

## Feminism and Modern Islamic Politics: The Fact and the Fallacy

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### ABSTRACT

*Islam is perceived as a religion that relegates women in different spheres of life. This informs the Islamic feminists' criticism of Islam as against gender equality. This study critically appraises the factors responsible for the exclusion of women in modern politics, explores the Islamic textual position on women's roles in society; investigates the level of women political participation in states that have declared Islam as the state religion as compared with those that have not declared Islam. Methodology is comparative and content analysed. The findings show that gender inequality in political participation is a global phenomenon. Gender mainstreaming in some states that have declared Islam as the state religion is far ahead of some advanced democracies. Barriers to women's political participation vary from socio-economic to institutional. This paper stresses the role of women as political equals of men, yet their primary role as mothers, wives and daughters cannot be undermined.*

*Keywords: Islamic feminism, gender equality, liberalism, politics, women*

The roles of women in politics have generally been downplayed throughout history. In 350 BCE, Aristotle, in his treatise "Politics", excluded women along with children and slaves from his definition of a citizen (Everson 1988). This catalyses women's struggle to gain the same respect, dignity and basic rights. The widespread concern for women's rights dates back to the era of Enlightenment. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) sought to reverse the dominant thinking of the philosophers of the age of Enlightenment to recognise women as political equals. At the turn of the twentieth century in the Western world, women's rights campaign profited as women gained the right to vote. The question of women political participation has taken a centre stage in the debate in the West and the Muslim world largely criticised for female exclusion and discrimination.

The political status of women in Islam is still perceived to be relegated, socially excluded, economically underutilised, and politically marginalised compared to other parts of the globe (West). The West perceived Muslim women in the Islamic world to be downgraded and oppressed. Most western or secular feminist analysts and the Islamic feminists' counterpart considered Islam as a major setback to women's political participation, and consequently against gender equality. The claim that gender equality and social justice is alien to Islam need further interrogation. This paper explore feminism in modern Islamic politics by investigating the Islamic textual position on women's roles in governance, women's political participation in modern Islamic politics, factors that account for women's political participation, and facts and fallacies of Islamic feminism.

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## **Islamic Feminism: An Appraisal**

Islamic feminism arose under postmodern feminism. It is a part of the global movement housed within the broader, contemporary movement operating in Muslim countries. It aims at achieving gender equality and social justice within an explicitly religious, Islamic framework (Badran 2005: 6; 1999: 242; 2008). Islamic feminism developed in reactions, firstly, to the claim of universality of Western feminism, and secondly, to the orientalising of the experiences of Muslim women as a reassurance of the Western moral superiority (Jawad 2009: 1-3; Blore 2010: 6-7). These objectives give rise to two distinct arguments, both waving the banner of Islamic feminism - the conservatives and the reformists (Blore 2010). Blore seeks congruity between the Islamic feminism and feminist thinking relying on the literal interpretation of the Quran and liberal *ijtihadis*. If Islamic feminism is to be compatible with the feminist ideal of gender equality, the hermeneutics must transcend literal interpretation of the Islamic texts.

Islamic feminists are sceptical about the possibility of achieving human rights within the framework of Islam. They argued that patriarchal Muslim cultures, and the classical interpretation of the religious texts constrain human dignity and rights (Moghadam 2002: 1153-1155, 1158-60; Hassan R. 2004). The classical scholars and elites interpret the Islamic text influenced by dominant patriarchal values, beliefs and interests (Ahmed 1989: 144; Mernissi 1991: 7-22; Engineer 2004: 48-49). Consequently, the bulk of Islamic theology has been interpreted and adapted by male theologians who have claimed exclusive rights to instituting and interpreting the *Shari'ah* (Afshar 1996: 199, 1998; Mir-Hosseini 1996: 285-319, 2006; Ahmed 1992; Badran 1998, 1999, 2005 & 2008). Rendering Islamic traditions unable to deliver gender equality nor social justice. This results in the emergence of the reformists who reinterpret the Islamic texts to overturn the allegedly patriarchal themes (Mir-Hosseini 1996: 285-319; 2006: 636; Engineer 2004: vi). As a result, common in Islamic states is the use of more secular tactics in demanding for women's rights (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008: 31-34). Other criticise Islamic feminism and its various forms, ranging from the fundamentalists to the reformists. Far from being an alternative to secular, radical and socialist feminists, the Islamic feminism justifies unequal gender relations (Mojab 2001: 131).

Islamic feminists discontented with the traditional interpretation of the Quran, for example, men's right to reprimand their wives, both verbally and physically, if she does not comply, is considered a reflection of gender dominance. Similarly, two witnesses are required in case the woman questions her husband's rights in courts. Divorce is unilateral, prohibiting women from appealing for divorce and the female's inheritance is half that of the male. Ahmed-Ghosh (2008: 105) claims the Quran allows specific gender hierarchies. However, Ahmed-Ghosh claims, "This does not deny the rights the Quran ascribes to women, nor the mention of humanity that refers to both men and women in certain verses, but the underlying message of the Quran is that men are the "protectors and providers" of women and children". Others argue that this condition is restricted to specific context and not be used for generalisation. The requirement of two female witnesses equals one is specific to financial matters only (Engineer 2004: 74; Afshar 1998: 4-5). In addition, Islamic family laws and required "modesty" misconstrued as a limitation on women freedom and mobility. Critic claimed this will inhibit women's access to education and injure their social, economic and political life (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008: 106-107).

