

## Islam and the Changing Role of Women in Contemporary Times: A Special Study of Pakistani Society

Dr. Nabeela Falak

*Associate professor, Department of Islamic studies, The university of  
Lahore Sargodha campus*

*Email: [nabeelafalak@gmail.com](mailto:nabeelafalak@gmail.com)*

### Abstract

Few topics generate as much controversy in contemporary Muslim societies as the question of women's roles. Pakistan, a country grappling with modernization, Islamization, economic development, and democratic transition, offers a particularly revealing case. This study examines the changing role of women in contemporary Pakistani society through an interdisciplinary lens that takes Islamic teachings seriously while engaging with empirical data, legal analysis, sociological research, and policy evaluation. Moving beyond both Western feminist critiques that dismiss Islam as inherently patriarchal and conservative narratives that resist any change as un-Islamic, the paper develops an internally grounded framework that distinguishes between eternal ethical principles and historically contingent interpretations. Drawing on Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith analysis, classical legal theory, contemporary Islamic scholarship, Pakistani legislation, development reports, and peer-reviewed research, the study examines women's participation across education, professional employment, family structures, public institutions, and political leadership. It identifies persistent challenges: legal gaps between constitutional guarantees and personal status laws, educational disparities, occupational segregation, the double burden of paid work and domestic labor, violence against women, and restrictive social norms. The paper then develops an Islamic evaluation of contemporary changes, arguing that the Qur'an's egalitarian ethic



supports women's full participation in all domains, but within a framework that preserves family cohesion, modesty, and mutual respect. The proposed model—family-centered empowerment with ethical participation—rejects both Western individualistic feminism and conservative patriarchal restriction, offering instead a distinctly Islamic vision of women's development that is both faithful to sacred texts and responsive to contemporary Pakistani realities.

**Keywords:** Women in Islam, Pakistani Society, Gender Roles, Women's Empowerment, Family-Centered Development, Professional Women, Working Mothers, Legal Reform, Social Change, Contemporary Pakistan

## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

Pakistan stands at a crossroads. Since its founding in 1947, the country has oscillated between competing visions of women's place in society. The modernist vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah emphasized women's full participation in national development. The Islamization policies of the Zia-ul-Haq era (1977-1988) restricted women's mobility and legal rights. Subsequent decades have witnessed contradictory trends: the election of a woman Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, alongside the rise of militant groups opposing girls' education; the passage of landmark legislation against sexual harassment and anti-women practices, alongside continued honor killings and forced marriages; dramatic increases in girls' enrollment in schools and universities, alongside one of the world's lowest female labor force participation rates.

The puzzle of Pakistani women's status is that formal indicators of empowerment have improved significantly over the past three decades, yet substantive equality remains elusive. More girls are in school than ever before, but most remain at home after marriage. More women work outside the home, but occupational segregation and wage gaps persist. More women participate in politics (reserved seats ensure this), but their substantive influence remains limited. More laws protecting women have been passed, but implementation is weak and social norms resistant.

This gap between formal and substantive change requires explanation. Part of the answer lies in the contested interpretation of Islamic teachings.

Conservative interpretations, often presented as the only authentic Islamic position, have been used to justify restrictions on women's education, employment, mobility, and public participation. Liberal interpretations, dismissed as Westernized, have struggled to gain traction in a society where religious authority remains largely in conservative hands. This study seeks to move beyond this polarized discourse by developing an internally grounded Islamic framework that takes sacred texts seriously, engages with contemporary Pakistani realities, and offers practical guidance for policy and practice.

### **Problem Statement**

The central problem this research addresses is the gap between the Qur'an's egalitarian ethic and the lived realities of Pakistani women. This gap is not simply a matter of implementation failure, though that is certainly part of the problem. It is also a problem of interpretation. Conservative interpretations have read patriarchal cultural norms into sacred texts, presenting as divine command what is actually human construction. Liberal interpretations, while often more aligned with the Qur'an's egalitarian spirit, have been unable to overcome the perception that they are Western imports rather than authentic Islamic positions. This study asks: What does a genuinely Islamic, contextually sensitive, practically viable framework for women's development look like?

### **Research Objectives**

This research has five objectives. First, to establish the conceptual and ethical foundations of women's role in Islam—their status, rights, and responsibilities—through fresh engagement with primary sources. Second, to analyze the changing role of women in contemporary Pakistani society across education, professional employment, family structures, public institutions, and political leadership. Third, to identify persistent challenges facing Pakistani women, including legal barriers, educational disparities, economic discrimination, violence, and restrictive social norms. Fourth, to develop an Islamic evaluation of contemporary changes that distinguishes between authentic Islamic teachings and cultural patriarchy. Fifth, to propose a balanced, practically viable model of women's development—family-centered empowerment with ethical participation—along with concrete policy recommendations.

