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WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ISLAM: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The topic of political participation of women in Islam is a very important one and can be studied using the Qur'an, Sunnah, Islamic history and in the context of today's political realities. Islamic sources reveal that women have moral agency, legal personality, and the power to voice their opinions and engage in issues of society, contrary to the thought that Islam leaves women out of public and political life. The Qur'an speaks about men and women in the same way – as complementary parts of the Muslim nation and as having identical duties in the promotion of righteousness and prevention of wrongdoing. The experience of the early Muslim community also serves as an example of women's participation in the political, public affairs, education, social welfare and decision making of the community. The women included Khadījah (RA), 'Ā'ishah (RA), Umm Salamah (RA) and other female Companions were all important in the intellectual and social development of the Muslim community. Muslim women today vote, serve in parliaments, governments, civil society and policy formation in various Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority settings. But, the scope and conditions of women's political leadership from various Islamic jurisprudential lenses are still being debated. In this article, women's political participation is discussed from an Islamic perspective and based on the principles of the Qur'an, the guidance of the Prophet (s) and the experiences of the past. It suggests that Muslim philosophy and practice affirm women's social and civic role, and that participation in politics is essential to be consistent with the Islamic moral values, justice, dignity and public good.

Key concepts:

Women, Political Participation, Islam, Qur'an, Sunnah, Islamic History, Political Leadership, Shūrā, Contemporary Muslim Societies.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of women political involvement has emerged as a topic of concern in the modern debates on Islam, gender, human rights and political development. Cultural norms, social systems and views on religious texts have historically marginalized women's engagement in political institutions in many societies. Consequently, there is a tendency to represent Islam as restricting women's role in public and political activities. This understanding, however, must be revisited with care, given the experiences of Muslim women, and the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Islam gave women a unique legal and moral identity when the status of women and their participation differed greatly from one society to another. The Qur'an considers men and women to be responsible members of the Muslim

community, and refers to them on a number of occasions concerning their faith, morality, social responsibility and accountability. During the early Islamic period, there is no evidence of a sense of political participation, but there are principles such as consultation (shūrā), justice (ʿadl), public responsibility, accountability, and commanding what is right that help to understand civic and political participation.[i]

The Qur'an states:

وَالْمُؤْمِنُوْنَ وَالْمُؤْمِنٰتُ بَعْضُهُمْ اَوْلِيَآءُ بَعْضٍۘ يَاْمُرُوْنَ بِالْمَعْرُوْفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُقِيْمُوْنَ الصَّلٰوةَ وَيُؤْتُوْنَ الزَّكٰوةَ وَيُطِيْعُوْنَ اللّٰهَ وَرَسُوْلَهٗۗ اُولٰۤىِٕكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللّٰهُ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ عَزِيْزٌ حَكِيْمٌ ٧١

The believers, both men and women, are guardians of one another. They encourage good and forbid evil, establish prayer and pay alms-tax, and obey Allah and His Messenger. It is they who will be shown Allah's mercy. Surely Allah is Almighty, All-Wise.

This verse is a statement of a principle of joint social responsibility for believing men and women. It shows that women are not only dependent part of the society but playing a role for the moral and social upliftment of the community.

Islamic history also has women who actively engaged in intellectual, social, and economic and public activities. Daughters of the Prophet Muhammad and the women of the other wives of the Prophet Muhammad were not left uninvolved in issues concerning the Muslim community. Their views and ideas were consulted, their knowledge was handed down, and their involvement shaped the structure of Islamic society.

So, the state of women's political participation in the context of Islam cannot be analyzed by looking at the framework of modern western political systems. It is rather to be understood within the framework of Islamic concepts of responsibility, consultation, justice, public welfare and moral behavior. This article discusses these principles and their application to modern political activity.

2. Islamic Concept of Women's Political and Social Participation

As per Islamic belief, women are equal to men in terms of their rights and obligations. According to the Islamic perspective, the rights and duties of women are equal with men.