Contrary to the gender hierarchy claims, Foley (2004: 53-84) delineates equity and equality debate. The equity strategy embraces the 'separate but equal' thesis. The equity debate claims the equality of the sexes is having differing but complementary roles. The equality debate argues for equal rights between men and women in all affairs. The debate revolves around the choice between demanding the same rights as men (equality) and different rights (equity). Badawi (2002: 6) argues that Islam prefers the term gender equity instead of "the common expression of equality which is sometimes mistakenly understood to mean absolute equality in every detailed item of comparison rather than the overall equality".

## Roles of Muslim Women in Islamic Politics

Islamic political system places equal obligation on men and women in commanding the *ma'ruf* (good) and forbidding the *munkar* (evil). This fundamental political obligation is gender neutral. Surah Taubah (Quran 9: 71) says,

The believers, men and women, are protecting friends (Awliya) of one another; they enjoin the *ma'ruf* (that which Allah commands) and forbid people from *munkar* (that which Allah prohibits); they perform Salat, and give the Zakat, and obey Allah and His messenger. Allah will have mercy on them. Surely Allah is All-mighty, All-wise.

Islam commands the Muslim women, as it commands the men, to be concerned with the affairs of the community. Women are permitted and encouraged to engage in political participation as long as this does not compromise their primary roles as wives and mothers. Jalali asserts that a woman is not permitted to hold positions of ruling such as *Khalifa* (vicegerent) as *Mu'awin* (assistant), *Wali* (governor), *'Amil* (Major) or any other activity categorised as ruling. This is in view of a hadith narrated by Abu Bakr that when the news that the people of Persia had appointed the daughter of Chosroes as their Queen, reached the Messenger (saw), he said, "people who appoint a woman to run their affairs shall never succeed" (Al-Bukhari 1422H, vol. 6, 88, hadith no 4428; al-Tirmidhi 1998, vol. 4, 97, hadith 2262).

Jawad (2009: 15) claims that this hadith is used to associate deficiency with womanhood and to insist that women, by nature, are less prepared rationally and emotionally to handle any public responsibility. Some analysts clarify that this hadith does not suggest that women are inferior or incapable of assuming leadership positions in Islam. Jalali posits that the "deficiency" refers to a specific and contingent deficiency, rather than general and natural one. The identification of such deficiency in one woman does not make this the norm. In fact, there are women who possess qualities and abilities far greater than men. Rather, the Islamic provisions specifically prohibits women from ruling function (Jalali 2003: 3; Osmani, Ahmad & Ali 2009: 13). Stipulated guidelines like this, preclude the possibility of historical battle between the sexes in the struggle for equality of power and prestige. Gender equity in Islam espouses complementary roles between the sexes in the pursuit of the pleasure of their creator. Allah says in *Surah al-Nisa'*, (4, 32):

Do not long for the favours by which Allah has made some of you excel others. Men shall have a share of what they have earned, and women will have a share of what they have earned. Do not envy each other, but ask Allah to give you of His bounty. Allah has knowledge of all things.

Outside ruling position, equal gender participation is the norm such as appointment in civil service; as a judge where she exercises her verdict according to her views of the evidence presented in a court of law; as a member of the Majlisal-Ummah, unlike western parliament, is not considered a ruling structure but a body that holds the ruler accountable for his implementation of Islamic rulings, monitors him and expresses its disapproval when it perceives that he is not fulfilling his duties to the Ummah (Jalali 2003). Albeit, Imam Abu Hanifah allowed women to be judges and Muftis in the issue of legal verdicts with the exception of financial and criminal matters. While, Tabari claims that they could be judges in all issues (Osmani, Ahmad & Ali 2009: 13). Remarkably, these political rights were granted over 1400 years ago.

Similarly, a woman was expected to give *bay'ah* (allegiance) to the Caliph alongside the men (Quran 60: 12). Pledge of loyalty to the Islamic rulers is a measure of acceptance or support for the rulers. That this fall short of western voting, does not render it illegitimate. By extension,

women are allowed to participate in electoral politics. Though scholars disagree on women exercise of franchise (Osmani, Ahmad & Ali 2009: 12). No religious text in Islam prevents women from exercising this right.

There are scholars who completely denounce any public role for women. These scholars posit that women should stay in their houses "And stay in your house, and do not display yourselves like that of the times of ignorance" (Quran 33:33). Hence, women are confined to their homes. Likewise, scholars argue that men as protector of women enjoy certain degree over them (Quran 2:238). Badawi (2002) clarifies that such *ayat* deals with familial matters. Women are entitled to their husband maintenance, protection, who are responsible for the wellbeing of the family (*qiwamah*). Male guardianship is exercised within the framework of consultation and kindness. The Prophet urged men to consult their wives regarding their daughters. The *Qawamah* or guardianship was to the husbands due to their roles in the family and for the expenses that they make. These positions also require perfect wisdom and reasoning. On financial matters, the testimony of a man has been made equal to that of two women, the reason for which Allah has explained: "... so that if one of them (two women) errs, the other can remind her" (Quran 2:282). Also, the Prophet said after Eid prayer, women should be encouraged to donate to charity because the majority of the dwellers of hellfire were women. It was due to their frequent curse of each other, and being ungrateful to their husbands. Moreover, He said: "I have not seen one more deficient in intellect and religion than you (women), who could easily lead a cautious sensible man astray by you". These Quran verses and hadith do not simply suggest women inequality. Particular emphasis has been paid to women weaknesses in certain specific context and what could be done to ameliorate the consequences.

