

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

**Khaled Abdel-Tawab and Muhammad Salama**

Department of Islamic Studies, International Open University, The Gambia

### **ABSTRACT**

*Women's empowerment has become one of the central themes in the ongoing debate between Islam and secularism regarding women's role and status in society. Liberal Islamists embrace women's empowerment and promote it in Muslim societies without a thorough assessment from an Islamic perspective. Women's empowerment has not received a sufficient response from the Islamic scholarship. This work attempts to lay down the foundations for addressing the current gap in that response. Toward that end, this work employs a qualitative approach. It utilizes secondary sources of information to analyze women's empowerment and critique the main approaches employed to promote it in Muslim societies. This work then provides an Islamic assessment of women's empowerment and concludes with recommendations for further work.*

**KEYWORDS:** Islam, Women, Empowerment, Feminism, Gender

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Conceptually, women's empowerment asserts fostering women's decision-making power and access to opportunities and resources (Batliwala, 2014). Women's empowerment is a change of the power relation between men and women in society, giving women more power in the social, economic, political, legal, and religious spheres (Rahman, 2013). The United Nations (UN) advocated the concept behind women's empowerment in the 1979 'Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' (CEDAW). Women's empowerment was further emphasized and given social, economic, and political dimensions in the UN 1995 'Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action' (UN Women, 1995).

Some Muslims adopt and promote women's empowerment based on the perception that it aims to remove obstacles that prevent women from gaining and exercising their rights. Other Muslims exhibit suspicion toward women's empowerment and oppose it due to its roots in Western thought. Women's empowerment is a recent concept and is yet to receive sufficient response from Islamic scholarship. There is a good body of Islamic literature on various women-related topics.

This work aims to explain the call to empowering women, critique the approaches utilized to promote it in Muslim societies and assess it from an Islamic perspective. The study makes two main contributions. First, establish the foundations of an Islamic assessment of the call. Second, highlight existing Islamic discourses that indirectly address aspects of the call.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Concerning women's issues, the literature reveals three main discourses amongst contemporary Muslim scholars and researchers. The first is the conservatives. The second is liberal Islamists. The third is those who maintain a just position between the first two and is termed herein the middle Islamist discourse.

The conservative discourse generally restricts women's role in society to their homes as daughters to be wives and mothers e.g., (al-'Abd al-Karīm, 2009). This discourse does not acknowledge a need for women's empowerment, and the rest of this article does not consider it further. This section does not intend to provide a comprehensive review of women's issues. Instead, it focuses solely on crucial aspects of women's empowerment in liberal Islamists and middle Islamist discourses.

### **2.1. The Liberal Islamist Discourse**

Adherents of this discourse are intellectual Muslims who are firm admirers of Western culture and generally lack formal education and training in Islamic sciences (al-Shafīe, 2004). They adopt the

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Western concept of women's empowerment after recasting it in a self-proclaimed Muslim-styled perspective (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2012).

The central idea in this discourse is that the Islamic texts affirm equality between men and women. The liberal Islamists claim that Muslim scholars purposefully read inequality and patriarchy into the text to justify political and social structures that favor the ruling male elites and satisfy male chauvinism (Hidayatullah, 2014). They further claim that the Islamic scientific heritage reflects men's norms in society and is a form of hegemony that subjugates women (Barlas, 2006). They conclude that it is indispensable for women and feminists, in general, to apply their own experience and understanding to establish a new jurisprudential effort (ijtihād) to achieve women's financial and social independence (Wadud, 2006).

While liberal Islamists have vehemently propagated the idea of patriarchy in Islam, there has been no material or historical evidence to lend credence to it (al-Masīrī, 1999). However, patriarchy's idea continues to take center stage in the liberal Islamists' thought, especially in their critique of the concept of men's guardianship and responsibility toward women (qiwāmah) stated in the Qur'ān verse 4:34 (Sharābī, 1993). An international movement named 'Musawah' emerged, advocating the rejection of qiwāmah and considering it oppressive patriarchy that needs reform (Brueske, 2018).

## **2.2. The Middle Islamist Discourse**

This discourse views women's empowerment as enabling Muslim women to realize their potential and influence in society while adhering to Islam's principles and values in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah (Farooqi, 20016). The discourse dismisses the liberal Islamists' norms that define women's success as financial and social independence, critiques the notion of judging women's success by comparing them to men, and emphasizes that success is not limited to the life of this world but, more importantly, the hereafter (Maryam, 2020).