### **Research Questions**

This research addresses six core questions. First, what are the conceptual and ethical foundations of women's status, rights, and responsibilities in the Qur'an and Sunnah? Second, how have women's roles changed in contemporary Pakistani society across education, employment, family, public life, and politics? Third, what factors—legal, economic, social, cultural, and religious—have facilitated or impeded these changes? Fourth, what persistent challenges do Pakistani women face, and how do these manifest in empirical data? Fifth, what does an Islamic evaluation of contemporary changes look like when grounded in the Qur'an's egalitarian ethic rather than patriarchal interpretations? Sixth, what would a balanced, practically viable model of women's development look like for contemporary Pakistan?

### **Significance of the Study**

This research makes several contributions. Theoretically, it moves beyond the polarized discourse that pits "Islamic" against "modern" or "traditional" against "feminist." It offers an internally grounded Islamic framework for understanding and addressing women's issues that takes both sacred texts and contemporary realities seriously. Methodologically, it integrates Islamic studies, gender studies, and sociology, legal analysis, and policy evaluation—fields rarely brought into productive dialogue. Practically, it offers concrete, evidence-based guidance for policymakers, religious leaders, educators, civil society organizations, and international development agencies working to advance women's status in Pakistan.

### **Research Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology. The inductive method gathers relevant Qur'anic verses, Hadith, classical legal texts, contemporary Islamic scholarship, Pakistani legislation, development reports, and peer-reviewed research. The analytical method examines these sources for their conceptual significance, historical context, social implications, and policy relevance. The comparative method places Islamic teachings alongside empirical data from Pakistan and international frameworks like CEDAW and SDGs. The case study method treats Pakistani society as a revealing case for examining women's changing roles in Muslim-majority contexts. Primary sources include the Qur'an, the six canonical Hadith collections, classical works of tafsir and fiqh, and contemporary Islamic scholarship. Secondary sources

include Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data, UN Women Pakistan reports, UNICEF Pakistan reports, UNESCO education data, World Bank Gender Data, and peer-reviewed journal articles.

### **Section One: Conceptual and Ethical Foundations of Women's Role in Islam**

This section establishes the conceptual and ethical foundations for understanding women's role in Islam. Western scholarship has often approached Islamic teachings on women through a framework of critique that assumes Western modernity as the standard of measurement. Conservative Muslim scholarship has often approached the same teachings through a framework of preservation that resists any change as un-Islamic. Both approaches fail to take seriously the internal logic of the Islamic tradition—its sacred texts, its methods of interpretation, its ethical purposes, and its historical development. The alternative adopted here is to begin with the Qur'an and Sunnah themselves, reading them with attention to their historical context, linguistic meaning, and ethical purposes, while also recognizing that the classical jurists who developed Islamic law were brilliant scholars working within their own historical contexts, not infallible interpreters whose conclusions are binding for all time.

Two foundational points deserve emphasis from the outset. First, the Qur'an's revelation in seventh-century Arabia occurred in a profoundly patriarchal context where women were treated as property, denied inheritance, and subjected to unlimited polygyny and unilateral divorce. Against this background, the Qur'an's reforms—granting women inheritance rights, restricting polygyny, regulating divorce, affirming women's spiritual equality—were revolutionary. Second, the Prophet's teachings and practices established concrete rights for women that exceeded anything in the surrounding culture, while also embedding these rights within a framework of family cohesion, mutual responsibility, and ethical conduct. The challenge for contemporary Muslims is to distinguish between the eternal ethical principles of the tradition and their historical embodiments, which were shaped by the cultural and material conditions of their time.

#### **I.I The Concept of Womanhood in Islamic Thought**

The Qur'an's foundational declaration regarding women's status appears in a verse that affirms the spiritual equality of men and women. The revelation came as a direct response to a woman who asked why the Qur'an addressed men only, and the verse that followed included both male and female forms for every virtue mentioned. This event itself demonstrates that the Qur'an was responsive to women's concerns and that women were active participants in the religious community, raising questions and seeking clarification.

A verse from Surah al-Hujurat establishes the basis for human dignity without gender distinction:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقَاكُمْ﴾<sup>1</sup>

*Translation: "O humanity, indeed We have created you from a male and a female, and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you."*

This verse directly challenges any hierarchy based on gender. The creation narrative—male and female from a single source—establishes fundamental equality. The diversity of peoples and tribes is for recognition, not competition or domination. The sole criterion of nobility before God is righteousness, a quality accessible to both men and women equally. Pakistani feminist activists have invoked this verse to challenge discriminatory laws and practices, arguing that any policy or custom that treats women as inherently inferior contradicts this clear Qur'anic teaching.

