

The Stance of Islam and Christianity on Gender Equality

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Abstract: The purpose of this research paper is to examine and explore the stance of Islam and Christianity on gender equality as both religions are the predominant religions in the world. The research work critically explored the posits of the Quran and the Bible on gender equality. The magnitude of misinterpretations and misconceptions of the stance of both religions on gender equality is unimaginable. Certain religious interpretations by some patriarchal fundamentalist have masterminded the discrimination, dehumanization, and marginalization of women across the globe. Clarifying this obnoxious patriarchal-centric interpretation is the primary aim of this research work. A descriptive approach was used in data gathering. The nature of this research also warrants the use of qualitative methodology by exploring available literature that has interrogated issues on religion, gender, and patriarchy as a means of eliciting useful information on the issue under discourse. This research identified that though gender discrimination is rampant in the Islamic states but is not Islamic as it is against the teachings of Prophet Muhammed. Also, in the Western Christian states women are not totally free from gender discrimination as women do not enjoy same right with their men counterparts. The teachings of Jesus as recorded in the bible has restored dignity to women which culture and traditions have equated to a domestic element. The research work concluded that the obnoxious patriarchal fundamentalist interpretations of the holy books are the rationale behind women's marginalization, dehumanization and, victimization.

Keywords: gender equality, Quran, Bible, Christianity, Islam and patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout recorded history, women have been dehumanized, disposed of, diminished, degraded, marginalized, disenfranchised, secluded, subjugated, and silenced (Barazangi, 2004). The issues of women's social status and role in society are ideological contentions that have permeated all societies from the beginning of civilizations to date. According to McGuire (2002), religion has been historically related to conflict on several issues including gender equality. Religion is often hijacked, politicized, implicated and subsequently used as the basis to justify certain predetermined personal aggrandizement.

Christianity and Islam are no doubt among the greatest religions the world has ever known. They are in fact the only two prophetic religions that transcend every restriction of race or nationality. The two religions are well represented in different parts of the world with many adherences.

The five pillars of Islam are the profession of faith in One God, prayer, almsgivings, fasting and pilgrimage. The emergence of Islam as a religion dated back to the 7th century in what is today Saudi Arabia. The traditional account opined that Muhammed received a series of revelations from Allah through angel Gabriel. These revelations were documented and called the Qur'an. The Quran is incontestable in the eyes of orthodox Muslims, and its content cannot be modified. (Awde, 2000). It is accepted by Muslims as the Word of Allah and Muhammad is believed to be the last and greatest of the prophets.

However, Christianity began as a movement within Judaism during the first century. The series of teachings of Jesus of Nazareth earned him many followers among who he picked twelve as his disciples. Together with his disciples he ministered to the poor, healed the sick, raised the dead and cast out demons. His teachings were considered blasphemous and controversial by the Pharisees and Sadducees who later orchestrated his arrest, trials, crucifixion, and death by the Roman governor. He died and he was buried and resurrected on the third day. After the death of Jesus, Christianity gradually became a movement distinct from Judaism, as it is practiced today. For the Christians, the bible is the clearest statement of God's will on any matter, it is the standard against which all other truth claims are measured.

For centuries, women have been victims of gender inequality and discrimination. Although gender inequality is prevalent in the Muslim-majority countries but this does not mean that women in the Western Christian-majority world enjoyed the same right with their men counterparts. Studies have shown that culture and religion have subjugated women to domestic violence (Muslim Women's League, 1995). Religion and culture are seen to have subjugated women, supported the norm that men are superior to the women and that women are supposed to be submissive to men in all areas. In many cultures, men are regarded as the head of the family and therefore assumes the role of breadwinner and authoritarian decision-making (Onislam, 2014).

Prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam, studies have shown that culture and tradition had enslaved women. Women were regarded as inferior to men. The laws of inheritance, betrothal, and divorce put men at an advantage. A woman passed from her father's sphere of authority usually without being consulted (McGuire, 2002)

An underage girl (under twelve years), she had no right to her own possessions, and the fruit of her labour or anything she found belonged to her father. If she was sexually violated, compensation money for indignity was paid to the father. A husband could divorce his wife without her consent for reasons ranging from her unchastity to her burning a meal, or to find another fairer than his own wife. Wife security was also threatened in some cases by the fact that polygamy was permitted. In the family the wife's duties include grinding flour, baking bread, washing clothes, breast-feeding the children for eighteen to twenty-four months, making the beds, working with wool, and washing her husband's face, hands and feet. The extent of a wife's household duties depended on how many servants she brought into the marriage.

Women have indeed faced discrimination compared to their male counterparts as men have continued to be seen as superior to women as men have dominated in the fields of religion, politics, economy and other aspects of life both in the Islamic and Christian dominated countries. However, gender discrimination is not Islamic. It is against the teaching and the preaching of Prophet Muhammed. Islam focuses on elevating the status of women who were culturally disadvantaged in a patriarchal society.

Also, the bible established the concept of the image of God in humanity which simply means that both women and men have a God-ordained dignity and are equally worthy of respect both by themselves and by others (Mottahari, 2001). The essence of this research work is to critically examine the stance of Islam and Christianity on gender equality.

II. CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

a. Gender Studies

Gender studies include several terms that define the framework in the study of human behaviour namely the construction of femininity, gender, gender roles, stereotypes, patriarchy, etc. These concepts help to analyze and understand the social differences based on gender in the society. As mentioned by (Judith Butler, 1990). Gender helps to study the differences in behaviour between men and women and to explore the basis of these differences as basically biological or as social constructions by the society. While Gender Discrimination according to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as adopted in 1979, is discrimination against a woman simply means any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedom (Raftari and Bahrami, 2011)

Gender refers to the division of people into male and female with their accompanying socially constructed roles, rules of behaviour, activities, and attributes. As a child grows, she/he learns these gender roles and how men or women in their

societies are expected to behave. In this sense, gender is not physiologically determined but socially constructed. It is extremely important since it also determines one's rights, responsibilities, and identity. Gender often constitutes the most important organizing principle in societies and it governs the processes of the production, consumption, and distribution of resources in societies.

Gender studies have often been understood as a discipline that focuses solely on the promotion of women. This, however, is a misconception. Even though the discipline usually concentrates on women as they mostly constitute the disadvantaged sex, its focus is rather on the promotion of gender equality. According to Pelle Billing, gender equality rests on the following five pillars, namely the recognition that: men and women have the same intrinsic value; men and women are equally valuable to society; men and women should have equal rights and responsibilities; the absence of discrimination on grounds of gender and the realization that equality need not translate into sameness (Pelle Billing, 2015).

b. Sex and Gender

The term 'sex' and 'gender' are concepts used by academicians, practitioners, and researchers to express the biological differences between 'male' and 'female' and social differences between 'man' and 'woman'. In general, the term 'sex' indicates the biological and physiological differences between males and females. Thus, a newborn is labeled as 'boy' or 'girl' depending on genital difference i.e. the biological difference between the sexes. Most people are born (exempt for third gender people) with one specific sex. However, individuals born with specific sex learn and respond according to the specific gender expectations and roles which they learn in due course of their life. Biological females are socialized to think, behave and play feminine roles whereas biological males socialized to think, behave and play masculine roles. As the feminist writer (Simone de Beauvoir, 1989) puts very correctly one is not born a man but becomes one, one is not born a woman but becomes one (Autumn, 1999).