The discourse emphasizes that women have three roles in life: a human being, a female, and a member of society (al-Qaraḍāwī, 1977). For woman's humanity, Islam emphasizes equality with men in the origin of creation. On the other hand, Islam differentiates between men and women in certain aspects, e.g., family's financial responsibility. The integration of equality and differentiation aims to make the relation between men and women complementary, enabling men and women to contribute to society and achieve success (al-Dosarī, 1432 AH). The engagement of Muslim women in society may need re-evaluation since ijtihād based on custom ('urf) and public benefit (maṣlaḥa) may change owing to the change in time and place (al-Qaraḍāwī, 2001).

Consideration of the objectives of the Islamic Sharī'ah (maqāsid al-Sharī'ah) enables developing arguments and solutions regarding women's societal roles in harmony with Islam's spirit and letter

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(al-Ghazālī, 2005). While women's primary focus should be the home, there needs to be a balance between women's duties toward the family and society ('Imārah, 2009). The life of the female companions is the model for achieving such a balance. The Muslim world needs women's presence in the public sphere to help combat the Western invasion in culture and education. Rather than focusing on the limitations of women's roles in society, the priority should be to look for opportunities that are compliant with Islam's rules and etiquettes (al-Ghazālī, 2008).

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This work employs the qualitative method and utilizes secondary sources of information. The following three discourses highlight the research approach:

1. Analyze women's empowerment from an Islamic perspective.
2. Evaluate the main approaches utilized to promote women's empowerment in Muslim societies.
3. Utilize the above two discourses to deduce an Islamic assessment of the call to empowering women.

### **4. ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

#### **4.1. Claimed Objectives**

##### **4.1.1. Economic Objectives**

The UN stipulated women's empowerment as an integral aspect of human development and a prerequisite to sustained development (UNIDO, 2019). According to the UN, women constitute the majority of the poor globally, and the main reason for that is their uncompensated work at home. Advocates of women's empowerment emphasize women's employment as the means for eliminating poverty in the world (Duflo, 2012). A profit-driven economic aspect of women's empowerment is evident in the World Bank statement that companies aiming to improve their profitability need to increase their women employees and empower them (World Bank, 2014). Also, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) advocates increasing women's access to financing as part of women's empowerment. Since women constitute half the society, IMF posits that increasing interest-based loans to women enables more economic activity and boosts economic growth (IMF, 2018).

The UN narrative on sustained development and profitability ignores the local and global conditions that contribute to poverty. These conditions include corruption, poor performance on human rights, the rise in military expenditure for the benefit of global defense corporations, and the global economic system that favors the rich countries at the developing countries' expense (Abu-Lughod, 2015).

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The Islamic perspective refutes the concept of feminization of poverty that ties socio-economic development to women's work outside of the home (al-Qaṭirjī, 2006). In particular, the concept of *qiwāmah* in Islam places the family's financial responsibility upon men, thereby indicating a clear emphasis on the socio-economic value of women's work inside the home (Islahi, 2020). In addition, Islam has conspicuously detailed and guaranteed women's financial and economic rights (Salama, 2021). Hence, the concept of feminization of poverty is unfounded from a secular and an Islamic perspective.

#### 4.1.2. Political Objectives

The apparent political motivation behind the call to empowering women is to achieve world peace. This hinges upon two hypotheses. First, women are less prone to waging wars than men, and, hence, pushing women to positions of political decision-making enables world peace. Second, women are the primary victims of armed conflicts and post-conflict adverse conditions. Addressing and resolving these conditions demands empowering women to be actors in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding (Webster, Chen, & Beardsley, 2019).

While empowering women may help prevent and resolve armed conflicts, the root cause of any conflict in the world has always been injustice. Therefore, for lasting peace, justice must prevail, which is not feasible as long as the dominant world powers mandate the international governing laws to serve their interests without consideration for the rest of humanity (Ibn Khaldūn, 2015). Additionally, the claim that women are the primary victims of wars is incorrect as the entire society is victims of war (al-Qaṭirjī, 2006). It is worth noting that Muslim feminists affirm that when women had the opportunity to lead nations, they were no less violent and bloody than men (Mernissi, 1997).

