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المقالات العربية

- 1 نظرية الأهلية عند الأصوليين وعلاقتها بالأمراض النفسية في علم النفس: دراسة تحليلية
(The Theory of Legal Capacity According to Scholar of Uṣūl and Its Relationship with Mental Disorders in Psychology: An Analytical Study)
أكمى مارياني بنت تون محمد
- 42 أهمية منهج ابن تيمية في الجمع بين النقل والعقل لتنسيق العلاقة بين الوحي والعلم
الحديث
(The Significance of Ibn Taymiyya's Method in Harmonizing Between Reason and Revelation to Regulate the Relationship Between Revelation and Modern Sciences)
محمد عصري بن صبري، محمد شهر الدين بن تيتيه، الأستاذ المشارك د. نعي محمد سيف
العزيمي بن نعي عبد الله
- 68 المعوقات النفسية لنهوض الأمة الإسلامية عند مالك بن نبي: (دراسة تحليلية)
(Psychological Obstacles to the Advancement of the Islamic Nation According to Malek Bennabi (Analytical study))
حاشور إدير، عبد العزيز برغوث، نعي محمد سيف العزيمي

English Articles

- Muslim Women’s Perceptions of Barriers to Sectorial Participation: Insights and Clarifications from an Islamic Perspective Based on a Qualitative Study in Ampara District, Sri Lanka** 92
Mohamed Sulthan Ismiya Begum, Indriaty Ismail and Zul’ Azmi Yakoob
- Anders Breivik’s Manifesto: Measuring Violence Indicator in Anti-Islamic Extremist Discourse** 115
Mariet Rosnaida Cabrera Cusi and Abdelaziz Berghout
- Representation of Islamic Thought and Civilisation at International Islamic University Malaysia Through Semiotics: An Analysis** 142
Mehwish Riaz and Thameem Ushama
- Transhumanism – Old Challenges in a New Garb?** 172
Anke Iman Bouzenita
- SDGs for Gender Equality: Is there a Clash between the Western and Islamic Perspectives** 194
Iffat Ara Nasreen Majid
- Balancing Tradition and Technology: Islam’s Approach to Modern Healthcare Across All Ages** 220
S. S. Meraj, Mohamad Fauzan Bin Noordin and Asadullah Shah
- Modes of Green Resistance in Mahmoud Darwish’s Poetry of Exile** 243
Hamoud Yahya Ahmed Mohsen, Tanja Jonid and Homam Altabaa

SDGs for Gender Equality: Is there a Clash between the Western and Islamic Perspectives

SDG untuk Keseksamaan Jantina: Adakah Pertembungan antara Perspektif Barat dan Islam

Iffat Ara Nasreen Majid*

Abstract

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) is the United Nations' goal to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. It has been set to ensure equality of rights of both genders. However, when we look at the targets in the goal, we find that they address the female gender exclusively. The United Nations is an institution led by Western ideologies, and the call for ensuring gender rights for all the member nations encompasses Islamic nations as well. The question therefore arises whether the targets are compatible with Islamic beliefs. If they do not comply then Islamic countries would not be motivated to realize them. In order to assess this aspect this paper looks at each of the targets in this goal and evaluates them from the perspective of the Quran, Sunnah and views of contemporary Islamic scholars. The analysis reveals a number of issues that are questionable from the Islamic perspective while there are areas where a change would be beneficial for Islamic communities if implemented with moderation.

Keywords: SDG 5, Clash, Western, Islamic, Perspectives.

Abstrak

SDG 5 untuk keseksamaan jantina telah ditetapkan oleh Pertubuhan Bangsa-Bangsa Bersatu untuk memastikan keseksamaan hak kedua-dua jantina. Walau bagaimanapun, apabila kita melihat

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sasaran dalam matlamat, kita mendapati bahawa mereka menangani jantina wanita secara eksklusif. Pertubuhan Bangsa-Bangsa Bersatu ialah sebuah institusi yang diketuai oleh ideologi Barat, dan seruan untuk memastikan hak jantina bagi semua negara anggota merangkumi negara-negara Islam juga. Oleh itu, timbul persoalan sama ada sasaran itu sesuai dengan kepercayaan Islam. Jika mereka tidak mematuhi maka negara-negara Islam tidak akan bermotivasi untuk merealisasikannya. Untuk menilai aspek ini, kertas kerja ini melihat setiap sasaran dalam matlamat ini dan menilainya dari perspektif Al-Quran, Sunnah dan pandangan ulama Islam kontemporari. Analisis ini mendedahkan beberapa isu yang boleh dipersoalkan dari perspektif Islam manakala terdapat bidang di mana perubahan akan memberi manfaat kepada masyarakat Islam jika dilaksanakan secara sederhana.