Islam doesn't measure the worth of human beings by their gender. The Qur'an has proclaimed that women and men are spiritually and morally equal, but that they might have different responsibilities and social roles.

Allah Almighty says:

اِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِيْنَ وَالْمُسْلِمٰتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِيْنَ وَالْمُؤْمِنٰتِ وَالْقٰنِتِيْنَ وَالْقٰنِتٰتِ وَالصّٰدِقِيْنَ وَالصّٰدِقٰتِ وَالصّٰبِرِيْنَ وَالصّٰبِرٰتِ وَالْخٰشِعِيْنَ وَالْخٰشِعٰتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِيْنَ وَ الْمُتَصَدِّقٰتِ وَالصَّاۤىِٕمِيْنَ وَالصّٰۤىِٕمٰتِ وَالْحٰفِظِيْنَ فُرُوْجَهُمْ وَالْحٰفِظٰتِ وَالذّٰكِرِيْنَ اللّٰهَ كَثِيْرًا وَّ الذّٰكِرٰتِۙ اَعَدَّ اللّٰهُ لَهُمْ مَّغْفِرَةً وَّاَجْرًا عَظِيْمًا ٣٥

Surely ˹for˺ Muslim men and women, believing men and women, devout men and women, truthful men and women, patient men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, men and women who guard their chastity, and men and women who remember Allah often—for ˹all of˺ them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.

This verse shows that the women have their own moral and spiritual responsibility with Allah. Their role in society is thus not negligible or secondary in any way.

Political participation is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a variety of aspects related to the community, such as consulting, voicing opinions, involvement in public service, voting, holding public office, policy-making, social advocacy, and making a contribution to society.

Participation from an Islamic perspective should be regulated by several principles:

Justice and fairness; Mutual advice; and Respect for the right to life; and Fostering the welfare of the public; Honesty and accountability; Prevention of unethical and intolerant activities that may be included in the definition of corruption.

From the side of the students, it was the respect of Islamic moral values that were observed. So, Islam offers a moral compass in which politics must be practiced.

3. Qur'anic Foundations of Women's Participation

3.1 Shared Responsibility in Society

One of the strongest Qur'anic foundations for women's social participation is found in Surah al-Tawbah:

"The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong..."

The verse assigns men and women a shared responsibility for promoting good and resisting wrongdoing. Although the verse is not specifically discussing modern political institutions, its principle supports women's active involvement in the moral and social affairs of the community.

3.2 Consultation and Collective Decision-Making

The Qur'an praises believers because:

﴿وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ﴾ ٣٨

who respond to their Lord, establish prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and donate from what We have provided for them.

Shūrā is an important principle of Islamic governance. Classical Islamic political institutions differed significantly from modern parliamentary systems, but the principle of consultation emphasizes that public affairs should not be managed through arbitrary or oppressive authority.

Women's participation in consultation can therefore be discussed within the broader Islamic principles of representation, advice, public welfare, and accountability.

3.3 Women and the Pledge of Allegiance

The Qur'an explicitly mentions women giving their pledge to the Prophet ﷺ:

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ إِذَا جَآءَكَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتُ يُبَايِعْنَكَ عَلَىٰٓ أَن لَّا يُشْرِكْنَ بِٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا وَلَا يَسْرِقْنَ وَلَا يَزْنِينَ وَلَا يَقْتُلْنَ أَوْلَٰدَهُنَّ وَلَا يَأْتِينَ بِبُهْتَٰنٍ يَفْتَرِينَهُۥ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ وَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ وَلَا يَعْصِينَكَ فِى مَعْرُوفٍ فَبَايِعْهُنَّ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُنَّ ٱللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ١٢

O Prophet! When the believing women come to you, pledging to you that they will neither associate anything with Allah ˹in worship˺, nor steal, nor fornicate, nor kill their children, nor falsely attribute ˹illegitimate˺ children to their husbands, nor disobey you in what is right, then accept their pledge, and ask Allah to forgive them. Surely Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

The practice of bayʿah demonstrates that women were recognized as morally responsible members of the Muslim community. Their commitment was recognized independently rather than being treated simply as an extension of their male relatives' commitments.