### Historical Legacies of Muslim Women in Islamic Politics

Islam increased female presence in politics in an unprecedented way. Women joined their male counterparts in call of the *Dawah* (call to the path of God) to enjoin the *ma'ruf* (good) and forbid the *munkar* (evil) within society. Even the Prophet consulted the female Companions for advice on political matters. Umm Salamah (RA), one of the wives of the Messenger (saw), was consulted by him at the time of the treaty of *Hudaybiyah*. Ummu *Salamah's* political insight and wisdom, come to play in advising the prophet in a way that defused tensions that had arisen among the Companions, who were disappointed at the peace accord reached with bitter enemies of the past (Al-Waqidi 1409/1989: 613).

In Islam, political rights of women extend to the authority to grant asylum to non-combatant. Umm Hani bint Abi Talib complained to the Prophet on Ali bin Talib's attempt to execute her relatives whom she had granted asylum because they were known for harming the Muslims and fighting against them. The Messenger said to her, "We offer refuge to whomever you offered and we guarantee the safety to whom you guaranteed safety" (Ibn Hisham 1955/1375: (2): 411). Here Umm Hani bint Abi Talib performed a significant political action by granting asylum to these men.

The Hanbalites describe a woman called Samra bint Nahik who had met the Prophet regarding commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong. According to the biographer of the Companions, this woman, Samra, commanded what was right and forbade what was wrong in the markets. However, it is not clear whether she was self-appointed or she was holding a public office. A relatively well-known woman, Shifa al-Adawiyya, was put in charge of some aspects of the market by Umar ibn al-Khattab (Cook 2000: 82).

In ensuring the state's adherence to the *Shari'ah* and preventing deviation from it, a woman called the attention of the Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, after his sermon in the mosque where he suggested a limit on the amount that could be asked for dowry. Once the sermon ended, the woman asked, "Who are you to place a limit on what Allah and His Messenger have not placed a limit upon"? Umar realised his mistake, and he replied, "The woman is right, and Umar is wrong"

(Al-Qurtubi 1384/1964: 286-287). This point to the woman's understanding of the *Shari'ah*, and was not afraid to raise matters directly with Khalifah in public.

The Quran also mentions the story of another important lady who ruled a nation with justice, fairness, *Shura* (consultation), mutual dealings, and reached decisions through consensus. Allah says: She said: "Ye chiefs! Advise me in (this) my affair, no affair have I decided except in your presence". (Quran 27:32). Her just rule was praised in the Quran and led the majority of her nation to believe in God through Prophet Sulayman.

During the lifetime of the Prophet, women participated in running the affairs of the Islamic state in Madinah. They were not only engaged in *da'wah* or missionary works, but some of the women also participated in wars, provided medical services to the warriors, and carried the injured to Madinah (Osmani, Ahmad & Ali 2009: 6). Aisha (RA) with Talhah and Zubayr (RA) led the army of Muslims in the battle of the Camel to demand the *qisas* of the murderer of 'Usman (RA). This undoubtedly establishes that women could also participate in the political affairs of an Islamic state.

In Islam, men and women are placed as equals, and each will be rewarded based on his or her respective virtuous deeds. The Quran states, "Whoever works righteousness, man and woman, and has faith, verily to him will we give a new life, a life that is good and pure and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions" (Quran 16:97). According to Surah al-Hujurat (Quran 49:13), men and women are equal; the best of mankind is the most pious one. In Islam, men and women, though are equal, are not identical, and each complements the other in their different roles and functions.

### **Islamic Modern Politics: An Examination of Women Political Participation**

In contemporary societies, there are numerous examples of Muslim women in politics. In the past several decades, many Muslims majority countries, including Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Turkey, have been led by women. Remarkably, four of the five most populous Muslim-majority countries have women leaders. Besides holding the topmost public offices, many women today are playing active roles as ministers, parliamentarians, legislators, judges, and other dignified posts with dexterity and efficiency. In Tunisia, women constitute one-third of Tunisia's university professors, 58% of its university students, more than one-fourth of its judges, 23% of the members of parliament and are represented in the police and the armed forces (Barron 2007). These public roles for women are not expected to affect women's primary roles as mothers and wives. Quoting Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, an Islamic scholar, Mohan (2008: 27) asserts:

There is nothing in the authentic sources of Islam that prevents women from running for political offices if they are confident of their expertise and credentials to make a positive difference – provided they are not doing so at the expense of their greater responsibilities of nurturing and caring for their families. Here, it must be stressed at all times that Islam considers a woman's role as a mother to be the noblest duty she can ever perform; nothing else can replace it. However, if her involvement in politics does not come in the way of this crucial role, there is nothing in Islam to dissuade her from it.