Kata Kunci: SDG 5, Pertembungan, Barat, Islam, Perspektif.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs set by the United Nations are more or less well known among the academics and researchers and member states of the United Nations. These SDGs are supposed to be a binding for all member countries to attend to in order to generate a sustainable system of development for the well-being of not only all human beings but also the whole planet earth. The underlying philosophy is to achieve prosperity in all sectors of life and in all the regions of the world including the environment around us. Of the 17 SDGs this paper focuses on the goals set by SDG 5 which calls for Gender Equality.

Although the term “gender” applies to both males and females a close look at the targets mentioned below reveal that the focus is on females in particular. It identifies areas which need to be addressed by the member countries in the form of targets with indicators to show how they are to be assessed. The list of all the targets under SDG 5 with their indicators below gives an overview of what is expected from the member countries.

Target 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.

Indicator 5.1.1: Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex.

Target 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.

Indicator 5.2.1: Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age.

Target 5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Indicator 5.3.1: Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18.

Indicator 5.3.2: Proportion of girls and women aged 15-49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting, by age.

Target 5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

Indicator 5.4.1: Percentage of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location

Target 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Indicator 5.5.1: Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments

Indicator 5.5.2: Proportion of women in managerial positions

Target 5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

<p>Indicator 5.6.1: Proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care</p> <p>Indicator 5.6.2: Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee women aged 15-49 access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education</p> <p>Target 5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.</p> <p>Indicator 5.a.1: (a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights bearers of agricultural land, type of tenure</p> <p>Indicator 5.a.2: Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women’s equal rights to land ownership and/or control</p> <p>Target 5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.</p> <p>Indicator 5.b.1: Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex.</p> <p>Target 5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.</p> <p>Indicator 5.c.1: Proportion of countries with systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality and women’s empowerment</p>

Table 1: A list of all the targets with their indicators under SDG 5

Among the member countries of the United Nations the Islamic countries in particular are a category by themselves. Though vastly diversified in their languages, cultures, eating habits and traditions due to their geographical locations, they are essentially unified by the religious values and principles set by the Quran that gives them the guidelines for conducting their personal, social, legal, and every other aspect of life. The United Nations on the other hand is governed by a majority of non-Muslim nations whose values are predominantly Western and secular. It

is therefore worthwhile to analyse these targets in order to ascertain to what extent they are attainable for an Islamic country or whether there are issues that need to be redefined from an Islamic perspective. This study therefore aims to identify the targets or elements entrenched in the targets in the SDG 5 that are not compatible with the guidelines given in the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh) and therefore problematic for the Islamic countries to implement.

Analysis of the SDGs from the Islamic Perspective

In this section each SDG 5 target will be discussed and evaluated to what extent they are in conformity with the guidelines in the Quran and if there is a gap between the way the Islamic and Western non-Islamic communities view them.

Target 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.

Indicator 5.1.1: Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex.

If we analyse this first target, we find that it is very broad and unspecified. The indicator however, points out that the requirement is to “promote, enforce and monitor equality on the basis of sex.” The problem that arises here is - what constitutes “equality”. Although the Islamic societies are guided by the Quran, there is a great deal of disagreement among Islamic scholars regarding the interpretation of a number of the Quranic verses. The most contentious of these verses is the following verse:

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in the husband’s absence what Allah has ordered them to guard” (4:34)

Traditionalists like Tabari and Ibne Kathir consider men as superior to women. According to Tabari men are superior due to the fact that only men had become Caliphs and are allowed to go for jihad, while in the

religious arena only men can lead prayers and give adhan. In the home front they are the ones who are supposed to provide for the family, give dower and have the right to give “talaq”. They are thus intellectually and physically the stronger sex. Ibne Kathir also considers men superior on the same grounds and further contends that all prophets were always men. The modernists on the other hand refute the claims of the traditionalists and contend that the differences are only biological and that Allah has not made women intellectually deficient in any way. They quote the verses:¹¹

“And whoever does righteous good deeds, male or female, and is a believer such will enter paradise and not the least injustice, even the size of a Naqira will be done to them.” (4:124)

For Allah the status of a person is decided by his or her deeds and not by the sex. Others quote:

“the believers, both men and women are allies of one another. They enjoin good, forbid evil, establish prayer, pay Zakah and obey Allah and His messenger. Surely Allah will show mercy to them”(9:71)

Men and women are thus counterparts and “allies” of each other and are considered equal in the eyes of Allah. The new generation female exegetes and scholars of the Quran like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Laleh Bakhtiar feel that the Quran has been interpreted from a patriarchal perspective in the absence of female mufassirs until now. Wadud shows how many words in Arabic that apply to both genders have been given a single meaning only by most mufassirs from the male perspective. Asma Barlas and Neemat Hafiz Barazangi also find a systematic misinterpretation of the Quran due to the way the texts are interpreted. Barazangi also insists that a distinction should be made between Quranic Sharia which is based completely on the Quran whereas Islamic Sharia is based on male interpretations. According to her: *“it is fair to reiterate that the true message of Islam concerning women has rarely been practiced for the past 14 centuries because most*

¹ All translated quotations from the Quran have been taken from Khan, Mohammad Mohsin; Al-Hillali, Mohammad Taqiuddin INTERPRETATION OF THE MEANING OF THE NOBLE QURAN IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, Darussalam Publishers and Distributors, 1998.

representatives of Islam are based on the reported traditions (hadith) without being corroborated by the Quran” (p-270)².

