rights in the Muslim World

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THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN ESTABLISHING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the literature surrounding women's rights in the Muslim world to determine the factors that have contributed to the oppression of women in the Muslim world and to understand the role that different interpretations of Islam can have on either restricting or improving the status of women in the Muslim world. The practices of Muslim people as a population deviate from what is prescribed by Islam in some cases, contributing to the misconception that the restrictive practices toward women in many Muslim-majority countries are founded in Islamic teachings. Factors such as individual levels of religiosity and adherence to traditionalist views influence support for gender egalitarian values, suggesting that religiosity itself, not adherence to a particular religion, may underlie the oppression of women. This literature review also found that specific teachings of the prophet Muhammad and verses from the Quran clearly contradict the practices of Muslim populations when it comes to issues such as women's veiling, education, and employment. When political, religious, and educational leaders align themselves with the fight for women's rights, they can influence positive outcomes such as increased awareness of violence against women and shortcomings in women's education.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the Muslim world has been subject to criticism due to its restrictive policies concerning women. This criticism is supported by the fact that rates of support for gender equality in much of the region are reported as being among the lowest in the world. In contrast, most western countries boast relatively high levels of support for gender equality (Glas et al., 2018, p. 686). A commonly held misconception in the Western world is that these restrictive practices are endorsed by the religious teachings of Islam. In reality, there is a dissonance between Islamic theology and practice when it comes to the status of Muslim women (Rahman, 2007, p. 480).

The status of women in the Muslim world has been shaped historically by a range of political and socioeconomic factors. For example, during the time of the Abbasid empire (750 – 1258 CE), political, religious, and legal authorities implemented an androcentric interpretation of the Quran, giving men almost exclusive influence over the public sphere and establishing a legacy that has influenced the interpretation of Islamic texts ever since (Ahmed, 1992, p. 66). In the modern period, imperialist projects and the political and social unrest resulting from them worsened the condition of Muslim women - who were already subject to patriarchy - in many parts of the Islamic world (Mahmood, 2006, p. 126). For example, in India, British colonizers - who subscribed to the separate spheres ideology - intensified existing patriarchal structures in India. In western nations such as England and France, the industrial revolution of the late 18th and 19th centuries came about from within and resulted in the transfer of productive activities from the household and out of the hands of craftsmen to the factory (Rahman, 2007, p. 484). In order to ensure that these factory jobs fell to men, even greater restrictions were placed on

women (Reader, 1988, p. 555), resulting in a separate spheres ideology that relegated women's roles almost exclusively to the home. However, this ideology obscured women's economic impact. While working-class women found some formal employment in factories, albeit for lower wages than men, the census did not report the labor of middle- and upper- class women who were often involved in family business, effectively concealing their economic impact (Gordon & Nair, 2000, p. 796). The British colonizers brought with them their patriarchal views, reinforcing the patriarchal structure already present in their colonies due to the perception that women in those colonies represented a threat to the racial purity and the cultural identity of the colonizers (Stoler, 1989, p. 647). This Western influence resulted in an emphasis on traditionalism and caused existing patriarchal values to become even more entrenched in many countries. Such traditionalism - characterized by a resistance to change, unquestioning acceptance of values, an inability to justify espoused beliefs, and misrepresentations of the scripture by those in positions of power - plays a role within these cultures in the current ideological lag regarding women's rights (Rahman, 2007, p. 481).

A commonly held belief in the Western world, and one shared by a small minority of Muslims, is that the religious teachings of Islam are opposed to feminism and progress in women's rights (Glas & Alexander, 2020, p. 444). At the political and institutional levels, religious teachings have been framed by religious leaders and rulers in many Muslim majority countries, particularly in the Middle East, in an attempt to reinforce and legitimize the patriarchal social structure in much of the Muslim world (Levitt, 1996, p. 309). The current paper explores the role of religious versus cultural values in perpetrating the subordination of women in the Muslim world, as well as the impact of women's education on overcoming the

established patriarchy. This paper aims to answer the following research questions: 1) What factors have contributed to the oppression of women in the Muslim world and 2) What role can a contextual approach to Islam have on improving the status of women in the Muslim world? For the purposes of this work, the Muslim world will include the regions of North Africa (i.e. Algeria, Libya, Egypt), the Middle East (i.e. Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia), and South Asia (i.e. India, Afghanistan, Pakistan), as these regions are where the Muslim population is most heavily concentrated. This paper will focus on the Muslim world as a whole and the role that Islam plays in establishing women's rights in this region.

Literature Review

Islamic theology vs. Muslim culture

Due to the inferior status of women in much of the Muslim world relative to many Western societies, the practices of Muslim majority countries have come under intense scrutiny in recent decades. However, there is significant confusion surrounding the origin of these practices and the basic teachings of Islam (Rahman, 2007, pp. 479-480). Despite the overall image of Muslim countries as lagging behind other nations in regard to women's rights, it is worth noting that Muslim-majority countries are not a monolithic entity and that there are key differences in the practices employed by different cultures in the Muslim world (Alexander & Parhizkari, 2018, p. 483). For example, despite having a vast Muslim majority, Turkey has established women's rights that are comparable to those in Western countries. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia continues to implement some of the strictest gender segregation laws in the world and, according to The World Bank, women make up only 15.8% of the workforce. Most other countries in the Muslim world fall between these two extremes (Alexander & Parhizkari, 2018, p. 476).