4. Women's Political Participation during the Prophetic Period

The biography of the Prophet Muhammad (saws) can be used as a source of understanding women's role in the early days of Islam. Women were involved in religious, educational, economic, and social and community affairs.

4.1 Khadījah (RA)

In pre-Islamic Makkah, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid was a prosperous and noble woman and was herself financially independent. She accompanied the Prophet ﷺ in the period of his mission that was the most difficult and the first period. Her wealth and advice helped establish the Muslim community.

Her job cannot be compared to a contemporary political position, but her example is an illustration that Islam was not limited to women's domestic domain.

4.2 Umm Salamah (RA)

Umm Salama is a particularly noteworthy case of female consultation. She had counseled the Prophet ﷺ during the treaty of Hudaybiyyah when there was a lot of tension amongst the Muslims. The Prophet (saws) listened to her counsel and did what it directed him to do.

This incident is notable for the following reasons: first, because it shows that a woman could give counsel on an important issue for the Muslims, and second, because the Prophet ﷺ accepted her counsel.

4.3 ʿĀʾishah (RA)

Aisha was one of the most influential scholars of the early Muslim community. She passed on many Prophetic traditions and gave Legal and Intellectual advice to both men and women.

Her academic expertise makes it clear that Muslim women had a large degree of intellectual power over public religious matters. Her later participation in political events in early Islamic history, however, is historically important, as is the political history of that period more generally, in that it is complex and troublesome.

A study of the role of women in the early Islamic history:

Women's role did not cease following the death of the Prophet ﷺ. Muslim women remained active in the fields of scholarship, social service, administration and public affairs.

Women passed on knowledge, offered legal advice, taught students, were active in charitable works and were involved in the building up of Muslim society. Women had been present all along in Islamic history and their intellectual achievements were an important aspect of Islamic civilization.

The story of ʾĀʾishah (RA) is of special importance, as male scholars came to her to learn. This means that there was no limitation on intellectual authority within Islamic traditions that was based on gender.

In the same way, women have made a contribution to education, charitable institutions, economic activity and public welfare in various eras of Islam. Their experiences show that the historical role of Muslim women is not limited to a single concept of total political marginalization.

5. Women's Political Role in Early Islamic History

After the death of the Prophet ﷺ, the involvement of women was not eliminated. Muslim women remained in the scholarship, social welfare, administration and public affairs.

Women passed on knowledge, educated students, gave legal advice, engaged in charitable works, and contributed to the development of Muslim society. Throughout Islamic history, women scholars have existed and their intellectual works came to play an important role in the Islamic civilization.

An important point to remember on this is that male scholars themselves came to her for knowledge, as was the case with ʿĀʾishah (RA). This means that there was no intrinsic limitation upon the intellectual authority of Islam to the male gender.

Likewise, women participated in education, charitable organizations, economic pursuits and public service throughout the history of Islam. They also show the historical situation of Muslim women cannot be understood solely in terms of complete political exclusion.

6. Islamic Perspective on Political Leadership

A question that has been discussed in Islamic jurisprudence is whether women can be given political leadership.

Classical Muslim jurisprudence scholars normally made a difference between the various types of authority. Some judges imposed limitations on women's access to political offices, especially the one traditionally considered to be the highest, the caliphate. They argued mainly on the basis of some Prophetic traditions and the political situation of their historical period.

Meanwhile, modern Muslim thinkers have taken a new look at the question in the light of the differences between the classical structure of caliphates and the modern constitutional states. The modern political offices of parliaments, ministers, elected representatives or mayors, civil servants, or policy-makers do not necessarily reflect the classical office of caliph.