This suggests that nothing in Islam prohibits women from engaging in politics. However, a woman's role as a caregiver cannot be jettisoned in her quest for political participation. Thus, the fallacy of the Islamic feminists claim that Islam fails to tolerate women political participation or rights. It is crucial to examine the level of women political participation in parliament globally. This will reveal the fallacy of the claims by Islamic feminist that the adoption of Islam or the lack of democracy in Muslim countries account for gender inequality in political participation. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union data from April 2013, greater number of men are in

national parliaments at both lower and upper chambers. Table 1 depicts women representation in parliament by World Average

Table 1: Women in National Parliaments by World Average

Parliament	Total MPs	Men	Women	Percentage of Women
Both Houses	46'431	36'686	9'608	20.8%
Single/Lower House	39'085	30'707	8'241	21.2
Upper House/Senate	7'346	5'979	1'367	18.6%

Source: *Compiled from the Inter-Parliamentary Union data, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013*

The above data shows that the number of women in national parliaments is low compared to men parliamentarians. Numerous studies have identified different barriers to women political participation ranging from socio-cultural factors to economic and financial constraints, lack of support from political parties and prevailing political structure in the areas of campaigns and funds. The percentage of women's representation in both houses is not more than 20.8% compared to men having 79.2%. The gender gap is too wide to argue that gender equality is attained or that the sexes have equal representation from this figure. Gender disparity is starkly palpable in both single and upper houses, with 21.2% women representation in the former and 18.6% in the later. This is far from attaining equality by any standard. Poignantly, this illustrate that low level of women political participation is not peculiar to Muslim countries. Generally, women are less in number compared to their male counterparts in political participation. Thus, the fallacy of the Islamic feminists' assumptions that Islam or the lack of democracy in Muslim countries accounts for gender inequality in political participation.

Although, in many Muslim countries, gender-based discriminations and socio-cultural barriers, limit women access to and participating in higher education (Hassan 2000: 1). However, Muslim countries vary widely in their culture, traditions, and social systems, and there is a broad range of attitudes toward women's education at the university level. For example, in Egypt, women have attended university since the 1920s, whereas in other Muslim countries, the tertiary education for women at the university level is a recent phenomenon. Although women in many Muslim countries have the right to education, those in more rural areas often do not exercise this right whether for social, economic, or family reasons (Hassan 2000: 2). Limited access to education may further narrow the level of Muslim women political participation. Mohan (2008: 4) opines that the role of women in politics in Arab societies is largely determined by the will of the leadership of these countries and cultural attitudes towards women's involvement in the public life.

Similarly, Ertan (2011: 4) argues that regions, where Islamic doctrines are present, are less likely to promote women's rights. The reasons for this backward trend for women's rights may be linked to political Islam. Ertan's position resonates the Islamic feminist perspectives. Countries, where religion (all the main world religions) is highly involved in the policy-making process, are less likely to protect women's rights but are more likely to produce oppressive practices against women (Ertan 2011: 5). Ertan posits that Islam rarely protects human rights including women's rights. The level of social, economic development, democracy and type of electoral system have effects on women's rights and representation in politics. Thus, Islamic states are less likely to give room for women's representation in the government than non-Muslim countries.

Categorisation of Islam as androcentric, undemocratic and oppressive towards women's rights need thorough re-examination to avoid the conflation of Islam in Muslim majority countries with gender discriminatory cultures, beliefs, practices and norms. To evaluate Islam based on gender-based discriminatory cultural practices, norms and values of some Muslim

countries is simplistic, reductionist and prejudiced. A clear distinction must be made between cultural practices and Islamic attitude towards the sexes. As explicated in Islamic religious sources cited earlier, gender equality is the overarching principle. Equity not equality is the strategy of achieving complementarity between the sexes in fulfilling their roles and functions in society. Role segregation by sex are not indices of oppression, and such role as guardianship are to be conducted through consultation. Embedded in the Islamic sources are human rights that are gender neutral. A broader view of human rights, not necessarily Eurocentric must be entertained to grasp universal embodiment of human rights based on societies and peculiarities.

Poor women's political participation in Kuwait is associated with prevailing stereotypes. While the patriarchal and traditional conservatives and extreme Islamists do not see a role for women in political life (World of Parliament 2006). Another factor is distrust women have in fellow women as credible political actors, and preference for male candidates. In 2005, the passage of the electoral law No. 35/1962, granting women's suffrage and appointment of women as ministers is changing the narrative (Admon 2005: 2). Similarly, in June 5, 2005, two female engineers, Fatima Nasser Al-Sabah and Fawziya al-Bahar were appointed as members of the new Kuwait City Municipal Council (Admon: 2005). In 2009, women won 8 percent of the seats in a keenly contested election (Shalaby 2015). Despite this reform, female presence in legislature continued to dwindle, as the only female representative, Safa al-Hashem resigned in 2014. Barriers ranging from cultural, institutional and structural impediments constrained women political participation and varied across geopolitical territory (Shalaby 2015: 3). While Al-Sabah (2013) observe pre-existing oppressive practices predicated on the misinterpretation of Islam impact negatively on women political participation. Apart from the quota system, radical electoral reforms and policies, improved education, geopolitics such as Iraq invasion and rise in national identity account for increased Kuwaiti women political participation led by women of the ruling family and civil society. Examples of this early effort is the Equal Rights Bill, sponsored by the head of the Women's Cultural and Social Identity Society (WCSS), Nouria al-Sadani to the third legislative council in 1973. The bill demanded for women political rights but was rejected. This activated the WCSS and the Girls' Club fierce campaign against the bill non-ratification (Shalaby 2015:12). Emerging political developments lay the struggle to rest until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Women active role in the war, informed government declaring more women political rights. However, this was delayed from war devastation and schism among constituent political entities. Combined forces of varying segments of the Kuwaiti polity alongside women organisations canvass rigorously for more women political rights (Shalaby 2015: 13). This resulted in the cabinet passage of suffrage bill on May 2004 and finally approved a year after. The new law granted Kuwaiti women the right to vote and be voted for in parliamentary and municipal elections from 2006. This move increases the number of electorate from 145, 000 to 350, 000 voters. No woman won any seats in the 2006 and 2008 elections. But the appointment of Masouma al-Mubarak as the first female cabinet member concretised women participation in the 2006 election amidst multiple obstacles to effective legislative functioning (Shalaby 2015:14).