While many countries in the Muslim world are significantly behind many of their Western counterparts when it comes to women's rights, the reason for the lack of egalitarian principles in these countries is often misattributed to the religion of Islam (Rahman, 2007, p. 479). However, there is a discrepancy between the teachings of Islam and the practices of the Muslim people and how the religion is interpreted within these countries. What may appear as shortcomings in the teachings of Islam might actually be due to the way in which these teachings are interpreted by human actors (Rahman, 2007, p. 480). In some cases, practices are

completely contradictory to what was prescribed by the Quran and the prophet Muhammad. For example, the prophet is reported as stating that “The search of knowledge is a duty for every Muslim, male and female” (Hamdan, 2005, p. 54). However, after the death of the prophet and until relatively recently (in the 1950s - 1970s for most Muslim majority countries) many Muslim women were denied a formal education in order to keep them subservient and under the control of the patriarchy.

In general, it appears that the teachings of Islam are followed when it is convenient for men, and not followed when it is inconvenient. Such selective interpretation strengthens patriarchal social structures and gives men greater control over the public and private spheres (Keddie, 1990, p. 86). Even for centuries before the introduction of Islam to the Middle East, the societies of the Muslim world were dominated by a patriarchal social structure. To this day, most cultures in the world, including those of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia are patriarchies. Because of patriarchal norms, men who were considered religious experts, called ulama, were in charge of the official interpretations of religious texts and teachings, shaping their societies’ laws in a manner that served the interests of men, often at the expense of women (Keddie, 1990, p. 86).

Contrary to the current status of women in Muslim countries, the introduction of Islam in 609 CE led to a period in which women in Muslim societies were allocated more rights than they generally had prior to the introduction of Islam (Glas et al., 2018, p. 442). For example, the Quran mandates that the groom pay a dowry to the bride in exchange for her hand in marriage, stating in verse 4:4, “Give women you wed their dowries graciously. But if they waive some of it willingly, then you may enjoy it freely with a clear conscience.” This dowry is paid in two

installments: one upon marriage and the other upon divorce or death of the husband. This was intended as a way to discourage the husband from divorcing, which was culturally much easier for men than it was for their wives (Beitler & Martinez, 2010, p. 14). To this day, there are parts of Africa and South Asia in which Islam is not as prevalent where it is still common practice for the bride to pay dowry to the groom (Ali, 2018, p. 45). Additionally, the Quran prescribes improvements for women including a ban against female infanticide and better inheritance practices compared to pre-Islamic times (although these were still biased in favor of males). In these ways, the status of Muslim women during the early days of Islam was not significantly worse than in other regions, and in regard to property these women were often better off (Keddie, 1990, p. 87). Additionally, prior to the rise of and during the early days of Islam, women enjoyed more prominent public roles (i.e. teaching, commercial interaction) than they did thereafter (Keddie, 1990, pp. 91-92).

The decline of women in the public sphere is likely not due to Islam itself, but due to a dissonance between Islamic theology and the practices and customs of Muslim societies. This decline began with Umar's ascension to the position of caliph, or ruler of the Muslim world, in 634 CE. Umar prohibited women from attending mosques, setting a precedent for future rulers to impose further restrictions on women, such as limiting them to the household (Beitler & Martinez, 2010, p. 57). Importantly, the turn to a stricter patriarchy may also have been influenced by the expansion of Mecca as a trade center around the time Islam was introduced. External influences as a result of the increased trade in Mecca could possibly have impacted the shift from a society which had several matrilineal tribes to a strongly patriarchal society in order to conform to the sociosexual arrangements of the city's trade partners, which included Syria

and the Byzantine empire to the north and Yemen and Ethiopia to the south. As the Muslims' most holy city, this change in Mecca likely had a profound impact on Muslim practice across the entire Middle East, if not the Muslim world as a whole (Ahmed, 1986, pp. 670 - 681). In order to push back against the interpretations of Islamic teachings and patriarchal practices used to restrict women, in recent decades both male and female Islamic scholars have used passages from the Quran to promote greater gender equality (Moghissi, 2011, p. 79). It is important that advocates for women's rights use the Quran to support their arguments since the words of the Quran cannot simply be dismissed by those ruling Muslim majority countries. This demonstrates that Islam is capable of being used to advance women's rights, and that contextual interpretations are emancipatory in nature and promote greater involvement for females in the public domain.