Female rights in Islam are an important religious issue that had been discussed in the Quran 1400 years ago while the West has taken it up only recently in the 21st century. Moreover, in Christianity if we look at the Bible, females are portrayed as perpetrators of the original sin and are the cause of the fall of man from heaven. The female is thus a symbol of human weakness. We find this attitude reflected in numerous films and novels where misery or misfortune befalls due to female characters either in trying to protect her or because of her insensitivity. Though female rights is now a secular issue in the West, the religious portrayal of the female in Christianity has also been very negative as opposed to their positive image in Islam. The Quran clearly states:

“then Shaitan whispered suggestions to them both in order to uncover that which was hidden from them of their private parts”(7:20)“So he misled them with deception.” (7:21)

The burden of original sin is thus not on the female but both the male and the female. The notion of gender discrimination in Islamic societies is hence not the same as in non-Islamic societies. As Abdul Moten puts it: *“Gender equality means that men’s and women’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will be the same irrespective of the difference in sex. Gender equity means fairness of treatment for women and men according to their respective needs” (p-40)³.*

Other female Islamic scholars like Zeenat Kausar (2019) emphasize that males and females can never be the same as they are biologically different. She notes: *“Islam recognizes the physical and biological differences between men and women. But these differences between men and women do not make them unequal and also do not make them identical, rather different” (p-72)⁴* Hence, like Moten she also

² Barazangi, Nimat Hafeez “Why Muslim Women are re-interpreting The Quran: A transformative Scholarship activism” in Researchgate on line, 2010

³ Moten, Abdul Rashid ‘The Convergence between Maqasid al- Shariah and Sustainable Development Goals’, in Abdul Moten (ed.) Spirituality and Sustainability: Experiences of the Islamic University Malaysia, IIUM Press, 2020.

⁴ Kausar, Zeenath Islamic Action Plan for women’s empowerment: An Islamic Alternative to Beijing Platform For Action, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 2019.

proposes “equity” as the more appropriate word from the Islamic perspective.

The idea of gender equality in Islam thus, does not refer to engaging women in everything that the men do because they have been made biologically and physiologically different. For Islamic scholars the more acceptable idea is “equity” rather than “equality”. **This fundamental difference in the understanding of equality changes the nature of discrimination and the rights that are to be achieved.**

Target 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.

Indicator 5.2.1: Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age.

The target mentioned above mentions violence not only in the public but also the private spheres and is an issue that has been directly addressed in multiple places in the Quran. Regarding sexual violence it says:

“and force not your maids to prostitution if they desire chastity, in order that you may make a gain in the goods of this worldly life.” (24:33)

“And those who accuse chaste women and produce not four witnesses flog them with 80 stripes and reject their testimony forever. They indeed are the Fasiqun”. (24:4)

Islam not only prohibits men from taking advantage of helpless women but considers even slandering of innocent women a sin punishable by flogging (a mode of punishment common during the time of revelation).

Within the private sphere of the home also women are to be safeguarded. The Quran states:

“It is not lawful for you to inherit women by force, Nor may you treat them harshly so that you can make off with part of what you have given them,

unless they commit an act of flagrant indecency. Live together with them correctly and courteously. And if you dislike them, it maybe that you dislike a thing and Allah brings through it a great deal of good. (4:19)"

"And those who accuse their wives but have no witnesses except themselves let the testimony of one of them be 4 testimonies." (24:6) And the fifth should be of the invoking of the curse of Allah on him if he be of those who tell a lie" (24:7)

Making false accusations against own wives is thus also considered a sin punishable by the curse of Allah which is a tremendous thing for a believer. However, an essential difference from the western perspective is that the code of conduct in Islam is clearly defined for peace and harmony within the family. In a patriarchal society the woman is to be obedient to her husband and if there is difference of opinion tolerance is advised. From the perspective of the Maqasid-e-Sharia, the ultimate goal of rules in the human society is the preservation of humanity through maintaining peace and order.

For self-preservation a woman is advised to protect herself by not making herself attractive to the other sex through exposure of adornments or to be too physically revealing. This is evident from the following Quranic lines:

"O prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of your believers to draw their cloaks all over their bodies. That will be better, that they should be known so as not to be annoyed. ..." (33:59)

This covering of body as a preventive measure is unfortunately seen more as a confinement and restriction for females by the West than something positive as a means of avoiding violence and disrespect. According to Mohammad Ashmawi, who is considered in the Arab world as the leading voice of liberal Islam:

"the real meaning of the veil lies in thwarting the self from straying towards lust or illicit sexual desires and keeping away from sinful behavior without having to conjoin this with particular form of clothing ad attire. As for modesty and lack of exhibitionism in clothing and outward appearance, this is something that is imperative and any wise person would agree with

it and any decent person would abide by it” Ashmawi (1994b. 25 in Mahmood 2005b 160)⁵.

