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IMPACT OF ISLAMIC RELIGION STEREOTYPES ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The culture, gender and the status of women vary from one Muslim country to another depending on their interpretation of the Islamic law and religion. The law, perception, and attitude towards women vary considerably amongst many nations, both Arabic and non-Arabic. Nevertheless, many of the Islamic states have the beliefs of women's status being restricted and segregated to specific treatments. Women face injustices, segregation, they are isolated and excluded from primary practices of in religious, social, economic and political podiums. The Islamic Personal Status Laws continually oppressed and discriminated women, thus inflicting suffering and harm to them and their children. Stereotyping and wrong interpretation of the Islam is the cause of the injustices and discrimination of women in the Muslim world. The laws have been interpreted to have the male species to be superior while women inferior and invisible persons. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how gender stereotypes based on Islamic doctrines have affected the status of women in Islamic societies. Nasr looks into the interpretation of the Muslim doctrines about women as stipulated in the Quran and the transitions Islamic women have undergone since the time of Prophet Muhammad. Our primary focus anchors on the religious responsibility, marriage and divorce, inheritance, and custody of children.

INTRODUCTION

The culture, gender and the status of women vary from one Muslim country to another depending on their interpretation of the Islamic law and religion. The law, perception, and attitude towards women vary considerably amongst many nations, both Arabic and non-Arabic. Nevertheless, many of the Islamic states have the beliefs of women's status

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injustices and discrimination of women in the Muslim world. The laws have been interpreted to have the male species to be superior while women inferior and invisible persons. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how gender stereotypes based on Islamic doctrines have affected the status of women in Islamic societies. Nasr (2013) looks into the interpretation of the Muslim doctrines about women as stipulated in the Quran and the transitions Islamic women have undergone since the time of Prophet Muhammad. Our primary focus anchors on the religious responsibility, marriage and divorce, inheritance, and custody of children.

Simmons (2002) argues that the claim that the injustices done to the Islamic feminism is misleading and incorrect according to the Holy Quran. Sechzer and many other Islamic scholars refute the same allegation arguing that they are purported and farfetched (Sechzer, 2004). However, Sechzer (2004) states that status of Islamic women adversely changed since the reign of the Prophet Muhammad successor. He further says that Prophet Muhammad was very sympathetic to women and advocated for respectful, equal, and equitable treatment not excluding full religious responsibilities (Sechzer, 2004). Ali provides an interpretation and meaning of the Holy Quran, the scripture demand women to be treated with just, respect, kindness, and love (Quran 4:5); it prohibits any injustices and ill-treatment of women and their children⁵. It is undeniable that many of the injustices the Islamic women undergo are due to stereotypic perceptions and attitudes advocated by Prophet Muhammad successor who worsen the status their status. The place of Islamic women in today's society is under debate as several states due to human rights, and feminist activism is rising to improve the status of women in the society. Zoharah argues in his research on *The Islamic Law of Personal Status and Its Contemporary Impact on Women in Jordan* that Islam is indeed a feminist's religion but the stereotyping, prejudices and myths documented about Islam has continually compromised and deteriorated the status of the women in the Muslim world. Today the most prominent heinous doings have been attributed to Islam with an argument that Islam supports it but in reality, the attribution is based on misconceptions.

Religious Responsibility

The Quran is very precise and explicit on the women's responsibility in religion; it gives both men and women equal chances to participate in religious activities (Quran 4:36) without any segregation and seclusion (Ali 2004). The Muslim women are often pictured all over the world hidden behind a veil showing a silent figure, voiceless and a bereft of rights. This picture is common to all of us, accordance to the interpretations of the Quran, only the prophet's wives were to wear veils when in public, but that Surah has been interpreted by stereotypes to apply to all women. Before the advent of Islam and in the early reign of Islamic religion, women were protected and respected as compared to the status today. An analysis of the historical data indicates that Muhammad worshiped with women, but only with permission of their husbands, they would stand behind the rows of men. Women were expected to pray for men and equally participate in religious activities. After the reign of Muhammad, women began to be excluded from major religious activities, barred from worship together with men; they were encouraged to pray at home. The rule of Umar and his subsequent successor infringed and undermined the rights of women to what the Islamic religion and culture are facing today (Sechzer, 2004; Simmons, 2002).