Similar trends are perceptible elsewhere, where Islam is neither a state religion nor Muslim majority country. In Nigeria, for example, more men have shown interests as candidates for elective positions. In the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) presidential primaries in 2011, Sarah Jubril was the only female candidate that contested, and she got no vote except hers in the primaries (Sahara Reporters 2011). From a total of 3606 votes cast, 61 votes were voided. Jonathan got 2736 vote casts, former vice president Atiku got 805 vote casts, while Jubril secured one vote from herself (Sahara Reporters 2011). Although, women delegates were present at the primaries but their preference for men candidate was observable. Likewise, records of post-independence African history shows that only one woman have emerged as a president in the whole of Africa 53 nations. Low level of women political participation either as candidates or in support of fellow women contestants is a recurring decimal of politics globally. Women express lack of trust in other female capabilities to lead, exacerbated by the probability that women in

power are controlled by men. Below is the statistical data on women’s presence in the parliaments in Muslim countries. The classification is based on the role of religion in these states. The categories are Muslim countries that: a.) are declared as Islamic States; b.) declared Islam as the State Religion.

Table 2: Women’s Representation in Islamic States

Declared as Islamic States	Lower/ Single House			Upper House/ Senate		
	Seats	Women	% W	Seats	Women	% W
Afghanistan	249	69	27.7%	102	28	27.5%
Bahrain	40	4	10.0%	40	11	27.5%
Iran	290	9	3.1%	13	5	38.5%
Maldives	77	5	6.5%	-	-	-
Mauritania	95	21	22.1%	56	8	14.3%
Oman	84	1	1.2%	83	15	18.1%
Pakistan	342	77	22.5%	104	17	16.3%
Saudi Arabia	151	30	19.9%	-	-	-
Yemen	301	1	0.3%	111	2	1.8%

Source: Statistical data compiled from the IPU database as at 1 March 2013

The data reveals that modern Islamic states have women representation in National Parliaments. Afghanistan ranked 37<sup>th</sup> position of the 190 countries on the IPU list database compared to France ranked 38<sup>th</sup> position, directly behind Afghanistan with 26.9% and 22.2% in the lower and upper house respectively. Afghanistan is far ahead of the United Kingdom ranked 57<sup>th</sup> position, Australia and Canada both ranked 46<sup>th</sup> position. The UK had 22.5% and 22.6% in the lower house and upper chamber respectively. Pakistan ranked 57<sup>th</sup> position alongside UK. Saudi ranked 69<sup>th</sup> position compared to the United States ranked 78<sup>th</sup> position. Some Muslim countries are not only increasing women representation in parliament, but their numerical strength surpasses some advanced democratic countries. With the exemption of Germany, some Muslim countries that have been declared Islamic states have more women in the parliament than their counterparts in more developed democracies. Women’s representation in parliament is still low in some Islamic states like Yemen. Nonetheless, the presence of women is a positive development. Islamic countries cannot be labelled undemocratic based on women representation in parliament. This point to the fallacy of the Islamic feminist claims that Islam negate women’s human right and undemocratic. Below is women’s representation in Muslim countries that declared Islam as the State religion.

Table 3: Women Representation in Countries that are Declared as Islamic States

Declared Islam as the State Religion	Lower Single House			Upper House /Senate		
	Seats	Women	%W	Seats	Women	%W
Algeria	462	146	31.6%	142	10	7.0%
Bangladesh	350	69	19.7%	-	-	-
Egypt	508	10	2.0%	270	12	4.4%
Iraq	325	82	25.2%	-	-	-
Jordan	148	18	12.2%	60	7	11.7%
Kuwait	65	4	6.2%	-	-	-
Libya	200	33	16.5%	-	-	-
Malaysia	221	23	10.4%	66	15	22.7%
Morocco	395	67	17.0%	270	6	2.2%
Qatar	35	0	0.0%	-	-	-
Tunisia	217	58	26.7%	-	-	-



UAE	40	7	17.5%	-	-	-
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Source: Statistical data compiled from IPU database as at 1 March 2013.