A non-apparent political objective of women's empowerment is advancing the West's interests in the Muslim world. Women's empowerment helps recruit and enlist Muslim women and feminists in the West's war of ideologies with the Islamist movements aiming to revive the Islamic civilization (Rabasa, Benard, Schwartz, & Sickle, 2007).

#### **4.2. The Liberal Islamists' Key Assumption**

The liberal Islamists claim that starting from the Abbaside era, male scholars marginalized female scholars, monopolized the interpretation of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth, and generated a heritage of patriarchal works denying women their rightful equality with men (Hidayatullah, 2014). The liberal Islamists claim that sidelining women scholars' enabled the incorrect patriarchal interpretations to become the standard throughout the ages (Barlas, 2002). The liberal Islamists persistently emphasize this claim in their writings that it became a *de facto* within the liberal Islamists' discourse.

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Three main points refute the above claim:

1. A well-known rule in fiqh based on the authentic ḥadīth states, ‘The burden of proof is upon the claimant’ (al-Burnū, 1997). This rule is also well-established in secular legal systems around the world. The liberal Islamists fail to provide evidence to support their claim and instead typically cite examples of women's unjust experiences in some Muslim societies to support their claim (Abū Ḥujayr, 1997). It is crucial to distinguish between Islam's teachings and Muslims' social practices as the latter may not necessarily conform with the former.
2. It is not practically impossible that the multitude of pious and righteous male and female scholars throughout time maintained silence toward injustice meted out to women and toward the claimed incorrect interpretations of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth (al-'Abd al-Karīm, 2009). Islamic history, especially during the Abbaside era, is rich in stories of scholars who stood firm for right and against wrong to the extent that some of them lost their lives in doing so (al-Tamīmī, 2006).
3. Women scholars have always been far less than male scholars, even in Muslim generations preceding the Abbaside era (Abū Ḥujayr, 1997).

#### **4.3. Women's Empowerment and Feminism**

The underlying idea of feminism is that women suffer oppression or are disadvantaged compared with men and that the oppression or disadvantage is either illegitimate or unjustified (James, 1998). Feminism aims to change the perceived injustices to women, and the concept of power is the key to such change. Feminism adopts a seemingly limited view of what constitutes injustice toward women. There is no consensus amongst feminists – neither on the forms of injustice meted out to women nor on the reasons that cause such injustice and the endpoint for bringing justice to women (Tauna & Tong, 1994). Since the 1990s, feminism turned into an activist movement calling for male-female confrontation, competition, struggle for power, and absolute equality between men and women (Caputi, 2013). Liberal Islamists rely on this form of feminism to promote women's empowerment in Muslim societies. They utilize so-called feminist readings of the Qur'ān to posit that the Qur'ān affirms the absolute equality of men and women in all spheres of life (Arnez, 2009).

In Islam, justice amounts to fulfilling the rights at the individual and communal levels (al-Sibā'ī, 1999). For example, from the individualistic feminist point of view, the law of inheritance in Islam is unjust to women since, in some cases, it gives the male twice the female's share of the inheritance. However, from the communal perspective, since Islam assigns the financial responsibility to men, that law equitably balances men's and women's shares of the inheritance

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with their responsibilities (al-Nabarāwī, 2004). The communal aspect of justice is widely recognized and accepted in the secular West because justice is inherently about doing the right thing (Sandel, 2009).

Islam defines the relationship between men and women in society as a partnership based on differentiation and integration of roles and responsibilities rather than competition and rivalry (al-Kurdistānī, 1994). The Qur'ān states, “*Do not covet that in which Allāh has made some of you excel others. Men shall gain a share of rewards according to their deeds, and women shall gain a share of rewards according to their deeds*” (Qur'ān 4:32). This verse asserts that the relationship between men and women is not a rivalry since the reward for each is commensurate with their roles and responsibilities in life (al-Qaraḍāwī, 2001). Furthermore, the verse implies that the prominent roles and responsibilities of men and women are different. Otherwise, there would be no point in separately mentioning men and women, and the verse's wording would have been: each human has a share of rewards according to his or her deeds (al-Nabarawī, 2004).

#### **4.4. Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality**

The demand for absolute equality between the two sexes – men and women – is an old topic that gained momentum in the nineteenth century, and there are ample Islamic responses that have addressed that topic, e.g. (al-Kurdistānī, 1994), (al-Dosarī, 1432 AH), (al-Nabarawī, 2004), and references therein. This subsection addresses the relationship between women's empowerment and the more recent concept of gender equality that developed in the 1970s.