The rule made veiling mandatory to all women, during Muhammad's time, it was not a mandatory and as stipulated in the Quran. Only the wives of the prophets were expected to wear veils covering their face when in public, the policy was adopted and ever since has been engraved in the Islamic culture (Ali, 2004). In addition to the system, women were limited to pray at home, hence being excluded from the mosque (Sechzer, 2004). Nowadays the women go to mosques, but do not worship in the same room with the men. Women were also excluded from partaking other religious and communal activities of life. Women until now in many Muslim countries interaction with men are limited to the household. These factors deterred and tangled the role and status of Islamic women. If I may quote from the Holy Quran 3:195 Their Lord responded to them: "I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female — you are equal to one another."

This is a clear indication that whether in religion, economic or in politics women should have equal rights as men, it does not say men are superior, does it. An Islamic woman was made invisible; she lacks the voice and equal rights as a man in undertaking religious responsibilities (Seedat, 2013).

Marriage and Divorce

Marriage and divorce are one of the most heated debate in the Muslim faith. Much of the discussions and the activism for equality and end of injustices emanate from this institution. Marriage has been interpreted and undertaken differently. However, both the patriarchal and matriarchal systems of marriage were accepted during the Muhammad's pre-Islamic reign (Nasr, 2003; Mulugeta & Messay, 2008). Both men and women had the rights to make independent decisions; own wealth has power and authority. Women had equal rights as men, contrary to the status of women currently in many Muslim cultures. Women are being portrayed as slaves and subjects of men, they are not allowed to own property, and if they do, it is under their husband even if it is their toil. The women are subjects and agents of the man; their place is restricted at home, and many take the roles of housewives only (Mulugeta & Messay, 2008). Surah 2:231 of the Quran says "When you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits) ..." the holy scripture does not give men the right to dictate over their women as the cases we see every day (Mulugeta & Messay, 2008).

The husbands solely make the decisions of the family, and there are expected to execute them even if they are in disagreement. Women remain invisible; the personal status laws have made women even to lack protection from their tribes when abused and mistreated in their marriages. The traditional description of marriage was that the women entered the contract for three fundamental entities: reproduction, sexuality and for domestic service in exchange for shelter, food, security, and clothing (Simmons, 2002; Seedat, 2013). The role of Islamic women can be described as to honor and obey their husbands willingly or not once, they enter the contract (Mulugeta & Messay, 2008).

Polyandry and polygamy were also accepted, but polygamy was more pronounced in the pre-Islamic culture. The Quran promotes both monogamy and polygamy, it states that a man should marry women of his choice, two or three or even four, but if he feels he won't be able to take sufficient care of them he should marry only one wife to avoid doing injustice to them (Quran 4:3) (Ali, 2004). It further demands dowry should be given to the women as a free gift (Quran 4:4). It warns those who are weak from making their wives, their properties and subjects, but should treat them feed, clothe them, speak, and treat them with kindness and justice (Quran 4:5) (Ali, 2004). It directs equal and respectful treatment of women (Mulugeta & Messay, 2008), which its existence is questionable looking at the women's roles in Islamic societies.

The polyandry and the matriarchal systems were abolished under the new religion. The place of women declined since the prohibition of the system; they are now controlled by their husbands and husband's family. Scholarly evidence indicates that during the reign of the Prophet, women had the liberty to end unwanted and abusive marriages; also, the Holy Islamic scriptures dictate women to have equal rights as men thus they are free to divorce their husbands. With the emergence of Umar's rule and other religious scriptures, that law was compromised adopting a different line. Many women tolerate and persevere abusive and violent marriages in the name of upholding the religious doctrines which dogmatic and barbaric in the contemporary society (Nasr, 2003). Young girls are dragged into marriage at tender ages, and they cannot resist the unions. Only the man who can divorce and as stated earlier the woman's obligation is only to obey and honor his husband always (Simmons, 2002; Sechzer, 2004; Mulugeta & Messay, 2008).

Sex equality is another controversial issue in the Muslim culture; several cases have been reported and other undermine at family and spiritual levels of husbands raping their wives when they refuse to have intercourse with them. Some women are beaten up for refusing to engage in sex with their husbands; the perpetrators quote the Qur'anic verse 4:34, which gives the men an impression of beating the disobedient wives (Simmons, 2002; Mulugeta & Messay, 2008). The famous verse 4:34 which

many Muslim men base on to beat their disorient women is a crucial verse that needs close interpretation and argument because literally I feel the verse does not mean the physical beating and chaining of women. It has been interpreted to feel the context of men being superior to women

As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For God is Most High, great (above you all) (Quran 4:34) (Ali, 2004, p. 27).