Many of the customs associated with Islam can actually be traced back to pre-Islamic cultures in the Middle East and surrounding areas (Keddie, 1990, p. 80). One of the most contentious issues in the present day is the practice of veiling, which has come under attack as a restriction on the liberties of women. Although veiling is a common practice in many Muslim majority countries, its origins are in pre-Islamic societies where it served differing purposes. In some cultures, it was used as a marker for upper class women that separated them from the outside world, while in others it was meant as a way of protecting wives and daughters from unwanted interactions with males outside the family (Keddie, 1990, p. 81). Today, the practice of veiling in many Muslim countries includes covering the head and face. The Quran itself prescribes only modesty for women's clothing, stating in verse 24:31, "Let them draw their veils over their chests and not reveal their adornments [legs and arms], except to their husbands,

their fathers, their fathers in law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, their fellow women...". Nowhere in the Quran is the practice of covering the head and face even mentioned, let alone encouraged (Keddie, 1990, p. 84). One Quranic verse in particular that has been used to justify veiling is 33:53, which states, "And when you believers ask his [the Prophet Muhammad's] wives for something, ask them from behind a barrier." This was determined by the established rulers to mean that women should remain out of public view by either remaining within their homes or by covering themselves completely when they left the home. This verse could have simply been a way to protect the prophet Muhammad's and his wives' privacy (Keddie, 1990, p. 84). This example illustrates that cultural customs that deny women equality have become entrenched in Muslim culture to the point where they are often accepted as Islamic rules. Yet, many of the customs or rules adhered to today cannot be fully supported by Islamic texts (Hamdan, 2005, p. 54). Additionally, it is worth noting that some Muslim women in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies practice veiling as a personal decision as their way of preserving their modesty (Mahmood, 2001, p. 209). Simply assuming the practice of veiling is categorically opposed to Muslim women's liberties without properly understanding the cultural and religious principles behind the practice deprives such women of their agency and may actually do more harm than good in progressing women's rights.

Interestingly, a discrepancy appears when examining the rules governing women's behavior in the Muslim world and the prophet Muhammad's treatment toward his own wives and daughters. The prophet is reported as being respectful towards and valuing the counsel of his wives. Khadija, the first of his wives, successfully managed a trade caravan, accumulating

substantial wealth that she used to support Muhammad. Another of the prophet's wives, Ayesha is reported as having been involved in leading, treating, and feeding the Islamic army during Muhammad's campaign to capture the holy city of Mecca. She discussed various political issues directly with the prophet and is responsible for relating about one-sixth of the hadith, which are the sayings of the prophet. Additionally, prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima was politically active after her father's death and voiced her disagreements with the succeeding caliph (Hamdan, 2005, pp. 53-54).

Following the introduction of Islam in the Middle East, women enjoyed an improvement in their status, gaining greater rights in areas such as marriage and property ownership (Glas et al., 2018, p. 691). Additionally, women were socially, politically, and economically involved, as demonstrated by the behavior of Muhammad's wives. Nonetheless, over the years, due to the strongly patriarchal structure of most Muslim majority countries, religious teachings were interpreted in a way that greatly restricted the opportunities available to women. Consequently, the practices in the Muslim world that oppose women's rights have come to be regarded as "Islamic" by some Western societies (Glas & Alexander, 2020, p. 444). However, this is a misconception, as these gendered practices are a result of the norms of Muslim societies rather than the religion of Islam itself. Despite the manipulation of Islamic teachings to restrict opportunities for the advancement of women, recent liberal interpretations of the Quran have been used to push for greater gender equality (Moghissi, 2011, p. 79).

Women's Education and Position in the Workforce

Across the world, the education of women plays a vital role in improving women's status. With higher levels of education, women are more likely to delay marriage and pregnancy (Glas & Alexander, 2020, p. 442). Higher levels of education also enhance the control women have over their own bodies, enabling greater success in negotiating the number of children they wish to have and when they wish to have them (Glas & Alexander, 2020, p. 442). In addition, women with higher levels of education are more supportive of gender egalitarian values (Alexander & Parhizkari, 2018, p. 484). In this sense, promoting women's education is a key step to reducing the gender gap in the Muslim world. Importantly, the economic development of a region is a key determinant of access to and quality of education. This suggests that another fundamental step towards gender equality is increasing Muslim women's participation in the labor force to spur economic development (McClendon et al., 2018, p. 313). A study of 47 countries found that Muslim women are employed at a rate of 24% while women in general are employed at a rate of 39% worldwide (Adbelhadi & England, 2019, p. 1524). Data from the United Nations suggests that opening more fields to women and reducing gender inequality in the workplace can contribute to increased economic vitality of the region, which will in turn improve women's education and status overall (Ahmad, 2013, p.1).

Despite the importance of education in improving women's status, countries across the world, and Muslim countries in particular, were slow to adopt its practice (Beitler & Martinez, 2010, p. 19). The restrictions placed on women by the caliph Umar set the precedent for denying women in much of the Muslim world access to education as a way of consolidating the highly patriarchal structure of these societies (Beitler & Martinez, 2010, p. 58). This is despite

the fact that restricting the pursuit of education for women is an un-Islamic practice, as it goes against the teachings of both the prophet Muhammad and the Quran itself. Together, the hadith - which are the teachings of Muhammad - and the Quran provide a strong basis of support for women's education. The prophet Muhammad stated, "The search of knowledge is a duty for every Muslim, male and female" (Hamdan, 2005, p. 53). In verse 58:11, the Quran says, "And if you are told to rise, then do so. Allah will elevate those of you who are faithful and raise those gifted with knowledge in rank." This verse suggests that in Islam, God considers knowledge as a desirable trait. In this way, preventing women from pursuing an education also restricts their ability to elevate their status as Muslims, diminishing the strength of the Muslim community as a whole.