In social sciences, gender is a social construct that dissociates biological roles from social roles. Gender is not a binary variable that designates a male or a female but is a spectrum of social beings within which males and females fall (Yenor, 2017). Conceptually, gender equality means that women should have the same rights and access to power and resources as men. Practically, gender equality attempts to eliminate the difference in social roles between men and women, aiming to change the relationship between men and women, especially concerning power (Rahman, 2013). UN literature presents gender equality as a fundamental human right essential to achieving peace and sustainable development (UNIDO, 2019). Gender equality is the enabler to women's empowerment, and women's empowerment is a result and a means of gender equality (Gurkan & Barut, 2019).

The concept of gender directly conflicts with the text of the Qur'ān verse 51:49 regarding creating everything in pairs, which includes humankind (Muslim *et al.*, 2010). While men and women are equal in many respects, they are physiologically and psychologically different. The Qur'ān verse 3:36 states, “*and the male is not similar to the female*” (Ibn Hismādī & Shams al-Dīn, 2018). A well-established fiqh rule is that ‘the Sharī'ah does not distinguish between similar entities, but it

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does distinguish between different entities' (al-Burnū, 1997). Concerning roles and responsibilities, where the similarity in characteristics, abilities, or needs is the case, the Sharī'ah does not distinguish between men and women, and the opposite is true (al-Ghazālī, 2008). Examples of aspects in which Islam asserts equality between men and women include the ontological value (i.e., humanity), dignity and honor, right to protection, legal responsibility, ownership, and capacity (ahlīyah) for financial transactions, right to knowledge, qualification for ijtihād, and consent for marriage (al-Dosarī, 1432 AH). Examples of aspects in which Islam differentiates between men and women include body parts that must be covered ('awrah), dress code, exception of women from some religious obligations (e.g., Friday congregational prayer or Jumu'ah), the share of an inheritance, testimony in financial transactions, testimony in criminal lawsuits that involve capital punishment (qisās) and legal retribution (ḥudūd), the communal obligation of fighting (jihād), the permission of a male guardian (walī) in marriage contracts, and child custody (al-Dosarī, 1432 AH). The Prophet said, "Let Allāh's curse be upon men who seek semblance with women and women who seek semblance with men" (al-Bukhārī ḥadīth no. 5885). The text of the ḥadīth is general, indicating that the prohibition includes any action that promotes such semblance between the two sexes (al-Kurdistānī, 1994).

Consideration of the differences is part of Islam's equity consistent with the objective of the Sharī'ah to achieve justice and welfare for the whole society (Ibn al-Qayyim, 1996). Both men and women are equally capable and need life, protection, dignity, honor, prayer, zakāh, fasting, ḥajj, legal capacity, the right to ownership, conducting financial transactions, and knowledge. Hence, the Sharī'ah does not distinguish between them in these aspects. However, where there is a difference in capability, characteristics, or need, the Sharī'ah distinguishes between them, such as in the obligations of Jumu'ah and jihād, testimony, inheritance, and dress code. The notion of absolute equality between men and women contravenes with the verse "Allāh does not burden a soul except [with that within] its capacity" (Qur'ān 2:286) (Ibn Kathīr, 2007). Ignoring the differences in characteristics and abilities and assigning similar roles and responsibilities for men and women is a form of injustice (al-Kurdistānī, 1994). Women and society would suffer the negative impact of such injustice. Thus, Islam calls for a just form of gender equality, or gender equity, recognizing the similarities and differences between men and women (Badawi, 2016).

The concept of gender promotes homosexuality and transsexualism as social norms (Yenor, 2017), which directly conflict with the Islamic text (al-Zāhabī, 2002) and (Ibn Hismādī & Shams al-Dīn, 2018). It is worth mentioning that recent Western scientific studies challenge the notion of gender equality. These studies point to a wide range of issues associated with gender equality, including gender dysphoria in children and the negative impact of gender-neutral parenting on society, among several other social issues (Soh, 2020).



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## 5. LIBERAL ISLAMISTS' METHODOLOGIES FOR PROMOTING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The liberal Islamists aim to intellectually break away from the Islamic scientific tradition and heritage they accuse of being chauvinistic toward women. They set out to produce works that promote women's empowerment. This section critiques the primary methodologies they employ in their endeavor.