This perspective of self- protection through covering themselves up to avoid violence is totally absent in Western thought. Unfortunately, over-conservative Muslims have on the contrary turned this positive aspect into a negative one by completely confining their females in their homes which in turn becomes a human rights issue.

Within the marital life, one form of domestic violence is beating up the spouses. Critics of Islam have pointed out that Islam permits wife beating and quote the following verse as evidence:

“As to those women on whose part you see ill-conduct, admonish them, refuse to share their beds beat them, but if they return to obedience seek not against them means”(4:34)

Modern exegetes of the Quran like Laleh Bakhtiar (2018)⁶ point out how the verse 4:34 of the Quran has been misinterpreted to allow men to beat their wives. According to her the way the word “daraba’ has been used in the Quran- the meaning it embodies is - ‘abandon’ which she shows in relation to the sunnah of the Prophet which reveals that he never ever beat up any of his wives but actually abandoned them temporarily when he was offended with them. She claims this to be the strongest proof of the intended meaning of the word as the Prophet would never go against the word of God in any of his actions. She makes a detailed linguistic study of the verse and comments: “... *the misinterpretation is not in the Arabic verse of the Quran, the eternal word of God revealed to the Prophet, instead it is how commentators over the centuries have interpreted the Word of God that is the issue*”. (p)⁷. Mahmud and Shah (2008) also express similar opinion when they comment: “*the most purposive interpretation/normative-law affirming stand was expressed by Al-Muzani. He, among other things held that the beating provision cannot be reconciled with the practice and exhortation of the prophet in giving wives the best of treatment. Hence it is no longer a*

⁵ Mahmood, Saba “Agency, Gender and Embodiment” in Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, Princetown, 2005.

⁶ Bakhtiar, Laleh. “The Sublime Quran: The Misinterpretation Of Chapter 4 Verse 34”, in European Journal of Women’s Studies, Davis, Kathy (ed.) Vol. 18, Issue 4. 2018

⁷ Ibid

law” (p-76)⁸. As the importance of the Sunnah of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) in Islam is next only to the Quran, it can be emphasized here that his behaviour with his wives is the role model to be followed by the Muslims. Negotiation and tolerance have been greatly emphasized in the Quran to make married life peaceful.

Another important term in the indicator of this target is the use of the word “partner” instead of “spouse” or “husband”. It may be mentioned here that Islam does not recognize any relationship outside marriage and in fact considers it a great sin. This is clearly expressed in the following lines:

“The fornicatress and the fornicator, flog each of them with a hundred stripes. Let not pity withhold you in their case, in a punishment prescribed by Allah, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a party of the believers witness the punishment” (24:2)

Marriage is considered a sacred religious institution in Islam and rights and responsibilities are bestowed on the spouses who are **legally married**. Contrary to this, as mentioned before, the Western society has done away with marriage as a religious institution and thereby resorted to being partners without any religious or legal binding. Such relationships are not only not recognized or protected by Islamic laws but are rather severely condemned in Islam.

The family as a unit has been given special significance in Islam as a place for generating proper social behaviour and sense of responsibility of both the parents and the children. It is the nurturing ground of moral and social values that are essential for the survival of a society and realization of human rights. It is therefore protected by strict punishments against adultery and slander which threaten the sanctity of this most important institution. EL-Mesawi et al (2022) note how the Shariah is not only concerned with the *“biological survival and physical continuation of mankind but is ... equally concerned about lineal association and identity of offspring through the regulation of marriage*

⁸ Mahmud, Mek Wok and Shah, Sayed.Sikandar, “MUSLIM WOMEN ISSUES IN THE FAMILY: TOWARD AN ENLIGHTENED FIQH CONSTRUCTION, in Al-Shajarah, ISTAC,IUM. (2008) Vol.13. number 1.

and family. Hence the importance of hisbul- nasab which contemplates a very critical purpose in human social life and existence.” (p-47)⁹.

This protective stand towards the family is in stark contrast with the Western world where the family is increasingly turning into a secular institution without any religious or legal binding. In the absence of such a binding, it has become a very unstable institution generating mistrust and a sense of insecurity among both the spouses and the progeny due to the loss of the sense of responsibility towards each other. Consequently, there is an increasing degradation of relationships and sense of belongingness in the society at large.

Target 5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Indicator 5.3.1: Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18.

Indicator 5.3.2: Proportion of girls and women aged 15-49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting, by age.