Throughout the history of Islam, conservative, masculine interpretations of Islamic teachings have been used to subjugate women (Hamdan, 2005, p. 58). However, the 20th century saw several notable Islamic scholars come forward and advocate for women's education. For example, Islamic scholar Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi points out that denying women proper education runs counter to Islamic doctrine and that this practice debases other members of the faith and harms the Muslim community as a whole (Ali, 2018, p. 39). Other notable scholars have also endorsed the idea that women have the same mental faculties as men, and therefore have the capability as well as the right to be educated if they want (Ali, 2018, p. 39). This idea is supported by the fact that in Saudi Arabia by the year 1990, girls were outperforming boys on standardized tests (Beitler & Martinez, 2010, p. 30).

Despite Islam's emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge, it was not until relatively recently that many Muslim majority countries formalized education for women. The educational system

of many Muslim majority countries for the population in general, and for women in particular, lags behind that of many Western nations and even that of similarly situated countries in Latin America and East Asia (Ahmad, 2013, p.1). Most Western nations had established institutions for women's education prior to the start of the 20th century. For example, Hungary established its first high school for girls in 1869, while the United States and United Kingdom started awarding college degrees to women in 1836 and 1878 respectively (Anderson-Faithful & Goodman, 2020, p. 3). On the other hand, most countries in the Muslim World did not establish formal institutions for girls' education until the 1900s. For example, in Kuwait women first gained access to education after the nation's independence in 1961 (Beitler & Martinez, 2010, p. 77). In Egypt, attempts at establishing girls' primary education were not successful until the early 20th century (Yousef, 2017, p. 572). Even after support for girls' education gained traction, resources were directed to urban centers, leaving girls in more rural communities with very limited access to education (Ahmad, 2013, p. 1). In India, the push for women's education made progress under women such as Savitribai Phule and Rokeya Hussain. Savitribai Phule was a social reformer from a lower-caste background who, with the help of her husband Jotirao Phule and fellow reformer Fatima Sheikh, fought against patriarchy and the caste system and was a staunch advocate for female's education (Wolf, 2011, p. 79). Rokeya Hussain wrote a number of articles, novels, and short stories in order to raise awareness of the oppression women face and highlight the role of women's education in improving women's position in society (Forbes, 1996, pp. 55-56). Despite the early success of institutions such as Savitribai Phule's girls' school, established in 1848, and Rokeya Hussain's Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, established in

1911, girls' education in the Muslim world was not widespread until the mid- to late 1900s (Wolf, 2011, p. 80).

Even though education for girls has become more prevalent in the Muslim world, the education of boys continues to take precedence over the education of girls. This is especially true when it comes to higher education (Ahmad, 2013, p. 4). Many parents are unable to support all of their children throughout their educational career and in such instances typically choose to provide an education for their sons rather than their daughters. This is due in part to the broader range of career opportunities available to men. For example, in Saudi Arabia – which opened its first girls' primary school in 1960 and first women's university campus in 1979 (Hamdan, 2005, p. 47, 51) – women were not allowed to obtain higher education in fields such as law and engineering as recently as 2006 (El-Sherbeeney & Alsharari, 2018, p. 98). Even today there is significant selection bias preventing women from pursuing many STEM careers as evidenced by the fact that the number of female STEM professionals in most Muslim majority countries is about half the number of female STEM graduates (Islam, 2019, p. 98). These restrictions on women's career opportunities are thought to have a negative impact on the region's overall economic vitality as Muslims make up 25% of the world population but contribute only 11.2% to the total global GDP (Ahmad, 2013, p.1). Opening more fields to women and reducing gender inequality in the workplace is likely to increase Muslim women's opportunities for employment and can contribute to increased economic vitality of the region, which will in turn improve women's education and status overall (Ahmad, 2013, p. 1).

One relatively recent development that has helped women's education progress in the Muslim world is the advent of the internet. In Saudi Arabia, it is reported that about two-thirds

of all internet users are women (Beitler & Martinez, 2010, p. 29). As the cost, reliability, and availability of the internet improves, access to education will become more prevalent (Yamin & Aljehani, 2016, p. 950). There are many small communities scattered throughout the deserts of the Middle East, and online education programs provide these communities with a quality formal education that they may not have been able to receive otherwise. Additionally, the internet allows women with children and other women who are unable to leave the home to have access to education (Yamin & Aljehani, 2016, pp. 950-951). The advent of the internet also enables women to socialize and educate themselves without the supervision of their relatives or instructors, enabling them to pursue knowledge on topics that may not have been taught at home or in school (Beitler & Martinez, 2010, p. 69). This is significant because it provides these women with sources of knowledge that they can peruse without external forces shaping what and how they learn. Furthermore, these women can potentially encounter more liberal interpretations of religious texts on the internet, an important step in combating the restrictions placed on women via the conservative, male-dominated interpretations of these texts (Glas & Alexander, 2020, p. 442).