### 5.1. Far-fetched Qur'ān Interpretations

The liberal Islamists rely on self-proclaimed unorthodox new readings of the Qur'ān (al-Shafīe, 2004). They utilize two main approaches: historical contextualization and thematic contextualization (Hidayatullah, 2014). This subsection explains these two approaches and recalls two examples of how the liberal Islamists utilize the approaches to explain away verse 4:34 of the Qur'ān that establishes the concept of *qiwāmah*.

Historical contextualization renders some verses of the Qur'ān inapplicable to the present time. The Qur'ān verse 4:34 contradicts the liberal Islamists' perception of the Qur'ān's egalitarian ethos that calls for gender equality. The liberal Islamists argue that the verse addresses a specific time and space where women's subjugation to men was prevalent and posit that the verse's text is no longer applicable (Hidayatullah, 2014). If this argument were valid, the question is: How could the Qur'ān approve such subjugation? There must be a clear-cut text that abrogates verse 4:34 or a progression in revelation to abolish the claimed subjugation (Ibn al-'Arabī, 1992). However, neither an abrogating text nor a progression in revelation to render *qiwāmah* inapplicable exists (al-Dosarī, 1432 AH).

Thematic contextualization links certain individual verses to general themes in the Qur'ān, aiming to reinterpret these verses to support the liberal Islamists' call to women's empowerment. This approach is referred to in the liberal Islamists literature as Intra-Qur'ānic Interpretation (Hidayatullah, 2014). This study prefers the term 'thematic contextualization' as it more accurately represents the concept behind the liberal Islamists' approach and avoids confusion with the well-known Intra-Qur'ānic interpretation in the science of Qur'ān exegesis. In their intellectual struggle to reconcile verse 4:34 with gender equality, some liberal Islamists utilize Monotheism (Tawhīd) to revoke the concept of *qiwāmah*. They assert that Tawhīd mandates Allāh's supremacy over all creation and that Allāh has no gender. They posit that women's obedience to men imposed by *qiwāmah* represents a gender hierarchy that contradicts Tawhīd and results in oppression and injustice and, hence, must be revoked (Wadud, 2006). Since Tawhīd is the most fundamental concept in Islam then, if the liberal Islamists' argument were valid, there must be an explicit text in the Qur'ān or authentic Sunnah that revokes *qiwāmah*, which is not the case (al-Dosarī, 1432 AH).

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## 5.2. Extrapolation of Events and Incidents

This approach leverages well-known isolated incidents and events to draw generalized conclusions that promote women's empowerment.

The liberal Islamists recall the female Companions embracing Islam during its early years, holding on to Islam, withstanding persecution, and migrating to Abyssinia and later to Madinah. The liberal Islamists draw upon modern-day political activism and consider these events to be active participation by women in the political arena (Faqīrī, 2015). Political activists typically suffer persecution, imprisonment, and sometimes exile for expressing their political views that oppose oppressive ruling regimes. However, the claim that the abovementioned events amount to political participation constitutes an incorrect analogy (qiyās fāsīd). The reason is that the effective cause ('illah) is different in each situation (Abū Ḥujayr, 1997). The male and female Companions who embraced Islam in its early years held on tight to the testimony of faith. They suffered persecution and migrated for that cause (Ibn Kathīr, 1990). Modern-day political activism does not spur from religious beliefs, and political activists may even be irreligious. The notion that Islam's first pillar constitutes political participation turns Islam into a political cause. It contradicts the fact that Islam is a complete way of life centered around worshipping Allāh. Politics is a part of that way of life but is neither its sole aspect nor foundation (Mihanna, 2018).

Motivated by gender equality, some liberal Islamists advocate that a woman can be an Imam leading public congregational prayers of mixed sexes, including the Jumu'ah sermon (Ali, 2019). The liberal Islamists recall a ḥadīth concerning the female Companion Umm Warāqah رضي الله عنها. The ḥadīth states, “The Messenger of Allāh صلى الله عليه وسلم used to visit her at her house. He appointed a prayer caller (mu'adhdhin) to make prayer call (adhān) for her, and he permitted her to lead her household in prayer” (Abū Dāwūd ḥadīth no. 592). There is a disagreement among scholars regarding the authenticity of this ḥadīth (al-'Abd al-Karīm, 2009). If the ḥadīth is considered authentic, its text restricts leading the congregational prayer to Umm Warāqah's household only. Extrapolation to general public congregational prayers needs separate evidence, which does not exist. The Prophet's practical Sunnah, followed by the Companions and Followers, indicates that women never led public congregational prayers of mixed sexes. It is unknown that any female Companion, including 'Ā'ishah رضي الله عنها, has led public congregational prayers of mixed sexes (Ibn Qudāmah, 1997).