Nyikos (2008) defines gender as a broad term that is often used to denote not only a biologically based dichotomous variable of sex that is male and female but also the socially constructed roles which are created by the different ways in which sexes are raised from birth and socialized within a certain culture. (Nyikos, 2008)

c. Masculinity and Femininity

Masculinity and femininity are concepts that indicate the social outcomes of being male or female. It associates different qualities and personalities of men and women and offers a certain advantage to men over women. The male body assumes certain traits and that characterize maleness or masculinity in our culture. Similarly, the female body assumes certain traits that characterize females or femininity in our culture. For example, 'strong' and 'tough' is associated with

masculine personality and 'weak' and 'soft' is associated with feminine personality (Raftari and Bahrami, 2011)

Similarly, the pink colour is treated as 'feminine' and a blue colour as masculine. There are numerous other qualities and traits that are grouped in a similar fashion as masculine and feminine. A person socially enters into gendered categories of masculine and feminine right from birth. Some of the feminist writers consider these differences as biological while others treat this as a social construct. In current literature, we can notice a constant shift in the conceptualization of human beings as controlled by wholly biological or social forces. Individual's expectations and lives have changed and their roles have broadened.

Feminism is a movement with the objective of making women gain some recognition politically, socially, economically, culturally, religiously, among others. Feminism is being defined as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim. These rights cover all spheres of life. Helen Chukwuma also states that Feminism means, therefore, a rejection of inferiority and striving for recognition. It seeks to give women a sense of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human beings. It aims at boosting the self-esteem and ego of women (Chukwuma, 2012).

d. Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a commonly used term in day to day conversation which denotes male prejudice against women or male domination over women. In simple terms, it refers to the total control of the eldest male member of the father over his family. However, in contemporary literature, feminist writers have used this term to explain the social system of male authority over women. The term patriarchy is not only a descriptive term but also used as an analytical category by feminism writers. It explains how different societies construct male authority and power and also explain critically the main components of authority and power in any social system. Patriarchy automatically privileges men over women such that women have little or no claims on material, sexual and intellectual resources of the society. In a patriarchal society, women have to struggle to be educated, to have property or to make choices regarding marriage and other aspects of life. Their life is controlled. Whereas, for men, these resources are a matter of right and can make choices that affect their lives. Thus, patriarchy is one of the most important causes of gender disparities in society (Rosemarie Tong 2009)

e. Gender Equalities

The important concept to understand the relationship between men and women is to distinguish between the sex concept and the gender concept. The understanding and distinction between both concepts are indispensable in the analysis in order to understand the social injustice problems faced by women. This is caused by the close relationship between gender differences and gender inequalities in terms of the

social injustice structure widely. An understanding of the gender concept is necessary to consider this concept has produced a gender analysis. (Rosemarie Tong 2009)

Noteworthy progress has been achieved in reducing gender inequality in the labour market over recent decades. Government, trade unions, businesses and women's organizations are continuously working to defeat the institutional and attitudinal discrimination that restricts women from economic, social and psychological growth. Unfortunately, inequality still persists in almost all fields and spheres of life. Gender Gap still exists even after various initiatives at national and international levels.

These differences appear in the functions and responsibilities of separation between men and women. The man has responsibilities to handle the matters outside the home and the woman has responsibilities to take care of the home that is known as the hunter and gatherer in traditional society the public sector and the domestic sector in the modern society. The gender differences in the subsequent process produced the gender role and it is considered that not cause problems, so it is never debated. However, the problem that needs to be debated is about the injustice structure that is inflicted by gender roles and gender differences.

Disclosure problems of women by using gender analysis often face the resistance both from the men and women. It can be caused such as: first, questioning the women's status is basically questioned the systems and structures that have been established. Second, discussing gender means that discuss the personal power relation which concerns and involves each individual. Therefore, understanding of the gender concept is a fundamental issue in order to clarify the equality relationship issues, positions, roles and responsibilities between men and women. Nyikos Martha (.2008)

III. THE STANCE OF ISLAM ON GENDER EQUALITY

Surveys have shown that discrimination against women is more rampant and widely accepted among many Muslim-majority countries. Muslim women have come to live under an extremely conservative patriarchal a gender-based system that thrived under the camouflage of Islam and Sharia in its most reactionary and intransigent form regarding Muslim women. In Islam dominated societies such as Sudan, Iran, Northern Nigeria, etc. Muslim women are striving not only to attain basic human needs and rights but using Islam to demand gender equality via a more liberal reading of the Holy Qur'an and Islamic jurisprudence, new civil liberties, and new relationships to the outside world (Afary, 2004). The problem regarding gender inequality within Islam is indicative of cultural practices and traditional patriarchal and male-dominated religious interpretations used to subjugate Muslim women for centuries. Although the Holy Qur'an posits neutral gender, patriarchal gender-based regimes have been successful in imposing their conservative, male-dominated, misogynistic religious interpretations to control and/or

disregard Muslim women in a changing and dynamic Islamic society (Mottahari, 2001).