While increased access to education is a necessary factor in striving toward gender equality, another important factor is employment. Importantly, neither the Quran nor the hadith provide any support for the economic restrictions placed on women. According to Islam, there is no contradiction between being a mother, wife, and/or daughter and a professional working outside the home (Hamdan, 2005, p. 58). Indeed, there are key female figures in the history of Islam that actively participated in the economy. Khadija, the first wife of the prophet Muhammad and the first convert to Islam, accumulated a large fortune by managing a trade

caravan and in fact hired Muhammad to help manage the caravan (Ridley, 2016, p. 2). By the time of her death in the year 619, it is reported that she had spent her entire fortune to support Muhammad in his mission to spread the religion of Islam. It is likely that without her support, Muhammad would have been much more limited in his influence and ability to spread the religion (Ridley, 2016, p. 2). Another woman, Al-Shifa bint Abdullah, was one of only a few people at the time in the entire city of Mecca who could read and write. She was also well-versed in the medical practices of the time and was appointed as a public administrator of the Medina market, which was a busy trade center (Ridley, 2016, pp. 3-4). These women's accomplishments demonstrate that under Islam, women are permitted an active role in the economy and are free to pursue education.

An important part of increasing women's involvement in the work force is ensuring that their access to education equals that of their male counterparts. Until recently, conservative interpretations of Islam have overwhelmingly prevailed, providing justification for the unfair treatment of women in many Muslim majority societies (Ali, 2018, p. 50). This is despite the fact that both the Quran and the teachings of the prophet Muhammad promote women's education as well as their active role in the economy. Recent advances in government sponsored education in these societies has helped improve these women's access to information and has also increased the potential for exposure to different, more liberal interpretations of Islamic texts (Glas & Alexander, 2020, p. 444). This exposure can make Muslims more aware of Islam's original intention to educate and liberate women, bolstering the support for reforms to increase women's rights in the Muslim world.

The Role of Religiosity in Establishing Gender Role Attitudes

The restrictive policies concerning women in the Muslim world are more a product of the culture and patriarchal norms of the region than of the religion of Islam itself. Until this point, this paper has only covered societal-level factors that have contributed to the unequal status of women in the Muslim world. In addition to prejudiced social policies, the behavior and attitudes of individuals plays a role in perpetrating the highly patriarchal nature of Muslim majority societies. At the individual level, an important factor to consider when it comes to the role Islam plays in establishing gender role attitudes are levels of religious feeling and devotion, or religiosity. Religiosity has an important influence on family values and attitudes toward gender equality (Forman-Rabinovici & Sommer, 2018, p. 55). For example, those expressing greater religiosity tend to have less egalitarian views when it comes to the division of labor in the household (Goldscheider et al., 2014, pp. 905-906).

A clear indicator of religiosity is frequency of religious service attendance. Studies have shown that increased religious service attendance reduces support for gender equality (Glas et al., 2018, p. 902). This is likely due to the fact that those who frequent religious services are repeatedly exposed to the patriarchal interpretations of the religion (Glas et al., 2019, p. 301). Interestingly, this effect is observed more strongly for women than for men, suggesting that women's attitudes toward gender equality are more likely to be influenced by religion than the attitudes of men. This is likely due to the fact that when women do not attend religious services, their baseline support for gender equality is significantly higher than that of men who do not attend religious services (Glas et al., 2018, p. 702). It is important to note that this effect is present across several religions, including the three major monotheistic religions of

Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Forman-Rabinovici & Sommer, 2018, p. 55). Additionally, when controlling for religiosity, no religious group stands above another in terms of its support for gender equality (McClendon et al., 2018, p. 316).

The fact that Muslim majority countries have less gender equality than most Western nations in conjunction with the fact that the three major religions do not differ in terms of their support for gender equality when controlling for religiosity suggests that greater adherence to religion might be a consequence of belief in the religion of Islam (McClendon et al., 2018, p. 316). A possible reason for this is that religion may be more salient in Muslim majority countries than in countries where other religions dominate. For example, in the United States, in creating the constitution, the nation's founding fathers emphasized the separation of church and state. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf nations have established their government through the implementation of Sharia law, which is based on interpretations of religious texts (Moghissi, 2011, p. 79).

Additionally, many Muslim majority countries are strongly impacted during the holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which Muslims fast during the daylight hours. This often requires a restructuring of individuals' work and personal lives for the duration of the month (Alghafli et al., 2019, p. 1). During the month of Ramadan, family and friends gather nightly to break their fast, engaging in conversations about faith and religious practices. In addition to the daily fast, many Muslims engage in supplementary nightly prayers during the month of Ramadan (Alghafli et al., 2019, pp. 9-10). The observance of Ramadan pushes religious practices to the forefront of people's minds for a full calendar month, contributing significantly to the salience of religion in Muslim-majority

countries. Another factor that increases the salience of religion in the Muslim world is the call to prayer, or adhan, which typically occurs over a loudspeaker at various local mosques five times a day (Progler, 2014, p. 1). In this way, people in the Muslim world are exposed to different aspects of their religion on a daily basis. A possible effect of the high levels of religious salience is an overall higher level of religiosity, which in turn has an adverse impact on attitudes toward gender equality and the establishment of gender roles.