Many of the ills in the current Muslim world emerge from a disregard for or ignorance of the proper knowledge of the Quran and Sunnah. Clear guidelines are given in the Quran regarding who is eligible for marriage in an Islamic kinship system and a great importance is given on consent. In this context it may be mentioned that in many Islamic countries that are conservative in nature, unlike in Western cultures, marriages are arranged by the guardians of the females as free mixing among sexes is not the tradition. Although the educated younger generation these days who are much influenced by Western cultures choose to select their own partners in life, the general trend in traditional Muslim families is for marriages to be arranged. However, to quote Al-Faruqi (2012) here:

⁹ El-Masawi, M, El-Tahir, Faris W.F, Al-Hidabi, Dawood.A.Yahya-Al Hidabi, Regrounding Human Spiritual Morality and safeguarding Mankind in Maqasid al-Shariah, IIMU, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2022.

“There must be two adults consenting in total freedom to marry each other. The minor may be married by his or her parents but he or she has the full right, upon reaching adulthood, to consummate the marriage contract or to reject it. Even if the marriage had already been consummated, Islam gives the right to either partner, upon reaching adulthood, to dissolve it if they wish.” (p-183)¹⁰.

It may be mentioned here that many pre-Islamic pagan Arab cultures totally ignored the opinions of the females regarding marriage which is evident by traditions such as the claiming of a widow as a spouse by throwing a man’s cloak on her after the death of the husband. However, Islam strictly imposed the need for consent of the female. Mention maybe made here of the case of a young girl who came to the Prophet (pbuh) and told him that her father had married her off against her will. The Prophet (pbuh) gave her the choice to either stay married or walk away from it¹¹ (Abu Dawud). In two other cases he simply annulled the marriage due to lack of consent of the girl who was compelled to marry. Hence forced marriage is very much un-Islamic and Islamic societies in which it is prevalent need very much to be educated.

Regarding female genital mutilation or FGM which is widely practiced in Somalia, Egypt, Sudan, Sierra Leone Eritrea, Gambia, Ethiopia, The Maldives, some parts of Indonesia, and by the Bohra community in India, it needs to be mentioned that this is a practice not mentioned anywhere in the Quran. For that matter neither is male circumcision. But circumcision was a tradition practiced by the Pagan tribes in Arabia. It is an action that was imposed on the Jews who perform it as a religious ritual, but female circumcision has origins in Pharaonic rituals. The Wikipedia states that while the male circumcision is beneficial for the males on hygienic grounds as proven by research, in case of females it is essentially done to reduce their sexuality. This aspect in fact stands in contrast to the general principles of Islam where the physical and sexual needs of both the spouses are well recognized. This is evident in the narration by Abu Huraira¹² who mentioned that once when the prophet was going on an expedition he said to his followers:

¹⁰ Al- Faruqi, Ismail “The Muslim Family” in Essential writings Ismail-Al Faruqi ,(2012) selected and edited by Imtiyaz Yusuf, Shanandoah USA in collaboration with Islamic Book Trust, Malaysia, 2021.

¹¹ (As reported in Ibne Majah 1952, hadith 1873, and Sunan Abu Dawood).

¹² (As mentioned in the tafsir of Muhsin Khan and Al- Hilali (1998), p-245.

“anyone who has married a woman and wants to consummate the marriage and has not done so yet should not accompany me:” Although FGM is practiced in Islamic communities in the above-mentioned countries it is not an Islamic ritual at all but merely a tradition, with very negative health issues for the females. The Quran says: *“Indeed in the messenger of Allah (Muhammad) you have a good example to follow for him who hopes for Allah and the last day and remembers Allah much”.* (33:21)

Female circumcision was never practiced in the household of the prophet and thus cannot be an Islamic ritual. Widespread awareness needs to be raised against such practices in order to break such pagan traditions.

Islam acknowledges the need for sex in but strongly recommends marriage as a deterrent to illegal sexual behaviour in young males and females, totally prohibiting free physical union. Many parents therefore consider it their religious responsibility to see their offspring married off at the proper age (decided upon by the respective societies they live in) which is in stark contrast with Western societies where sexual behaviour between unmarried couples has no religious or moral restriction. However, child marriage has been found to be harmful for the physical and mental health of the female child and needs to be discouraged through proper awareness development.

Target 5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

Indicator 5.4.1: Percentage of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location

The traditional Islamic societies divide the internal and external social spheres between the males and the females. In the traditionalist view the husband is responsible for providing food clothing and shelter while the woman is responsible for looking after his children and his

household. Islam endows value on the services of a wife by giving her the right to receive dower from her husband as a gift or incentive to marry him. However, a distinctive tension is evident in modern Muslim societies regarding gender role distribution. Ozbay (2016)¹³ reports research done on Turkish society by Sunar (2002) Sunar and Okman Fisek (2005) who found that educated men from urban middle class families marry wives having similar social backgrounds and values and attempt to form modern middle-class families based on more egalitarian relations and Western lifestyles. According to them: *“To be traditional or Western is a discursive construction that operates as a distinguishing mark in Turkish society. For this social cohort religious conservatism connotes traditionalism and backwardness. Their modern lifestyle based on Western ideals and values is consciously detached from religious conservatism”* (P-101).¹⁴