The figures above show countries that have declared Islam as the state religion. The countries have commendable female representation in parliaments. Algeria with 31.6% female presence in the lower house, was ranked 28th of the 190 countries on the IPU database. Algeria was not just the first but the only Arab country to have more than 30% women holding parliamentary seats. Tunisia ranked 39th, directly behind France and ahead of the UK and the USA in the 57th and 78th position by 1 March 2013 IPU ranking. Bangladesh with 19.7% women presentation surpassed the 19% of UN world average for women parliamentary representation. Besides Qatar with no female representation in parliament, Egypt and Kuwait had the least female representation among the countries that declared Islam as the State religion. Algeria, Iraq and Tunisia were other Arab countries that surpassed the 19% UN world average for women parliamentary representation.

Muslim countries today allow their citizens to have some level of voting and control over their government. The disparate time at which women's suffrage was granted in Muslim-majority countries indicate the varied traditions and values present within the Muslim world. Unlike many European and North America nations, where women suffrage was a relatively recent development, timing of the women's franchise did not derive from Islamic politics, but from the liberation of these nations from colonial oppression.

Some Muslim countries have women suffrage before certain advanced democratic nations. For example, Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan gained its independence in 1918. The republic only lasted for two years before Azerbaijan became part of the Soviet Union. Following the disintegration of the USSR, Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991 as well as Uzbekistan. Albania became independent in 1912, Turkey in 1923, Maldives in 1965, Bosnia in 1992, recognised by the Parliament in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Indonesia in 1949, Senegal in 1960, Malaysia in 1957, Algeria in 1962, Iran 1979, Tunisia and Morocco in 1956. The timing of women suffrage is connected to the period of national independence.

In Pakistan, five women led their political parties such as Fatima Jinnah (Pakistan Muslim League - PML), the sister and companion of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a strong political personality in Pakistan (Talha 2009). Fatima Jinnah is a social activist that impact positively on women's lives in society and government. Participated in organising the Muslims league and strove for more Muslim women political participation (Talha 2009: 69-70). She participated in various women organisations ranging from Girls Guide movement mass campaign. Fatima Jinnah as a political worker promoted women's education, health, political work and social activities (Talha 2009:70). Following the creation of Pakistan, she participated in the settlement of refugees from India. Fatima Jinnah not only set up various organisations to help refugee settle down and continued to provide moral support to the displaced. Other organisations imitated and embarked on relief program for the refugees. Fatima Jinnah established fund for refugees; participate in marking the World Health day, supported Hayat-ul-Islam orphanage, exempt them from income tax on government donations; as member of the flood relief committee, East Pakistan Dacca, provided relief materials to flood victims alongside other sympathisers (Talha 2009: 71). Fatima Jinnah donated to National Tuberculosis Association of Pakistan, female hospital at Muzaffarabbs and expand its capacity in 1957. At Azad Kashmir Government at Muzaffarabad, Fatima provided scholarship of Rs. 10,000 to boys' and girls' middle school each; visited the squalors in 1957, supported Azad Kashmir government with stretcher ambulances. Fatima established women organisations that promote her ideas about freedom and social status for the poor women of Pakistan. Fatima Jinnah promote the role of women in nation building (Talha 2009: 72).

Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan Peoples Parliament Party - PPP), the daughter of Pakistan People's Party founder and Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was the first woman leader of a Muslim nation in modern history (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d). In 2008 elections, there were

far more women who applied for party tickets to contest in the elections than the political parties were willing to grant. Many who were refused the party tickets contested as independent candidates. However, all of them lost except Robina Watto. Rabino's victory could be explained by her political lineage than by her gender. She is the wife of Mr Mazhar Ahmed Wattoo, a member of National Assembly 2002-2007, member Provincial Assembly of the Punjab in general elections 2008. Her father was the former speaker of Punjab Assembly during 1985-88, 1988-90 and 1990-93 and appointed thrice as Chief Minister, Punjab during 1993. Her brother, Mr Moazzam Jahanzeb Ahmad Khan Watto was a former member of Punjab Assembly during 1997-99 (Provincial Assembly of the Punjab).

In Pakistan, conservative tribal, religious and feudal structures are eroding as women were allowed to vote during the 2008 election. For example, places like South Waziristan, Federally Reserved Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) allow women to vote. Non-Muslim candidates compete outside the mainstream political parties as religion, caste and creed of individuals remain influential in their choice as candidate for election (Saeed 2013).

Quota systems and reserved seats improves women representation in parliament over direct elections. Ratification of international treaty such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and political development generally, played a vital role in enhancing women political participation and decision-making (Awan 2016; Saleem 2008: 1). For example, Tehmina Daultana, one of the six vice-presidents of PML (N), was the first to be elected to National Assembly 169, Vehari-III became one of the four women including Benazir and Nusrat Bhutto in the National Assembly. She won this seat again in the 1997 elections, which returned six women to the National Assembly (Saleem: 2008). However, the quota system signifies that women are not directly elected by voters and are not true representatives of the socio-cultural class of the majority of women of Pakistan. Most women that had occupied legislative seats come from families with strong political background. Party nominations for women candidates to compete for general seats are lower compared to men. This suggests low trust in women's abilities to win election (Awan 2016: 5). Socio-cultural practices and economic dependency of women, low rate of literacy and gender segregation in social roles hinder women political participation (Awan 2016: 5). In Turkey, Tansu Ciller, born into an affluent family, was the first female Prime Minister (1993-1996) and leader of the True Path Party and remains a central figure in Turkish politics (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d).