In summary, factors at the societal and individual levels influence attitudes toward gender equality. A major individual-level factor is level of religiosity. Higher levels of religiosity are correlated with less egalitarian values and more negative attitudes toward gender equality (Goldscheider et al., 2014, p. 905). This suggests that in addition to the highly patriarchal culture of Muslim majority countries, religiosity may contribute to the relatively large gender gap that is present in these nations. Factors such as the implementation of Sharia law, observance of the month of Ramadan, and the frequency of the adhan all increase the salience of religion in these countries, which may in turn raise the overall level of religiosity in the Muslim world compared to regions where other religions dominate. For this reason, drawing a distinction between the religious and the secular as opposed to the Islamic and the non-Islamic may prove more useful in studying the role that religion plays in establishing gender norms (McClendon, 2018, p. 316).

Barriers to Progress

As noted previously, Muslim majority countries have made substantial progress when it comes to women's rights. However, much work still remains to be done. Even as women have been granted increased access to education and greater opportunities for entering the labor force in recent years, the ideology surrounding gender equality lags behind these changes in society (Rahman, 2007, p. 483). When ideology lags behind changes in society, women often have to face a stigma when they try to adapt to the changing social conditions. This ideological lag contributes to the fact that rates of support for gender equality in much of the Muslim world are reported as being among the lowest in the world (Glas et al., 2018, p. 686). As the Muslim world continues to move toward greater equality for women, it must combat the barriers to progress that are ingrained in the patriarchal social structure of the region, such as ideologies that block equality for women.

One of the biggest barriers to progressing women's rights in the Muslim world is a tendency toward traditionalism. Traditionalism is marked by literal expression of sources at the expense of the principles underlying them, a resistance to change, unquestioning acceptance of values, and misrepresentations of the scripture by authoritative figures (Rahman, 2007, p. 481). Another trait of traditionalism is its tendency to ignore the socio-historical context in which a given tradition is being interpreted (Rahman, 2007, p. 488). For example, the prophet Muhammad reportedly prohibited women from traveling a distance "of one day and night unless she is accompanied by her husband or a male relative" (Bukhari, 1966). In the seventh century, such a decree made much more sense. At the time, travels were made on foot and travelers were subject to dangers such as bandits without the protection of police as no

widespread, organized form of law enforcement existed. For these reasons, a traveler's safety, especially that of a female traveler, was never guaranteed. However, these days individuals can cover long distances in a short time, taking refuge in safe lodgings either at their destination or en route. Additionally, law enforcement is much more prevalent and organized than during the lifetime of the prophet. Thus, based on the socio-historical context of the statement, this restriction on women's travel was sensible at the time. However, the lasting repercussions of the focus on traditionalism cannot be overstated. Staying with the previous example, based on conservative interpretations of the above hadith, women in Saudi Arabia were prohibited from driving as recently as 2017, severely restricting their movements, causing unnecessary hardship, and increasing their dependence on men (Wilhams et al., 2019, p. 126). This example illustrates the fact that traditionalism disregards the hardships its practices force upon women in order to maintain dogmatic adherence to esoteric practices (Rahman, 2007, p. 490). It is important to note that these traditional practices arose due to the patriarchal nature of Muslim societies and not the religion of Islam, as most of these practices are not consistent with the Islamic belief that both genders are equal before God (Rahman, 2007, p. 493).

Traditionalist Islamic practices are rooted in Sharia, or Islamic law. Sharia is not concretely laid out in the Quran, but is the product of human interpretation of religious texts (Afkhami, 1995, p. 58). Due to the highly patriarchal nature of Islamic societies, the official interpretations have been made almost exclusively by and in favor of men. In establishing Sharia law, male leaders focused on isolated passages of the Quran without considering other passages which establish gender equality (Rahman, 2007, p. 500). These biased interpretations have been emphasized across generations and as a result, both men and women in these

societies are passively socialized into supporting patriarchal practices (Glas et al., 2018, p. 689). While Sharia law has been used to solidify the patriarchy in many Muslim majority countries, its flexible nature also enables more progressive interpretations of the Quran which can be used to promote greater equality for women (Ali, 2018, p. 45). In challenging established Sharia, it is important that women and other supporters of women's rights use the language of the Quran, as this cannot be refuted without contradicting Islamic texts (Hamdan, 2005, p. 46).

Despite the restrictive practices concerning women in many Muslim majority countries, it is worth noting that women in the Muslim world are not a monolithic group who unilaterally support progress in education, economy, and politics for women (Ahmad, 2013, p. 7). Largely because of the highly patriarchal society in which they are raised, girls are discouraged from pursuing gender equality from a young age and there is a lack of prominent female role models whom these girls can look to for inspiration (Afkhami, 1995, p. 90). Another obstacle preventing greater gender equality is the fact that even those women who are politically and physically able to push for women's rights lack access to resources, hindering their ability to spread their message and lobby for greater equality (Afkhami, 1995, p.6). For these reasons, women alone cannot hope to cause substantial change; it is imperative that those responsible for disseminating information, such as educators and religious scholars, advertise women's participation as leaders in the history of Islam and raise awareness of the religion's intention of establishing greater equality (Hamdan, 2005, p. 54). When successful, such efforts have yielded positive results in increasing awareness of issues such as violence against women and women's education. However, the scale of such initiatives is typically not sufficient to introduce nationwide changes (Ali, 2018, p. 50).