Thus distinction needs to be made between:

1. The ancient office of the greatest caliph, or of supreme authority in the Muslim world;
2. Contemporary modern political positions of the constitution;
3. Women's role in voting and elections;
4. Women's participation in consultation and policy making;
5. Women's contribution to public administration and civil society.

This distinction enables the issue to be considered in greater depth rather than all forms of political participation being considered as the same.

7. The Story of the Queen of Sheba

The story of Bilqīs is especially significant in Islamic tradition as the Queen of Sheba, and this story is relevant to the issue of women's political leadership.

The Qur'an states that she was a ruler whose people were subject to her. She didn't impulsively act when she received the letter of Prophet Sulaymān (AS).

Instead, she consulted her advisers:

قَالَتۡ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡمَلَؤُا۟ أَفۡتُونِى فِىٓ أَمۡرِى مَا كُنتُ قَاطِعَةً أَمۡرًا حَتَّىٰ تَشۡهَدُونِ ٣٢

She said, "O chiefs! Advise me in this matter of mine, for I would never make any decision without you."

This account demonstrates qualities such as consultation, political awareness, careful decision-making, and diplomatic engagement.

The Qur'an does not present her simply as an example of incompetence because she was a woman. Instead, her political conduct is described through her decisions and response to the circumstances surrounding her. Her story therefore provides valuable material for contemporary discussions about women's political leadership, although it should not be treated as a direct legal ruling concerning modern political offices.

8. Women's Political Participation in Contemporary Muslim Societies

In the modern period there has been a growing involvement of Muslim women in political structures. They have represented at parliaments, served as ministers, judges (in some countries), diplomats, local government representatives, academics, political activists or civil society leaders.

Their involvement differs significantly from country to country in Muslim-majority nations due to the different political, constitutional, legal and cultural systems.

The contemporary participation can be assessed from an Islamic perspective based on the objectives and principles of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharī'ah) which involve justice, preservation of human dignity, public welfare, accountability, and prevention of harm.

Five ways how women can contribute to society:
Electoral participation and voting;
Political consultation;
Membership in legislative bodies;
Public administration;
Teaching and policymaking;
Community organizations;
Social welfare programs;
Promote justice and the common good.

When this participation takes place in an ethical and responsible way, it can be a way to serve society.

9. Contemporary Challenges to Women's Political Participation

Muslim women, however, still have to overcome a number of obstacles to political participation despite greater opportunities. A number of these obstacles are not related to Islamic teachings, but to cultural traditions.

9.1 Cultural Restrictions

Traditional attitude limit women's movement and public participation in some societies. These prohibitions should not be considered as an inherent aspect of Islam; cultural practices and religious teachings are not necessarily the same.

9.2 Limited Educational Opportunities

Knowledge and awareness are necessary for political participation. The lack of access to quality education, in turn, can limit women's effectiveness in public life.

9.3 Economic Barriers

Money is necessary for political campaigns and for the people to participate. Political under-representation can thus be a consequence of economic inequality.

9.4 Misinterpretation of Religious Teachings

Some of the discussions on the issue of women and politics are based on selective interpretations of the Islamic scriptures without taking into account overall Qur'anic principles of justice, responsibility, consultation, and public welfare.

The political and social institutions of a state.

Case studies reveal that in certain countries institutional structures pose obstacles to women's involvement. These can be partial representation, discrimination, no political opportunities, or social resistance.

10. Islamic Ethical Principles for Women's Political Participation

Islamic political participation is not simply about acquiring authority. Political authority is considered a responsibility and a trust.

The Qur'an commands:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا ۙ وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُمْ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ أَنْ تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ نِعِمَّا يَعِظُكُمْ بِهِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا ٥٨

Indeed, Allah commands you to return trusts to their rightful owners; and when you judge between people, judge with fairness. What a noble commandment from Allah to you! Surely Allah is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.

Therefore, anyone participating in political affairs—male or female—is expected to demonstrate honesty, competence, justice, and accountability.