## 5.3. Unscholarly Ḥadīth Criticism

The liberal Islamists reject ḥadīths that do not conform with their call to women's empowerment claiming these ḥadīths to be spurious. An example is the well-known ḥadīth that “Allāh's Messenger صلى الله عليه وسلم went out to the place of prayer on the day of celebration (īd). He passed by

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some women and said to them, ‘O womenfolk, give charity ... Among those deficient in discernment and religion, I have not seen anyone more able to sway the mind of a prudent man than one of you. They asked, ‘O Messenger of Allāh, what is the deficiency of our religion and our discernment?’ He replied, ‘Is it not the case that a woman's testimony is equivalent to half that of a man?’ They said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘This pertains to the deficiency of her discernment.’ He then said, ‘Is it not the case that when a woman menstruates, she neither prays nor fasts?’ They replied, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘That pertains to the deficiency of her religion’” (al-Bukhārī ḥadīth no. 304 & Muslim ḥadīth no. 80).

In the liberal Islamists' view, the above ḥadīth is demeaning to women and contradicts women's equality with men in dignity and honor as mandated by the Qur'ān (Mernissi, 1992). Hence, liberal Islamists declare the above ḥadīth spurious despite having the highest authenticity level as it is agreed-upon. The attempt to revoke the ḥadīth under consideration lacks the scholarly approach in ḥadīth sciences. In particular, when a ḥadīth seems to conflict with the Qur'ān, it needs to be dealt with under the well-known topic of contradiction of evidence in the science of Fundamentals of Fiqh (Usūl al-Fiqh) (al-Sūsah, 1992). Such treatment did not take place in the liberal Islamists' attempt. The Prophet ﷺ explained precisely in the text what he meant by a deficiency in discernment when he referred to the Qur'ān verse 2:282. Also, the Prophet ﷺ explained the deficiency in religion as missing the daily prayers and fasting due to menstruation. In actuality, the ḥadīth is advice from the Prophet ﷺ to women to be cognizant of an innate power they have, which is the ability to sway the minds of men, even the most prudent of them (al-Qaraḍāwī, 2001). The Prophet ﷺ had the best manners, and it is unthinkable that he would demean women, especially on the happy occasion of 'Īd (Ezzat, 2015). The ḥadīth merely points to characteristics related to women's psychological and physiological nature different from men's (al-Dosarī, 1432 AH). Thus, the ḥadīth does not contradict the Qur'ān and falls under the category of Sunnah that confirms the Qur'ān.

Another liberal Islamist approach to reject ḥadīths that contradict their call for women's empowerment is to declare a narrator in the chain of narration (sanad) weak despite being declared trustworthy by ḥadīth scholars. An example is the well-known ḥadīth narrated by the Companion Abū Bakrah رضي الله عنه stating, “Never will succeed such a nation that makes a woman their ruler” (al-Bukhārī ḥadīth no. 4425). The liberal Islamists declare Abū Bakrah رضي الله عنه untrustworthy due to a well-known incident during 'Umar's caliphate and declare the ḥadīth to be spurious (Mernissi, 1993). However, Abū Bakrah رضي الله عنه is declared trustworthy by the consensus of the ḥadīth scholars (Ibn Ḥajar, 1995). Furthermore, the ḥadīth under consideration is reported in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,

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which enjoys the highest degree of authenticity after the Qur'ān, declared authentic by the consensus of the scholars, and the Muslim Ummah has received it with acceptance (Ibn Ḥajar, 2013).

#### 5.4. Employing Unauthentic Ḥadīths

In their pursuit of supporting women's empowerment in politics, the liberal Islamists cite a narration that claims that 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb رضي الله عنه noticed that people demanded higher women's dower for marriage. So, he ascended the pulpit and ordered that the dower is not to exceed four hundred dirhams. A woman from the tribe of Quraysh stood up and addressed 'Umar رضي الله عنه saying that he has no right to limit dower and referred to the Qur'ān verse 4:20. 'Umar رضي الله عنه then declared that the woman was correct and that he was wrong, ascended the pulpit, and withdrew his order. The liberal Islamists use this narration to claim that women participated in public policy during the righteous caliphs' time (Faqīrī, 2015). However, the above narration has been declared weak in both the sanad and text (matn) (Abū Ḥujayr, 1997).