Another challenge women face in their push for equality is the threat of violence. In recent decades, increased instability in the Muslim world has contributed greatly to the rise of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Adil & Abdul, 2019, p. 73). These terrorist organizations take fundamentalist values to the extreme, enforcing their values and spreading their ideology through the use of violence (Adil & Abdul, 2019, p. 76). Perhaps the most conspicuous case of religious extremists hindering progress for women's rights is the story of Malala Yousafzai. Malala Yousafzai was born in 1997 in Mingora, Pakistan where her father ran a girls' school. In 2008, the Taliban occupied this region and banned girls' education, among other things. Malala started speaking out for girls' right to education and in 2012, at the age of 15, she was shot in the left side of the head by a Taliban operative (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, pp. 1-6). Unfortunately, Malala Yousafzai's story is not unique, as she has stated, "I tell my story not because it is unique, but because it is the story of many girls." Families in regions occupied by these fundamentalist terrorist organizations are in constant danger, and women especially so. It is not uncommon for women to be subjected to rape and torture by terrorists (Afkhami, 1995, p. 161). Additionally, many Muslim majority countries still have a culture which often views rape as dishonorable to the women's family, and so many instances go unreported and may even result in censorship of the victim herself. In some instances, the woman is disowned, beat, or even killed for dishonoring her family (Afkhami, 1995, p. 164). Such conditions severely limit these women's ability to seek proper help and spread awareness of their plight, which in turn perpetuates the issue.

The barriers to progress that women in the Muslim world face are numerous and diverse, ranging from prevailing traditionalist views to outright violence. One of the keys to

greater gender equality lies in the liberal, as opposed to traditional, interpretation of religious texts (Hamdan, 2005, p. 46). Arguments founded in religion are more likely to appeal to not only religious and political leaders, but also to the general public. In addition to the efforts of women, men and people in positions of authority must ally themselves with the fight for equality in order for substantial change to occur at a reasonable rate (Hamdan, 2005, p. 54). Additionally, there must be an effort from both domestic and foreign entities in order to improve the stability of the region and provide a safer platform from which advocates for women's rights can spread their message.

Contribution to Existing Literature

There is a dearth of literature that explicitly addresses the discrepancies between the teachings of Islam and the actions of Muslims, and specifically how this discrepancy has shaped the role of women in Muslim-majority societies. The studies examined in this literature review recognize that women in the Muslim world lack equal rights, and some examined how the teachings of Islam have been interpreted to influence a particular issue (e.g., veiling, access to education, restrictions on travel), but these studies largely failed to address how interpretations of Islamic texts have been used to establish greater control over multiple domains of women's lives and did not point out why these interpretations came to dominate Muslim ideology in the first place. For these reasons, the main contribution this paper makes is in its broad scope. This paper examines how selective interpretations of Islamic texts have restricted women's liberties from several angles. This is significant because most research in this area is relatively limited in scope and so does not paint a clear picture of the many facets of life that are impacted by androcentric interpretations of religious texts. For example, seeing how such interpretations have negatively influenced issues from women's education to women's transportation provides a more holistic view of the impact they have on Muslim women than an inspection of any individual issue would.

This paper was written to examine and increase awareness of the forces hindering gender equality in the Muslim world and to highlight how the teachings of Islam itself are at odds with the restrictive practices and policies regarding women in Muslim-majority countries. Having addressed how interpretations of Islamic texts have been used to establish restrictive practices in various domains of women's lives, readers of this work will be made aware of the

wide variety of issues facing Muslim women and will gain exposure to numerous topics that are important to examine individually in greater depth in the pursuit of gender equality in the Muslim world. Some important considerations raised in this paper include the role of religiosity in perpetrating unequal gender attitudes, the threats traditionalism poses to gender equality, and the disconnect between Islamic teachings and the practices of Muslims as well as the matters of Muslim women's veiling, education, and employment.

Conclusion

A common misconception in the Western world is that the restrictions placed on women in many Muslim-majority countries are rooted in the teachings of Islam (Rahman, 2007, p. 480). This paper aimed to determine 1) the factors that have contributed to the oppression of women in the Muslim world and 2) the role a contextual approach to Islam can have on improving the status of women in the Muslim world. To advance these aims, this paper examined the literature surrounding women's rights in countries in the Muslim world in order to understand the forces that prevent the adoption of gender egalitarian values in these countries.

