A Review of “Islam, Masculinity and Poverty”
Inspired by:


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Front Cover
Photo Reference Damon Lynch (http://damonlynch.net)
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Femin Ijtihad stands for "critical thinking" of gender notions and laws. Its aim is to research and share relevant and simplified academic scholarship on Muslim women’s rights, to activists and organizations working at the grassroots. Over the years, academic ideas and theories have flourished the re-understanding of women’s rights. F.I.’s Research Programs focuses on locating academic and activist articles, book chapters, or NGO-produced reports from a variety of disciplines (legal, theological, historical, anthropological, sociological, political science, and other social science methods) that analyze arguments on notions of exegesis of Islamic texts; contemporary legal reforms in Muslim-majority societies; various forms of Muslim women’s resistance; Muslim women in literature; and programs that empower men as partners in women’s rights efforts.
Islam, Masculinity and Poverty

1. How can spirituality be important for Muslim women’s rights?

The emergence of Spiritual Muslim Feminism, which focuses not just on the role of women but also what it is to be a woman, has increased women’s ability to embrace a compassionate form of Islam over the restrictive, fear-mongering versions. Spirituality can enable women to adopt a kind and more holistic viewpoint to their work ethic. Spirituality can be used to emphasize that all members of society should show kindness and patience and promote a woman’s freedom as God gave her free will. A spiritual approach towards women emphasises a woman’s agency and womanhood itself rather than taking a narrow approach which only views women through their roles as a wife, mother or daughter. The spiritual approach sees a woman as a woman rather than through her relationships.

2. What is Masculinity?

There are different types of masculinity. Masculinity can be an attitude towards life, society and people. Masculinity is influenced by the social-political and economic structure of family and community and individual men can express different levels at various points in their lives. There can be three types of masculinities – ‘fair-minded’, mixed and abusive. High-minded masculinity is where men view their wives as equals in contrast to the sexist norms of the society. They value their paternal responsibilities to their daughters and they condemn violence, and value being a good husband as an integral factor in poverty alleviation. This type of masculinity can be helpful for women it can encourage men to promote women’s rights.

UTILITY

Understanding what masculinities exist is important to gender programs because it allows you to capitalize on existing understanding of masculinity that promote women’s well-being. It also gives you an idea of how to address negative masculinities through counselling, mentorship and public awareness programs.

Think about

• What factors have affected the development of certain types of masculinities?
• How is masculinity defined in your society?
• How have these developments impacted on your society, both negatively and positively?

3. What is the link between masculinity and women’s spirituality?

The division of Muslim men and women do not reflect social realities because society does not operate in this strict two-toned view which can be unhelpful for change. The reality is more complex and depends on the local culture and history.

The range of Muslim masculinities which reflect various attitudes discovered reveals opportunities for change at the very foundations of gender inequality.

Opportunities for change include changing attitudes and institutions by challenging views especially those which use Islamic principles and laws negatively and against the very peaceful and progressive spirit of Islam. Development organizations need to reduce the risk faced by men who support women’s rights so that they can publicly affirm their solidarity with women in the development effort. The use of feminist spirituality by village women in rural Bangladesh enhances the ethical nature of village society while it raises the material standards of their low-income households because it can increase participation of women in all levels including economically. Indigenous perspectives of poverty reduction, which include spiritual attainments as well as material assets can be useful for the improvement of women as it adopts a holistic view of looking at the role of men and women within.

Think about

• Are women in your community denied spiritual authority? If so, what does reflect about your community, and how can it be changed?

4. How can spirituality help reduce poverty?

Besides access to wealth for women there are other forms of enrichment which are important to furthering women’s rights such as spirituality. Ahmed in her article “Islam, Masculinity and Poverty” identifies the link between spirituality and poverty alleviation as the ‘missing factor’ in development studies. Traditionally, the reduction of poverty is measured by increase of material gain. However, a spiritual approach to poverty means that dignity becomes
important, this includes wider issues. Labour conditions, access to opportunities such as work and society's attitudes all become important in reducing poverty. Thus, poverty reduction becomes a wider issues not just about money and goods. Dignity in labour, forms the core of Muslim feminist spirituality, which relies on the teachings of the Quran and Hadith for empowerment against oppressive-male regimes.

5. How can Islam empower women to work and reduce poverty?

Expressions of Islam based on fear are derived from the masculine interpretation. This form of Islam has spread in Pakistan, where it is increasingly institutionalized. However, using Islamic examples from the Quran and the Sunnah which highlight the achievements of women in all areas of life including the private and public spheres can make clear that women have a key role to play in society and should not be denied their agency. Islam is a source of social justice that can institute change in society. This can be done by activists citing specific examples from Islamic society and looking at female scholars in Islam to show that there needs to be recognition in modern society for these achievements. This in turn can encourage women to get involved in activism, education and work. By encouraging women to pursue education and work this can help reduce various forms of poverty. Removing ignorance from a society is a key to reducing poverty, indeed this itself is highlighted in Islam.

Activists need to strategize programs that alleviating poverty and give dignity to human life, create opportunities, recognize people for labour done, maintaining trust and respect within members of the community; and measuring one’s quality of life beyond measurements of money. And this will highlight the Islamic view that the richness of life is not merely monetary but also very spiritual.

Think about

- What does poverty alleviation mean to your society?
- How can activists address the idea of “poverty” in their work by altering popular definitions of poverty as just a lack of income?
- How can activists encourage the community to recognize their agency through the dignity and respect they give others, and the opportunities they create for others to lead a better life. Perhaps Mullahs and imams can be trained to address this in their Friday Khutbahs (sermons), through the use of Islamic principles, values and historical traditions. Indeed this training is beginning to happen in certain societies in order to ensure Imams are Islamic rather than promoting cultural chains.
6. How can the different notions of masculinity affect women’s rights?

Some men struggle to publicly support their wives, daughters, and female in-laws because of the threat of violence or disagreement. In societies where abusive masculinity is dominant, non-abusive men may feel uneasy expressing their support of women’s or female empowerment. However, the involvement of men can really help to change the views of society. Men can be a part of social change and in achieving recognition of women’s rights. This can be done through education and participation.

Think about

• What can activists do in order to involve men in local projects?
• What kinds of masculinities benefit women’s rights? How can these be cultivated?
• How do men and women help to challenge or change dominant attitudes about female empowerment? Does their influence operate in different ways?

7. How can the participation of men further the empowerment of women?

Cooperation between men of different masculinities would help the cause of women’s empowerment because some men would be more open to the arguments of other men. This means that ‘fair minded’ men or those who support the promotion of women’s rights can encourage other types of men to change their views.

Organizations should reject the popular idea that men stop women’s progress in the labour market. Instead focus on decreasing the risk of violence against men and women who support women’s rights. This approach takes a more unified view of women’s right, it argues that men can be helpful and should indeed be involved in empowering women.