A World Values survey conducted in Turkey in 2012 found that 45% men who have children consider religious faith an important quality that their children can be encouraged to learn at home. But Ozbay (2016)¹⁵ found a disparity regarding this issue in the opinions of the fathers who were interviewed by him as they did not want to adhere to traditional practices which they associate with religion because they consider religious values a threat to their lifestyles and values. The author thus found a distinct struggle of values between pious and religious groups. The modernized generation resents leaving their children in the care of their grandparents as their values do not match. The author reports that the consequence of this practice is that highly educated females like engineers, bankers and academics etc. have to sacrifice their careers and stay at home to care for their children which is considered a necessary sacrifice by this particular class. In this respect mention needs to be made of Mohammad Qutb who notes that:

“...woman in Islamic countries is generally backward with neither respect nor grace.....she is made to surrender more than she is given; and seldom rises above the level of a purely impulsive existence . This is also true but may we ask: who is responsible for this state of affairs? Does Islam or its teachings have anything to do with it? The fact is that the miserable plight

¹³ In Ozbay, Cenk “Men are less Manly, Women are more Feminine” in Gender and Sexuality in Muslim Cultures ed. Gul Ozygen, Routledge, 2016.

¹⁴ Ozbay, Cenk “Men are less Manly, Women are more Feminine” in Gender and Sexuality in Muslim Cultures ed. Gul Ozygen, Routledge, 2000.

of the eastern woman is the result of the economical, social, political and psychological conditions prevailing in the East today". (p124-125).¹⁵

In another study conducted on the gender disparity issues in Muslim countries Nezhahat Kucuk (2016) found that:

"The gender issue in the Muslim world is more complicated and major factors vary across countries. Institutions, cultural values, exposure to other cultures, oil, and religion do all play a role. Empirical findings do not support the simplification of gender inequality as an issue that is only linked to Islam in the Muslim countries, and doing so does not contribute to our understanding of the complicated gender dynamics in these countries" (p-229)¹⁶.

It is very unfortunate that 'modern' Muslims following Western lifestyles should consider Islamic values as backward and old fashioned. The Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh) shows that despite his heavy social responsibilities he used to help his wives at home.¹⁷ Local traditions are being continued in the name of Islam in most regions of the world overshadowing a proper understanding of its philosophy. True Islamic values do not undermine the dignity and needs of any gender but in fact calls for observing them as a requirement of a religion that is embedded in an equitable lifestyle. As the following verse says:

"Wives have rights corresponding to those which husbands have, in equitable reciprocity"

(Sura 2:229)

Target 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Indicator 5.5.1: Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local administrations

Indicator 5.5.2: Proportion of women in managerial positions

¹⁵ Qutb, Mohammad, Islam the Misunderstood Religion, Markazi Maktaba Islami New Delhi, 2000 Qutb, Mohammad, Islam the Misunderstood Religion, Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers, New Delhi, 2000.

¹⁶ Küçük, Nezhahat "GENDER INEQUALITY IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES: MYTHS VERSUS FACTS" in Acta Oeconomica, (2016) Vol. 66 (2), pp. 213-231, 2016, DOI:10.1556/032.2016.66.2.2

¹⁷ As reported by Ayesha (wife of the Prophet)

So far public life is concerned, the Quran does not give any clear guidelines regarding the roles of females. This allows for a great deal of controversies regarding to what extent women can partake in the external political affairs. There are clear guidelines regarding how the wives of the prophet are to conduct themselves, which are taken by the traditionalists as exemplary role models for all Muslim females. However, Cheema (2022) comments that: *“the participation of a number of companions of the prophet under the leadership of Ayesha in the battle of the camel problematizes the version proffered by the traditionalists”* (p-130)¹⁸. He also points out that Islamic countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan have been led by female rulers of the state without any objection raised by their constitutions. He further observes that:

“It is interesting to note that Mawdudi extended his unconditional support along with many scholars to Fatima Jinnah (sister of Mohammad Ali Jinnah) against General Ayub in 1960s as a presidential candidate in Pakistan. Another religio-political party namely Jamiat-e-Ulama Islam remained in hands and gloves with Pakistan People’s party under the leadership of Nusrat Bhutto (widow of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto) during martial Law of General Ziaul Huq and again in 1990’s it became part of the government under the partnership of Benazir Bhutto.” (p- 131).¹⁹

Owoyemi & Mumtaz Ali (2011) studied the viewpoints of different scholars of Islam who feel that it is necessary to introduce reform in Islam. Regarding the status of females in Islam they quote one of the progressive Muslim females Gwendolyn Zohara Simmon who comments:

“When women are going on space missions and walking on the moon, flying F-16s, performing heart transplants, and so on and so on, can we continue talking and preaching about woman being created from a rib and that this has determined that she is too emotional and mentally fragile to work outside the home or to pursue a meaningful career? The facts on the

¹⁸ Cheema, Shahbaz Ahmed. “Women’s status in Islam: An Analysis from the Perspective of Private and Public Spheres” in *The Asian Yearbook of Humanities and Humanitarian Law* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004520806_007.