In their assertion of women's empowerment, liberal Islamists claim that women can fight in wars alongside men (Aqsūrī, 2019). The liberal Islamists recall as evidence a ḥadīth regarding Umm 'Ammārah Nusaybah bint K'ab رضي الله عنها. The ḥadīth states that “Some women’s garments were brought to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb رضي الله عنه. Among these garments, one was elegant and large ... 'Umar رضي الله عنه said, ‘I shall send it to someone more deserving of it; Umm 'Ammārah Nusaybah bint K'ab رضي الله عنها. I heard Allāh's Messenger صلى الله عليه وسلم say, ‘on the day of the battle of Uḥud, whenever I turned to the left or the right, I saw her fighting to protect me’” (Ibn Sa'd, 2001). The sanad of this ḥadīth includes al-Wāqīdī, Ya'qūb ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Īsā, and Mūsá ibn Ḍamrah. Al-Wāqīdī is well-known to fabricate ḥadīth (al-Dhahabī, 1982). Ya'qūb ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Īsā is weak (al-Baghdādī, 2011) and Mūsá ibn Ḍamrah is unknown (majhūl al-ḥāl) (al-Bukhārī, 2008). A ḥadīth that has in its sanad a fabricator is spurious and should not be used (Ibn al- Ṣalāḥ, 1980). The ḥadīth under consideration is entirely spurious since it has in its sanad a fabricator, a weak narrator, and an unknown narrator.

The matn of the preceding ḥadīth conflicts with an authentic ḥadīth that states, “'Umar رضي الله عنه distributed garments amongst some women in Madinah. An elegant garment remained ... he said, ‘Umm Salīṭ is more deserving of it because she used to carry the water skins for us on the day of the battle of Uḥud’” (al-Bukhārī ḥadīth no. 2881). The similarity of the incident in the two ḥadīths indicates that the reward was for Umm Salīṭ's رضي الله عنها role in providing water to the soldiers in the

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battle of Uhud. Numerous other ḥadīths confirm female Companions' role in the Prophet's battles as helping with food, water, and tending to the wounded (Abū Ḥujayr, 1997).

## **6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **6.1. Foundations of Women's Empowerment**

Women's empowerment based on feminism and gender equality creates a culture that recognizes women as empowered if they conform to masculine traits, take on duties historically performed by men, and assert their individualism. Such a narrative considers masculinity the model to aspire for and implies that femininity is lower than masculinity and contradicts the premise of presenting the call to empower women as a pro-women movement (Farooqi, 2016). The liberal Islamists women's empowerment narrative fails to acknowledge women's contributions and empowerment to fulfill female-dominated roles (al-Qaṭirjī, 2006).

On the other hand, Islam acknowledges femininity as an integral aspect of women's existence and ascribes rewards for women for their feminine-based role in society. Islam's consideration of the difference in traits between men and women is evident in a ḥadīth where the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said, “Embrace goodness toward women, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved part of the rib is its upper part. So, if you attempt to straighten the rib, it will break, but if you cease [to straighten] the rib, it shall continue with its curvature. So, embrace goodness toward women” (al-Bukhārī ḥadīth no. 3331 & Muslim ḥadīth no. 1468). This ḥadīth explicates that women's traits are different from those of men and that men should not attempt to mold women into men's traits as this goes against women's nature upon which Allāh created them (al-Qaraḍāwī, 2001). That nature best suits women's roles in life and empowers them to carry out their responsibilities. Also, molding women into the same traits as men contravenes the wisdom of creating the two sexes to complement each other. Islam assigns rights and responsibilities considering the difference in traits, and in the end, the reward is justly commensurate with the capabilities and responsibilities (al-Kurdistānī, 1994).

The fundamental argument behind women's empowerment in the liberal Islamist discourse is that men and women are equal in humanity (Barlas, 2002). To achieve justice, men's and women's social roles should be equal in all spheres of life. The liberal Islamist discourse assumes absolute equality between the two sexes to be a condition for justice (Ali, 2019). However, the fact that men and women are equal in humanity does not imply equality in all characteristics and, hence, in all life spheres. Islam is concerned primarily with justice and considers equality a consequence, rather than a condition, of justice (al-Dosarī, 1432 AH). Equality materializes when it does not conflict with justice. When femininity and masculinity do not play an influential role, the Sharī'ah does not distinguish between men and women in its rulings, and the opposite is true (Ibn al-Qayyim, 1996).