Egypt elected the first Arab woman to parliament in 1957. Egypt, once a leader in women political participation, female parliamentary representation had declined since 1984 when women occupied 36 of the 458 seats in the Lower House of the Egyptian Parliament. Women secured just nine of 454 seats in the legislative election in 2005, four of which were elected and the rest were appointed by the president (McGrath 2009: 1). Social and cultural barriers, lack of political education and party support for women candidates account for low women political participation (McGrath 2009). The dramatic impact of the Arab spring, which challenged the deep seated oppression and exclusion of women from political life, manifest with the revolutionary election of Hala Shukrallah. The election of the first woman and non-Muslim to lead a major Egyptian party was unprecedented and signalled a changing stereotype (Kingsley 2014). Though, institutional and constitutional limitations and social and cultural barriers continue to be major impediments to women political participation. Women in civil society promotes women political participation and clamour against gender discrimination. An example is the National Council for Women (NCW) in Egypt established in 2000 and ensured the establishment of a Center for Political Participation of women. The Centre along with other civil societies and NGOs train women on political participation and discourage political apathy (Khodair & Hassib 2015).

NCW group notable for its role in encouraging women political participation through awareness creation, have shown little or no impact on women contribution to social, economic and political development or even women chances of winning election. Rather, the NCW is

reawakening women political consciousness and a platform to galvanise women's rights. In 2016 Parliament, women held 89 seats (15%) of the total number of the 596 Parliament seats (Ahmed & Gielen 2017, 112).

In 2013 Malaysia elections, 23 women were elected to the Parliament, compared to 24 elected in 2008. Fifty-six women contested for the Parliamentary seats including seven independent candidates. Sixteen of the 18 incumbent candidates who contested were re-elected, and 56 of the 113 women who ran for State Assembly won. Despite progressive trends, women political participation continued to be mired by societal beliefs, stereotype, family background, education and experience in politics among non-Muslim women (Mustafa 1999: 10, 31-41). Other constraints include gender discrimination, time constraints, disinterestedness in politics and inadequate resources (IDEA 2002, 2). While gender equality in education ensures upward mobility of women in civil service and corporate sector. "In many cases, Islam has empowered and enabled women to reach their full potential and capabilities just as much as men. In Malaysia, the most politicized and politically active group of women has been the Malay Muslims" (IDEA 2002: 3). Women in NGOs and civil society are increasingly visible in public sphere. Examples include women from *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)*, *Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM)* and various civil societies and NGOs like *Tenaganita* and *Suaram*. Many NGOs joined forces with *keADILan*, and the *Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif or BA - coalition of opposition parties-Parti keADILan Nasional (keADILan), Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM)* to contest in the 1999 general elections. *Hajjah Zainon Jaafar (ABIM)*, *Fuziah Salleh (JIM)*, *Irene Fernandez (Tenaganita)* and *Zaiton Kasim (Women Candidacy Initiative)* contested on the BA platform. Alliance formation between civil society activists and political parties as a positive response to the economic quagmire in 1998 (IDEA 2002: 4). Similarly, important are meaningful contribution of women in advancing societal progress, values, aspirations, and meeting needs that improve welfare and wellbeing of the people. Women have used their positions to promote greater human values, equity, protect the marginalised and disenfranchised, provide informed opinion and promote gender sensitive policies in government and spur other women politicians.

No direct correlation exists between Islam and low women political participation. Socially constructed gender roles, women competency, support for candidates to win election and family background play more significant role in women political participation.

In Tunisia, the strategic importance of collective national development, impact positively on the political environment. Tunisia maintains 50% gender parity in drafting the national constitution and guarantee women franchise (Goulding 2011: 1-2). Typically, Tunisia state-sponsored feminism tied directly to the national political interests remain prevalent for over half a century. In 2004 elections, the ruling *Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD)* party allocated 25% of the 152 parliament seats to women. In 2005, the president increased the quota for women in local councils to 25%, and nationally to 30% in 2009. In the Middle East, Tunisia topped with 27.6% female political representation (Goulding 2011: 2). Tunisia ranked 69th in political empowerment based on the *Gender Gap Report 2015* and electoral laws that enhance gender parity in political participation (UNWomen 2016).

Since the Arab revolt in Tunisia for example, women participation in the October 2011 *National Constituent Assembly (NCA)* as candidate and campaigners was impressive. Women in civil society and political parties are notable contributing to evolving political transition. However, gender discriminations remain perceptible. Women participation in politics and civil societies, apart from promoting gender sensitive policy preferences, can stoke local and international NGOs and civil societies support for women's rights.

Female politicians, for example the former first lady, *Leila Ben Ali* was criticised to have given certain privileges to women in Tunisia. Despite women's role in the revolution, women status is yet to record significant boost in society "there are women who chose to retreat and not participate in public life because they have been belittled". Gender equality is yet to be actualised.

But the Tunisian revolution is emboldening the women to champion another revolution, if “women’s rights are not fully constitutionalised” (Borovsky & Yahia 2012:14). Activism serves as an eye opener to make more demand on society.