Women's political participation should consequently be guided by:

Justice: Political decisions should protect the rights of individuals and communities.

Integrity: Public office should be treated as a trust rather than a means of personal benefit.

Competence: Political responsibility should be entrusted to people who possess the necessary knowledge and ability.

Consultation: Decisions affecting society should involve appropriate consultation.

Public welfare: Political activity should aim at the welfare of society rather than personal or partisan interests.

Islamic morality: Political participation should remain consistent with principles of modesty, honesty, dignity, and lawful conduct.

11. Discussion

Neither an exclusive nor imitating approach to women's political participation is able to provide an adequate description of the Islamic concept of women. The principles of Islam on human dignity, moral responsibility, justice, consultation, and public welfare have remained unchanged over time and circumstance, while the details of political institutions have varied over the years.

The Qur'anic affirmation of the role of women as responsible citizens of the Muslim community gives women a good basis for their role in society. The role of women in the Prophetic period also illustrates women's capacity to give their opinions, offer advice, pass on knowledge, and engage in community life.

Meanwhile, Islamic jurisprudence has legitimate scholarly debates about particular types of political authority. Islamic jurisprudence, meanwhile, has legitimate scholarly debates about particular types of political authority. These discussions should NOT be ignored! In order to have a balanced approach therefore it is necessary to separate the matters which are unshakably clear from the Islamic texts and the matters which are developed by the Political process in the history and also by interpretation based on the Islamic texts.

Women's political engagement, if it is grounded in knowledge, competence, ethical behavior, justice and public service, can help advance the development of their societies in a positive way in the modern Muslim societies. The goal should not just be to include more people but meaningful and responsible participation.

12. Conclusion

Political participation of women in the context of Islam is a complex issue which needs to be comprehended with the aid of the Qur'an, Sunnah, Islamic jurisprudence, and from the experience of Muslims. Islamic values teach about women as independent persons who can contribute to the development of society and the moral and social responsibility of women and men. The principles of justice, consultation, accountability, and responsibility in the Qur'an

offer an excellent framework for the analysis of women's involvement in public life.

History shows that Muslim women were not totally barred from community life, as demonstrated in the Islamic history. We see women like Khadījah (RA), Umm Salamah (RA) and ʿĀʾishah (RA) who actively participated in the intellectual, social, economic and advisory activities of the early Muslim society. In the Qur'an, a woman also played a significant role in exercising political power and making decisions after consulting and thoughtful judgment; in the case of Queen of Sheba.

However, there are questions regarding specific modes of political leadership that have been discussed by Muslim scholars and need to be treated in a scholarly balanced manner. The political institutional context of the modern world is very different from that of classical Islamic history. It is therefore important to consider women's participation in elections, membership in legislatures, public administration, civil society, and in the formulation of policy from a gender perspective and in terms of their roles.

In the end, Islam says that government is a trust and that justice and public welfare are two important things that should be maintained in government. Women's involvement in political life, therefore, can be seen from this moral aspect. Where women have the appropriate knowledge, skills, integrity and dedication to the public good, they can play important roles toward political and social development in achieving justice and community welfare. An Islamic balance needs to separate between religion and culture, and it is important to take into account the contribution which women can make to a just and morally responsible society.

[1] Qur'an 9:71
[2] Ibn Khaldūn, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. Al-Muqaddimah.(Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002).
[3] Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Quran , Al-Quran 33 : 35
[4] Qur'an 9:71
[5] Al-Qur'an 42:38
[6] Al-Qur'an 60:12
[7] Al Bukhari 2001
[8] Sahih Muslim 2007
9 Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1991
[10] Ibn Kathīr, Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar. Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm.
[11] Ibn Khaldūn, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. Al-Muqaddimah.(Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002)
[12] Al-Quran 27 :32
[13] Ibn Kathīr, 2000; Al-Qurṭubī, 2006
[14] Al-Quran 4 : 58
[15] Al-Ghazālī, 2000; Ibn Khaldūn, 1967