In regard to women's rights, there is a discrepancy when it comes to the teachings of Islam and the way these teachings are put into practice (Rahman, 2007, p. 480). In some cases, the practices of Muslims run directly counter to the teachings of the Quran and the prophet Muhammad. Since they were introduced, Islamic religious texts have been interpreted almost exclusively by men who selectively construed their teachings such that they consolidated the power of men in society in an attempt to keep women under the control of the established patriarchy (Keddie, 1990, p. 86). Additionally, some of the more controversial practices associated with Islam, such as the practice of veiling, can be traced back to pre-Islamic cultures in the Middle East and surrounding areas and thus predate Islam (Keddie, 1990, p. 80). In fact, at the time that it was introduced, Islam actually prescribed improvements for women in areas such as ownership of property, marriage, and the prevention of female infanticide (Glas et al., 2018, p. 691). Finally, during the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad, women generally enjoyed more prominent roles in the community than they did in the period after his death. This is

largely due to the fact that as the Muslim empire continued to expand, it came into contact with other strongly patriarchal cultures that influenced male Muslim leaders to impose greater restrictions on women in an attempt to align themselves with the sociosexual arrangements of allies and trading partners (Ahmed, 1986, pp. 670 - 681).

One of the ways in which the biased interpretation of Islamic texts hurt women's rights is the restrictions they placed on women's education. Despite the fact that many countries in the Muslim world did not formalize women's education until the mid-20th century, the religion of Islam itself encourages its followers, male and female, to pursue education (Hamdan, 2005, p. 54). Some of the hadith, as well as verses from the Quran itself, either explicitly state or suggest that seeking education is the duty of a faithful Muslim. Women's education is key to improving women's rights as education can enhance women's ability to advocate for control over their bodies and has also been linked to greater support for gender egalitarian values (Glas & Alexander, 2020, p. 442). Although historically interpretations of Islam have been conservative and geared toward strengthening the patriarchal structure of Muslim-majority countries, support for greater access to women's education has increased among the Islamic public and scholarly community in recent decades (Ali, 2018, p. 39). More recently, the advent of the internet has improved access to education, primarily among rural communities and young wives, and has enabled women to pursue education without schools, relatives, or the government controlling what or how they learn (Yamin & Aljehani, 2016, pp. 950-951). Despite its importance, improving access to education is only a part of the equation, and women must also be given increased opportunities to enter the workforce and participate in the economy. Contrary to the message that has been put forth for centuries in the Muslim world, there is

nothing in the Quran or hadith that prohibits women from participating in the economy and in fact the prophet's own wife and other notable women played key roles in the economy during the early years of Islam (Ridley, 2016, pp. 2-4). Increasing the number of opportunities that are available to women in the Muslim world and reducing gender inequality in the workplace will improve Muslim women's employment prospects, which will serve to increase the region's economic vitality and improve women's status overall (Ahmad, 2013, p.1).

In addition to the societal-level factors that have restricted women in the Muslim world, the behaviors and attitudes of individuals also play a role. An important individual variable to consider is level of religiosity, as greater religiosity is correlated with less egalitarian attitudes across the three major monotheistic religions (Goldscheider et al., 2014, pp. 905-906). Importantly, when controlling for religiosity, there is no significant difference in support for gender equality among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (McClendon, 2018, p. 316), suggesting that it is the level of religiosity rather than the religion itself that is the driver of inequality. It is likely then that the low levels of support for gender equality in Muslim-majority countries are due to the increased salience of religion through Sharia law, religious observances such as the month of Ramadan, and the frequent and public recitation of the adhan. This increased salience is thought to contribute to increased religiosity, which translates to lower levels of support for gender equality (McClendon, 2018, p. 316).

Despite the progress made towards improving women's rights, support for gender equality in Muslim majority countries is still among the lowest in the world, and in order to achieve greater equality, these countries must overcome several barriers to progress (Glas et al., 2018, p. 686). Many countries in the Muslim world have a tendency toward traditionalism

and often maintain adherence to dated interpretations without considering the socio-historical context in which these interpretations are taking place (Rahman, 2007, p. 481). The result is widespread gender-biased attitudes that cause unnecessary hardship for women in the region (Wilhams et al., 2019, p. 126). A key tool in the fight against these obsolete interpretations is the use of the language in the Quran to push for greater gender equality. Liberal interpretations firmly grounded in religious texts will be difficult to refute without contradicting those texts, and so are more likely to be successful than arguments not founded in religion (Hamdan, 2005, p. 46). Additionally, supporters of women's rights also face the threat of violence from terrorist organizations that have occupied some parts of the Muslim world (Adil & Abdul, 2019, p. 76). Women alone cannot enact substantial change. Men and political and religious leaders both domestically and abroad must align themselves with the fight for equality in order to accelerate change (Hamdan, 2005, p. 54).

This paper focuses on how the various interpretations of Islamic teachings can be used to either restrict or progress women's rights. Future research should focus on identifying sections of religious texts that can be used to advocate for greater gender equality in the Muslim world. These sections should be examined in the historical context in which they were introduced as well as the context of the present day to determine how changing sociocultural conditions influence the application of religious teachings. Such work is instrumental in advancing more liberal interpretations of Islamic texts that can be used to displace traditional practices that arise from conservative, androcentric interpretations of these texts.

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