In addition, women politicians and elected officials have low visibility. National Constituent Assembly (NCA) members were not playing a strong role in the NCA. In a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) organised by National Democratic Institute, a participant claimed “the presence of women in the NCA is just a formality and they follow men” (Borovsky & Yahia 2012:26). Another participant observed “I know [the women NCA members] as names but I don’t have any idea about their role in the NCA”. Participants observe low female visibility in the activities in the NCA, they are not appointed in leading positions and gained little from their rights. Participants in the FGDs were unable to name several women candidates and elected officials, but name influential women for their positive influence. “The most visible women- political and civic actors who are seen often in television interviews- were named, but not for specific reasons” (Borovsky & Yahia 2012:26). While women organisations and civil society exist, limited knowledge and accessibility about them constrained their positive impact (Borovsky & Yahia 2012:28). Some participants have negative views of such women organisations and questioned their relevance (Borovsky & Yahia 2012:29). Given the insignificant role of women organisations and civil societies, participants call for legal/constitutional framework for protecting women’s rights.

The second vice president of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, which replaced the National Constituent Assembly in 2011, Faou Ben Fodha of the Free Patriotic Union, during the NCA mandate, 44 women created an informal and inter-political group to call for more parity (Amar 2016: 8). Notwithstanding, the gender inclusive legal framework, women were still discriminated against as choice for higher office positions and responsibility (Amar 2016, 10). Also, a significant difference is yet to be recorded in women representation before and after the constitution was approved (Ohman 2016: 21).

In Iraq, women candidates are increasing across Iraq (except the Kurdish region). A product of bandwagon effect and largely Iraqi elitist women involvement in politics. The Iraqi electoral law grants 25 percent of parliamentary seats to women (Al-Jaffal 2014). While the quota system enhances women presence in the legislature, gender parity advocates want representation by population percentage. Though quota system help fulfill the legal requirement of the percentage of female representation but not necessarily engendering politics nor make women true elected representatives, while most women political participation remain elitists (Hauslohner 2009).

In 2001, Megawati Sukarnoputri became the first female president of Indonesia. At present, women constitute 18.6% of parliamentarians in the lower house. The quota system and reserved seats for women have increased the level of female presence in the Parliament. A mandatory 30 % quota for women parliamentarian was imposed on political party fielding candidates for election to be qualified. The effort for gender equality process was stymied by the selection of female with relatives that are politicians and celebrities (Kowk 2014). Likewise, quota system meant to enhance women representation failed to target institutional limits (‘money politics, vote buying, backroom dealing, politics of patronage’) that constitute barriers to women political participation. (Hillman 2017: 38-43). Women from ‘political dynasties’ are replacing women activists and competent parliamentarians in Indonesia. According to research by Centre for Political Studies at the University of Indonesia, in the 2009-2014 parliament, 41.7 percent of women parliamentarians are from politically influential families. In the 2014-2019 Parliament, the figure increased to 46.75 percent. Political power rotation among entrenched political families has the tendency to reinforce the status quo, and women acts ‘as agents of masculine interests’ (Hillman 2017: 43). Huge campaign funds remained inaccessible to most capable female politicians from humble background and constrains their political ambition, while successful women candidates emerged from ‘political dynasties’ (Hillman 2017: 44). This scenario is not a far cry from what is obtainable in most low and middle-income countries.

To conclude, the historical precedents in Islamic states substantiate the claim that women are accorded equal status as citizens. Nonetheless, Islam assigns gender specific, albeit, complementary roles to each sexes in fulfilling their functions. Western notion of gender equality and secular or Islamic feminist's interpretation of Islamic sources need be done with greater precaution. This will circumvent the risk of perilously eroding the spirit and letters of Islam. Islamic history traverse the 7th century and evidence abound on the role of women in Islamic polity. Generalised presumption that Islam is patriarchal is ahistorical and reflect a teleological readings of society. Western society experience of gender inequality need not be universalised. While discriminatory practices must be addressed in all societies, Islamic or western. The importance of segregating cultural practices or dominant values, mostly patriarchy, from teachings of religion may be a prerequisite for analysing societies.

Finally, the level of women political participation is yet to achieve gender equality worldwide. Advanced democracy lagged behind in achieving gender equality in political participation. Women involvement in politics may be low in many Muslim majority countries. However, significant progress has been recorded in recent times especially through the quota system and reserved seats. States that declared Islam as state religion and Islamic states are making progress, although there is room for improvements. Gender friendly legislations, reforms, and voting systems have improved women participation in politics. Women are gladiators in some states that declared Islam as state religion. Barriers to women's involvement in politics remain perceptible. Consistent efforts to promote a gender inclusive socio-political and economic framework is imperative.

Until the power equation balance works to advance gender sensitive policies can women participation in politics remain beneficial. Future studies need to investigate how women political participation impact positively on women empowerment beyond few elitist empowerments. Women political participation ought to resolve major constraints to societal progress and development. These include bringing women-friendly perspectives to improving governance, increasing capabilities and functioning in health, education, and access to assets, resources such as land, jobs and decision making.

Major political cum economic upheavals have shown to stimulate activism across gender lines. The Arab revolt push aside gender barriers. Similarly, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait electrify political struggles that ignore gender divide. In Malaysia, the 1998 economic crisis propelled gender inclusive campaign for reform. Unlike most states, Malay women political engagement continued unabated for equitable polity. Whereas, most states plummeted in gender equality as liberation struggle subsides. Examples are Tunisia and other Arab countries where women's role decline after revolution. Deliberate effort to genuinely engage women in politics can result in empowerment of all citizens.

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