¹⁹ Ibid

ground dispute these contentions, resolutely. We must let these myths go". (p-335).²⁰

Although traditionalists would have us believe that females are not allowed to take part in public life the above views of Islamic scholars reveal that this SDG target should not be an issue for Islamic countries.

Target 5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

Indicator 5.6.1: Proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care

Indicator 5.6.2: Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee women aged 15-49 access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education

Issues related to sex are discussed in many verses of the Quran and the Prophet Mohammad is known to have given instructions regarding improper sexual behaviours as well as discouraging intercourse during the period of menstruation, which go a long way in protecting the females. Although, no clear indication is given regarding who takes the decisions regarding children, the general principal reiterated in the Quran in different verses is of taking decisions through mutual consultation.

"...who respond to their lord, establish prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and donate from what we have provided for them." (42:38)

In many Islamic societies there is an age-old tradition of giving preference to the male offspring. Allah clearly says in the Quran:

²⁰ Owoyemi, Musa Yusuf & Ali, Mohammad Mumtaz "The Compatibility of Islam with Modernity: A Brief Discourse on Muslim Reformists' Response" in Journal Of Islam In Asia, Spl. Issue, No.2 June 2011.

“And when the news of (the birth of) a female child is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark and he is filled with inward grief. (16:58) He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonour or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision.” (16:59)

This is a reference to the extreme behaviour in pagan times when female newborns used to be buried alive. There are also numerous instances in Islamic societies in current times as well where women have been divorced or faced violence by their spouses for not being able to produce a male child. The Quran gives very clear messages in this regard as well:

“To Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He creates what he wills. He bestows female (offspring) upon whom He wills, and bestows male (offspring) upon whom He wills” (42.49) “Or He bestows both males and females, and he renders barren whom He wills.”(42:50)

These verses clearly indicate that the woman is not to be discriminated for her ability or inability to produce a child.

However, the reference to ‘reproductive rights’ in this target is a problematic one. According to the claims of the UN Working group:

“The decision as to whether to continue a pregnancy or terminate it, is fundamentally and primarily the woman’s decision, as it may shape her whole future personal life as well as family life and has a crucial impact on women’s enjoyment of other human rights. Accordingly, and following the good practice of many countries, the Working Group has called for allowing women to terminate a pregnancy on request during the first trimester.”(p-5)²¹

²¹ Women's Autonomy, Equality and Reproductive Health in International Human Rights: Between Recognition, Backlash and Regressive Trends, UN Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice¹, October 2017 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-women-and-girls/womens-autonomy-equality-and-reproductive-health>

The SDGs for Gender Equality: Is there a Clash between the Western and Islamic Perspectives

213

As mentioned before, the Quran repeatedly insists on taking decisions through mutual consultation. Verse 61:12 clearly states that only those women deserve mercy of Allah who do not kill their children.

“O Prophet! When believing women come to you and pledge themselves not to associate in worship any other thing with God, not to steal, or commit adultery or kill their children or indulge in slander intentionally, inventing falsehood and not to disobey you in that which is right then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them their sins, for God is Forgiving and Merciful”.

Some rights groups have claimed that abortion should be considered legal in special cases like rape, medical threat to the mother if the pregnancy continues, mental health of the mother etc.

The term “reproductive right” therefore is an important term in this target and requires careful interpretation for Islamic societies.

Target 5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.

Indicator 5.a.1: (a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights bearers of agricultural land, type of tenure

Indicator 5.a.2: Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women’s equal rights to land ownership and/or control

Female rights to property were an issue that had been addressed in detail from the beginning of the advent of Islam. Numerous verses in the Quran make it very clear that sustenance and maintenance of the females have to be ensured by the males in the society. As revealed by the following verses:

“And those of you who die and leave behind wives should bequeath for their wives a year’s maintenance and residence without turning them out, but if they leave, there is no sin on you for that which they do of themselves, provided it is honorable. (2:240)

“Allah commands you as regards your children’s (inheritance): to the males a portion of two females if only daughters two or more, their share is two thirds of the inheritance if only one, her share is a half...” (4:11)

“Believers, if you marry believing women, and divorce them before the marriage is consummated, you are not required to observe a waiting period: make provision for them and release them in an honorable way.” (33:49)

“They ask you for instruction. Say, God instructs you concerning the indirect heirs. If a person dies childless but has a sister, she receives half of what he leaves, and he is her heir. If there are two sisters they receive two thirds of what he leaves. If there are brothers and sisters the share of each male shall be that of two females. God makes things clear to you so that you will not go astray. God has knowledge of all things”(4:176)

“...In that which you leave, their (your wives) share is a fourth if you leave no child, but if you leave a child, they get an eighth of that which you leave after payment of legacies that you may have bequeathed or debts. (4:12)

“from what is left by parents and those nearest related there is a share and a share for women whether the property be small or large, a determinate share”(4:7)

All the above quoted verses illustrate that Islam ensures that women are not left without inheritance, whether married or unmarried, unlike other religions as in Hinduism where the female child is not given anything by Hindu law of inheritance. In addition to these laws of inheritance numerous verses also address situations arising from divorce and how the rights of both the males and females are to be ensured so that no party is deprived.