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Equating men and women in roles and responsibilities would be unjust when different characteristics, traits, capabilities, and needs exist. Thus, Islam aims to achieve gender equity and not gender equality (Badawi, 2016).

### **6.2. Women's Empowerment and Ijtihād**

The liberal Islamists recognize and applaud the fact that Islam endorses aspects of equality between men and women. However, they neither acknowledge nor agree with the social elements in which Islam differentiates between men and women. They posit that such differentiation is not built in the Islamic text and is biased due to male chauvinism. Therefore, liberal Islamists call for opening the door of ijtihād to women and feminists to critique and revise Islam and Sharī'ah (Ezzat, 2015).

However, most liberal Islamists promoting women's empowerment lack proper education in Islamic sciences and Arabic. Hence, they lack the conditions required for ijtihād (al-Shafī'e, 2004). The liberal Islamists rely on their self-proclaimed endeavors rather than the well-established Islamic sciences approach to read women's empowerment into the Islamic texts. It is essential to emphasize that the Qur'ān clearly instructs referring matters related to women to Allāh. The Qur'ān states, *“And they request from you [O Muḥammad] a legal injunction (fatwá) concerning women. Say, Allāh provides you with injunctions regarding them”* (Qur'ān 4:127). This instruction mandates following the Qur'ān and the authentic Sunnah when discussing women's issues (Muslim & et al., 2010), which includes women's empowerment.

### **6.3. Assessment of the Call**

The liberal Islamists' call to empowering women contradicts fundamental Islamic principles, including qiwāmah, marriage, family life, and men's and women's intrinsic human nature. The call also introduces unorthodox principles and practices into Muslim societies. The main inevitable consequences of the liberal Islamist approach to women's empowerment are:

1. Deviation from the sound understanding and practice of Islam.
2. The collapse of the family institution.
3. Rise and spread of social ills including delayed marriage, divorce, single-parenting, homosexuality, and transsexuality.

The liberal Islamists' call to empower women leads to significant religious, family, and society corruption, negatively impacting religion and progeny's preservation. Preservation of religion is the most important of the five comprehensive objectives of the Sharī'ah (Ibn 'Āshūr, 2011). From the Islamic perspective, the resulting corruption (mafsadah) in the call to empowering women outweighs any potential worldly benefit (maslahah). Based on the fiqh rule that ‘repelling

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corruption takes precedence over acquiring benefits' (al-Burnū, 1997), Muslim societies should abandon the liberal Islamists' call to empowering women. Prophet Muḥammad <sup>صلى الله عليه وسلم</sup> cautioned of trials related to women saying, "I have not left after me a trial that is more harmful to men than [the trial of] women" (al-Bukhārī ḥadīth no. 5096 & Muslim ḥadīth no. 2740). The secular call for women's empowerment and its consequences are, without a doubt, aspects of that trial.

## 7. CONCLUSION

A question that needs an answer is: Do Muslim women need empowerment? The answer is a resounding 'yes.' The key to such empowerment is a sound understanding of the Sharī'ah objectives while observing the fixed and the variable aspects of the Sharī'ah (al-Ghazālī, 2008). Thus, an Islamically consistent approach characterizes women's empowerment as 'enabling Muslim women to perform their roles and carry out their responsibilities in life consistent with the Sharī'ah.' This concept qualifies as 'Women's Islamic Empowerment.'

In some Muslim cultures, misunderstanding and misuse of *qiwāmah* and masculinity result in demeaning, minimizing, and suppressing women's societal roles (Maryam, 2020). These cultures contradict the Islamic perspective on women as human beings and represent hurdles in fulfilling their roles in society. The result is that women who constitute half the society cannot perform their roles to the best of their abilities, and society suffers. Bringing such cultures into consistency with sound Islamic principles should be the objective of women's Islamic empowerment.

Finally, subsection 5.1 briefly pointed to the methodology of the Qur'ān interpretation that liberal Islamists utilize and refer to as 'feminist readings of the Qur'ān' (Hidayatullah, 2014). This topic and its relation with Western hermeneutics need further research and a detailed Islamic response as it is one of the liberal Islamists' pillars to women's empowerment.

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