Nevertheless, the scriptures urge women to respond willingly to their husbands and rejection of their demands may force them to engage in perverted activities. It is the responsibility of the wife to protect the man from such decision, but it also warns men from forcing their women to engage in intercourse (Mulugeta & Messay, 2008). We should acknowledge that the religion does not recommend men to handle their wives as puppets, sex toys, and slaves, but as their life companions. Seedat (2013) says that Muslim consciousness of equal treatment and adoption of sex equality in Islam has been awakened and promoted. She encourages the Islamic feminism to promote sexual rights and raise activism against sex inequality and patriarchy. Inheritance and sharing of wealth has well been stipulated in the Quran Surah 4:10-19; the verse clearly states that both male and female heirs as well as the wives have the right to own and inherit property equally. It is troubling when we see a Muslim woman being deprived her rights to have property.

Inheritance and Child Custody

Children are the property of the husband and his family; women are expected to bear children as the man dictates. People believed the man entirely owned children; thus, the women had no rights over them. In the case of divorce, the women were expected to leave the child in the custody of the man's family. However, the divorced mother was allowed to have in custody the male child until he attains an age of 10 years and the female 12 years then give the man's family. Improvements were made extending the care of the male child by 5 years to 15 from 10. The man also had the right to

regulate the movement of the children and the wives outside the homes (Simmons, 2002). Child infanticide was also prevalent, it is still practiced in several places in the Arab countries, but the cases are not as prevalent as during the pre-Islamic time.

God directs on the inheritance, according to the Quran, the male child is to receive equal inheritance to that of two females and if one has two more daughters, they share the inheritance in the ratio of two-thirds (Quran 4:19) (Ali, 2004). Both wives and the daughters are permitted to be the scripture to inherit property. It does not restrict inheritance to the male line as taken and interpreted in many Muslim countries, just like the male child and the husbands, women and their daughters are equally legible for inheritance. The female sex is not inferior according to the Holy Quran thus the discrimination, and the women segregation should be alleviated. This belief and family laws of the Shari incapacitate and violate the fundamental rights of women at most the primary constitutional principle of equality to all. Inheritance of women against their will is also prohibited (Quran 4:19) by the holy book. I believe and strongly believe that Islam is a feminist religion and its doctrines and laws from its founders strongly protected women and had its focus of elevating the status and the place of women. Women just like men have equal rights, the bossy and self-inflicted superiority of Muslim men is vague and ill from both the Quran and the modernity and civilized perspectives. The feminist activists should not stop today or tomorrow, more Muslim Women groups should come up and continue struggling to better the place of Muslim women. The religious and the staunch believers should teach the society of the true meaning of the Holy Scriptures rather than selecting a few for their own personal benefits. "(They) may ponder over its Verses, and that those of understanding would be reminded" (38:29).

CONCLUSION

In our perception, the injustices and the segregation of women based on the Islamic doctrines would be viewed in the same light as slavery. Belief very few or no Muslim would willingly opt and publicly renounce themselves to the practice of slavery. If so, then why should the society mistreat our mothers, sisters, and friends

under our watch? Just are the nation declared slavery abhorrent and ambiguous, thus should the segregation and mistreatment of women should be declared distasteful. Instead of waiting for international humanitarian support, every Muslim has the potential of starting activism and educational campaigns to grant women their rights. I believe the Islamic religion and doctrines do not support the mistreatment of women; thus the prejudices and the religious stereotyping should be rooted out for the healthiness of the society.

Our last pledge to all Muslim men who practice the vice based on the claims the Quran states so should vividly and rationally read and interpret the Scripture rather than basing on some few phrases. The misinterpretation of the Quran is the primary source of the injustices and the declined status of the Islamic women. Islam is a religion that is meant for promoting equality and social growth and development and not in the light, it is painted. The misconception of excluding women voice in the reading and interpretation of the Quran should be eliminated; they should be included in the reinterpretation and the reading of the holy book. Women should be given a place and a voice in the society.

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