Unfortunately, despite such clearly delineated provisions Taslima Mansoor, a Professor of Law in Bangladesh, found in a study (2001) that: *“95% of the women think it is wrong to ask for their rightful share, 80% of women erroneously believe that their property shall be destroyed if taken from their brothers.” (p-48)²².*

²² Mansoor, Taslima “Gender in law: Five decades of struggle for empowerment”, The Dhaka University Studies, Part F Vol.XII(1) 1-16 June, 2001.

The SDGs for Gender Equality: Is there a Clash between the Western and Islamic Perspectives

215

Hence, mere provision by law is not sufficient unless awareness regarding rights of each sex is ensured. **For Muslims societies 'equal rights' does not imply equal amounts but the proportions set own by the Quran where the reasons have been discussed in detail.** But depriving the females of their hereditary rights is considered a sin and it is mandatory for the males to ensure that they get their due amount.

Target 5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

Indicator 5.b.1. Proportion of individuals who own a mobile phone, by sex.

Shofyuddin and Roin (2023) observe that as women are intellectually no less than males, they have high potentials but unfortunately become marginalized due to lack of education. They observe that: *“women must continue to be given opportunities to participate in the development process, access proper education etc. even so, the community must also be aware that the role of women in development cannot be separated from their role as wives/ mothers in the family environment, namely as housewives”*(p-182)²³. Although technology is seen as having a wide scope of positive advantages one aspect that is mostly ignored is the philosophical one of overdependence. Yaqub Chaudhury (2020) refers to the concerns raised by Ziauddin Sardar in 1988 regarding the philosophical impact of information technology. He observes: *“A key concern of this work was to draw attention to the significant challenges for the Muslim world of what was then being heralded as an ‘information revolution,’ which could pose a risk*

²³ Shofyuddin, Ahmed and Roin, Usman “Implementation of Islamic Education learning based on Gender at SMP Plus at Fatimah Bojonegoro in International Journal of Graduate of Islamic Education, (2023) <https://doi.org/10.37567/ijgie.v4i1.1979>.

to the very 'physical and cultural survival' of Muslim communities since 'the information age may well turn out to be a new age of colonialism'(p-643).²⁴

He further notes that: "The question of whether or how digital transformation is affecting globalization and it is leading to cultural homogeneity (Castells 2009, p-117) fueling global tensions, improving the visibility of foreign cultures or enabling new forms of cultural expression remains subject to scholarly debate" (Barassi 2017, p-4)²⁵. Thus, while access to modern technology initially promises greater access to the world at large, issues of the nature and impact of the access need to be addressed by respective Islamic countries or as Sardar warns this could be an act of signing in to cyber colonialism of the West where Western values seep in eroding the Islamic ones.

Conclusion

The focus of this article was to take a close look at the Sustainable Development Goal of Gender Equality (SDG 5) in order to assess to what extent the targets set in it are compatible with Islamic philosophy, and whether there are issues that Islamic communities would need to address. Although most of the targets corroborate guidelines already given in the Quran, most of them are overshadowed partially by Western ideology and need to be critically analysed to be acceptable to Islamic communities. Kauser (2019) rightly points out that unless social roles are taken to be based on a religious and moral principle it becomes: "...lopsided and imbalanced because its entire focus is confined to material development and political development at the cost of moral and spiritual values. According to the Islamic perspective, this kind of development of women is not development, rather de-development" (p-78).²⁶

The call for drawing attention to these goals however, is an important one as moral and ethical values have become greatly eroded in the Islamic world largely due to the materialistic worldview of the modern geo-

²⁴ Chaudhury, Mohammad Yaqub "Initial Considerations for Islamic Digital Ethics" in *Philosophy and Technology* 33 (2020), 639-6. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-020-00418-3>

²⁵ Barassi, Veronica. "Activism on the Web: Everyday struggles against digital capitalism" Routledge, 2015, edition 2017. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315870991>.

²⁶ Kausar, Zeenath *Islamic Action Plan for women's empowerment: An Islamic Alternative to Beijing Platform For Action*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 2019.

political system and ignorance of the modern man regarding true Islamic values. It is true that the females in this world are greatly discriminated but it is also true that Islamic countries need to decide what kind of equality Muslim women need to have to uphold the true Islamic spirit instead of blindly emulating the women of a Godless society represented by the Western world.

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**The SDGs for Gender Equality: Is there a Clash between the
Western and Islamic Perspectives**

219

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