It was discovered that inequalities against women is more pronounced in countries where Islam is the source of legislation. According to the WHO, levels of discrimination and violence against women in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions are at the highest, at 37% compared to the Western regions. In the realm of law and practice, Muslim women are still treated discriminatorily, especially with regard to personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

According to Rachman the oppression and discrimination against women are caused by a patriarchal system which was then prevalent in the MENA. It resulted in misogynist tendencies and inequality against women. The Islamic texts (Qur'an and Hadith were interpreted by Islamic men scholars to promote patriarchy ideology and culture. Where the men are superior and the women are inferior. Though Islam is a textually-based tradition, these texts have constantly undergone a process of interpretation and misinterpretations throughout history. This ill-reputed parochial-centric interpretation of the Quran as resulted in repression, subjugation, disenfranchisement, marginalization, and discrimination against Muslim women. The biased interpretations served as the basis for establishing laws in the Muslim-majority states. In formulating the legal system, the divine purpose of Allah must be preserved and ensured. (Awde, 2000).

According to Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir of the Fahmina Institute in Indonesia who disagrees with those who say Islam is inherently contradictory towards aims of gender justice, pointing out that even in the absence of religion, oppression of women would still exist in society because of its predated Islam (Alfitri, 2012). History informs us that the plight and condition of women before the emergence of Islam was very miserable. In Roman, Indian and other civilizations of the world, women were constantly subjected to all kinds of humiliations and hardships. They were, for instance, buried alive or were looked upon as a bad omen, some societies, for instance, did not welcome female newborns so they sometimes buried them alive. They were considered profitable goods, just like cattle or horses. This condition for women prevailed even into the pre-Islamic Arabia. Apart from this, women were not allowed to inherit either the daughter from her father nor the wife from her husband nor the mother from her son.

The Quran is considered to be the direct word of Allah and is thus incontestable in the eyes of orthodox Muslims and their content cannot be modified. Yet, even in the eyes of religious scholars, some passages are difficult to understand and not free from contradictions. Islamic reform theologians believe that the implementation of the texts of the Quran as it relates to gender equality could and should be newly interpreted in light of modern times. This applies in particular to questions

which first arose in the modern era as to how the traditional role of women in the context of a changing society is to be assessed.

Islam raised a woman to a position of spiritual equality with men. It held that man and woman complemented each other and were a means of mutual fulfillment. For instance, it is said:

“They are a garment for you and you are a garment for them.” (2:188)

“He it is who has created you from a single soul and made therefrom its mate so that the male might incline towards the female and find comfort in her.” (7:190)

In the Quran Men and women are equally spiritual before Allah. The women are as spiritual as the men and equal rewards await them with Allah according to their spiritual deeds (Awde, 2000) Therefore, Islam openly declares that men and women have equal status and value before God, and piety alone differentiates one an individual from another.

For instance, it is said:

“For men who submit themselves wholly to Allah, and women who submit themselves wholly to Him and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey Allah and women who obey Him, and men who are truthful and women who are truthful, and men who are steadfast and women who are steadfast, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their chastity and women who guard their chastity and men who remember Allah much and women who remember Him, Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.” (33:36)

“Allah will turn in mercy to believing men and believing women; Allah is Most Forgiving, Ever Merciful.” (33:74)

“Who so does good whether male or female and is a believer shall enter Paradise and they shall not be wronged a whit.” (4:125)

“The believers, men, and women are friends one of another. They enjoy good and forbid evil and observe Prayer and pay the Zakat, and obey Allah and His Messenger. It is these on whom Allah will have mercy. Surely, Allah is Mighty, Wise. Allah has promised the believers, men, and women, Gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide, and delightful dwelling places in Gardens of Eternity, and the pleasure of Allah, which is the greatest bounty of all. That is the supreme triumph.” (9:7172)

Islam teaches that in human men and women are equal before God and so they are equally obligated before Allah. Islam recognizes that while men and women have some physical differences, spiritually they enjoy absolute equality before God. The Quran and Sunnah are unequivocal in stating that one's gender will have absolutely no bearing on their reward or punishment in the next life (Awde, 2000). Women are first

and foremost human beings and all human beings deserve the same, kind and humane treatment. If women have shortcomings, it is enough to talk to them or advise them. Physically and mentally harassing should not be tolerated. Interpretations of Islamic sources as well as the Islamic jurisprudence itself have been and still are almost exclusively in the hands of male religious scholars. The effect is that the majority of the Islamic sources are interpreted in a patriarchal way. It goes against the Quran and the example of Prophet Muhammad. All woman-friendly ideas should not be suppressed, only to suit the purposes of certain ill-meaning men in the community who have misinterpreted the teachings of the Prophet for their personal aggrandizement. It should be noted that contemporary Islam is not problematic for gender equality per se, but that many Orthodox interpretations of Islam exhibit clear discriminatory elements. It is not the Qur'an itself, but the patriarchal interpretation of the secondary religious texts that is responsible for the subordination and subjugation of women. The Islamic teachings do not schematically distinguish between both but they are addressed as a whole because they complement each other. The quality of a man or woman's relationship with Allah is depended on his or her devotion and piety to Almighty Allah. Nowhere in the Qur'an state that one gender is superior to the other. Some mistakenly translate "*qiwamah*" responsibility for the family as superiority. The Qur'an makes it clear that the sole basis for *superiority* of any person over another is piety and righteousness not gender, color, or nationality. Islam truly reveals the gender equality perspective and does not desire injustice or violence in society. Islam is a source of empowerment, equality, and justice for women and not a source of oppression and discrimination.

According to Anwar the founder of the Musawah in 2009, it argued that Islam is the source of liberation to stop and silence governments, patriarchal authorities, and ideological non-state actors from who had used religion and the word of God to counter the demands for equality in the Muslim-majority states globally. Many feel they have to reject Islam to achieve gender justice but gender injustice predated Islam.

IV. THE STANCE OF CHRISTIANITY ON GENDER EQUALITY

The Bible is a product of many authors, writing on various issues in diverse social-cultural settings centuries ago as inspired by God. The Old Testament teaches that both men and women are created equally in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1-2). The concept of the image of God in humanity means both women and men have a God-ordained dignity and are equally worthy of respect both by themselves and by others. The concept of human dignity transcends any human policies, conventions, charters, acts or any other such legislative instruments. It is something that God brought into being. It is not a human invention. In Genesis 2:18, God Himself said that human solitary life was not good. He intended to create "a helper/helpmate meaning a suitable

friend who is equal with him and who could be of help to him. The word helper/helpmate conveys no implication whatsoever of female subordination or inferiority. But rather the word suitable denotes equality and adequacy.

However, seeing women as only a "servant" or "inferior" does not seem to be appropriate. "Equal" means "opposite" or "contrary to him". Therefore, the text does not mean that the creation of women/wives as "suitable servants" for men or their husbands, but as "equal helpers". For as the woman came from man, so also man is born of woman (Emarth, MargarethSittler, 1970). At creation, the woman was not created to be independent of the man, nor was the man created to be independent of the woman. A world where only men or only women exist would be unthinkable and even undesirable.

God created both man and woman implies that both are intrinsically worthy of respect. This respect is derived from being part of God's creation and particularly being made in God's image.

In the Bible, there is no particular writing saying that the assigned roles of women are only in domestic sectors. In the book of Genesis, the word "equal" does not mean that men have to be women or women have to be men. Women and men stand-alone, with different profiles and body structures, with their unique characteristics, but both are precious in God's sight.

Jesus Christ came to fulfill the law and brought freedom for humanity from sin, regardless of gender, status or national origin. In the new testament, there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free person, a man and a woman (Gal. 3:2628). Thus, every believer is an adopted child of God, an heir of God and co-heir with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:15-17). All believers are filled with the Holy Spirit and blessed with its gifts without discrimination on grounds of age, race, social status or gender (Acts 2:17-18). All believers irrespective of gender are called to be priests of God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9) all believers are ambassadors of God in the church and the world (2 Cor. 5:20). Jesus offered true liberty, and women especially have appreciated this liberation. This explained why many Roman women were drawn to Christianity before their spouses was.

The New Testament is frequently countercultural in celebrating the dignity of women. In a distinctly patriarchal context, Jesus uplifted women. He treated them with dignity and respect. Jesus upheld the dignity of women throughout his earthly ministry. For example, he chose to come into the world by means of Mary; Anna, the prophetess "spoke about [Jesus Christ] to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel" (Luke 2:36-38); he had concern for a Samaritan woman of questionable reputation (John 4:7-29). It was contrary to cultural conventions for Jews and Samaritans to interact (v. 9), let alone Jewish men and Samaritan women; he defended a "sinful woman" over against a respectable Pharisee (Luke 7:3650); he appeared to women first upon his

resurrection, and made them his first witnesses (Matt 28:8-10; Mark 9-11; John 20:10-18).

The Jesus movement (redemption) offered women a seat at the table and a place in the church. As Jesus restored the dignity of women, he did not sideline men. For example, Jesus came in the form of a man, and he chose twelve men as the inner circle of his disciples. Jesus did not come to strip men of their dignity but recognized both men and women as equally significant and worthy of respect. As a result of such social effects, the early church experienced persecution because Christians were seen as subverting the social order and the tradition of men.

Paul's restriction on women to speak in the church (1 Tim 2:12), should be seen in the light of the socio-cultural and religious background of his time. In the Greek and Roman public life, women were not allowed to participate and had to operate under their husbands' authority. Within this context, Paul's statement that a woman should learn (1 Tim 2:11), is quite remarkable. Mouton and Van Wolde explain that men were the public speakers and women were forbidden to learn and interpret the Torah. Immediately after this statement follows Paul's instruction that a woman is not permitted to teach (1 Tim 2:12). This command appears only once in the New Testament. (Tim 2:11). Mouton and Van Wolde conclude that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 cannot be seen as a universal statement on human dignity or as a moral prescription for all times and all places. It should rather be seen as an example of the dynamic processes in which the early faith communities struggled to understand God's will for their particular time while using the available language from their contexts (*Elna Mouton, (2017)*).

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Religion has been implicated by patriarchal fundamentalist as promoting gender inequality and discrimination against women. However, critically examining the holy books both the Quran and the Bible reveals that religious interpretation, rather than religion itself has masterminded the marginalization and dehumanization of women. This research identified that though gender discrimination is rampant in the Islamic states gender inequality is not Islamic as it is against the teachings of Prophet Muhammed. Also, Western Christian states are not free of gender discrimination. The teachings of Jesus as recorded in the bible restored dignity to women whose culture and traditions have equated to a domestic element. Conclusively, the obnoxious parochial fundamentalist interpretation of the holy books is the rationale behind women's marginalization, dehumanization and victimization.

Islam and Christianity are expected to pioneer a movement in the encouraging paradigm shift that will debunk and dispel the stereotype ill reputed patriarchal fundamentalist ideology of gender inequality, and improving the understanding of gender equality.

Practically, religions are expected to monitor and evaluate the program as well as develop policies and activities that are not biased. If there is interpretation of the verses of religions that the validity is doubt and that it hampers gender equality, this unfair interpretation needs to be clarified. Various methods and approaches to the renewal of the study of women in religions can be used for this purpose. The thing to strive for is how to restore women's humanity that they can grow into whole human beings.

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