The mutual relationship between spouses is described in another foundational verse:

﴿هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لَهُنَّ﴾<sup>2</sup>

*Translation: "They are clothing for you and you are clothing for them."*

The clothing metaphor is rich with meaning. Clothing provides protection, warmth, and covering. It is close to the body and essential for well-being. Neither spouse is described as the clothing of the other in a one-directional way; the relationship is mutual and reciprocal. This verse establishes the marital relationship as one of mutual protection, support, and intimacy—not hierarchy, domination, or submission. Pakistani family law, which often treats

wives as subordinate to husbands, stands in tension with this Qur'anic vision of mutuality.

The Qur'an also commands kind treatment of women, recognizing their rights and dignity:

﴿وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ﴾<sup>3</sup>

*Translation: "And live with them in kindness."*

The term "ma'rūf" (kindness, good custom, what is recognized as good) is a key Qur'anic concept. It refers to practices that are ethically good, socially recognized as proper, and consonant with human dignity. The command to live with women in kindness is not optional but obligatory. Any treatment of women that violates this standard—whether physical abuse, psychological cruelty, economic deprivation, or social restriction—contravenes this Qur'anic command.

Classical exegete Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, in his commentary on this verse, writes:

«أَمَرَ اللَّهُ بِمُعَاشِرَتِهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ، وَذَلِكَ يَشْمَلُ حُسْنَ الْخُلُقِ، وَطَيِّبَ الْكَلَامِ، وَتَحَمُّلَ الْأَذَى، وَالْإِنْفَاقَ عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ»<sup>4</sup>

*Translation: "God commanded living with them in kindness, and this includes good character, pleasant speech, bearing hardship, and spending upon them in a proper manner."*

Al-Jaṣṣāṣ enumerates specific obligations: good character (not harshness or cruelty), pleasant speech (not verbal abuse), bearing hardship (patience with differences), and proper financial support. This comprehensive understanding of kindness provides a framework for evaluating marital practices in contemporary Pakistan. Arranged marriages, while not prohibited, must respect the woman's consent. Domestic violence, verbal abuse, and economic deprivation are explicitly condemned by this Qur'anic command.

The Prophet's own practice exemplified this command. His treatment of his wives was marked by gentleness, consultation, and affection. He helped with household chores, joked with his wives, and consulted them on important matters. When one of his wives expressed dissatisfaction, he listened and responded kindly. This example is directly relevant to contemporary debates about marital roles and relationships.

Contemporary Islamic scholar Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im argues: "The historical experience of Muslim societies demonstrates that Sharia has been interpreted and applied in diverse ways across time and place. Muslims today have both the right and the responsibility to reinterpret Sharia principles in light of contemporary conditions, provided they remain faithful to the fundamental purposes of Islamic law: justice, human dignity, and the common good."<sup>5</sup> An-Na'im's approach, known as the "constitutional mediation" of Sharia, opens space for reform without abandoning the authority of the tradition. Pakistani legal reform efforts, he suggests, should be grounded in Islamic principles rather than presented as Western impositions.

Pakistani Supreme Court Justice (Retired) Nasira Iqbal writes: "The Pakistani Constitution guarantees fundamental rights without discrimination on grounds of sex. But constitutional guarantees are not self-executing. They require enabling legislation, judicial enforcement, and social change. The gap between constitutional promise and lived reality is where most Pakistani women struggle daily. Bridging this gap requires not only legal reform but also religious education that presents Islam's egalitarian message accurately, not filtered through patriarchal cultural lenses."<sup>6</sup> Her observation highlights the importance of both legal and cultural change, and the role of religious education in challenging patriarchal interpretations.

## **I.2 Rights and Responsibilities Under Islamic Law**

Islamic law grants women rights that were unprecedented in seventh-century Arabia and remain contested in contemporary Pakistan. The right to own and manage property independently is established in the Qur'an's recognition of women's financial agency. A woman's property before marriage remains her own after marriage; her husband has no right to it without her consent. This economic independence is a foundation for other rights.

A verse from Surah al-Nisa addresses women's property rights directly:

﴿لِّلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَتَبُواْ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَتَبْنَ﴾<sup>7</sup>

*Translation: "For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned."*

This verse establishes the principle that both men and women have independent claims to their earnings. A woman's earnings are her own property; she is not required to contribute to household expenses, though she may choose

to do so. This economic independence protects women from financial coercion and enables them to leave abusive or unsatisfactory marriages. In contemporary Pakistan, however, many women are unaware of this right, and social norms pressure them to transfer control of their earnings to male family members. Legal literacy programs that educate women about their Islamic financial rights are essential.

The right to consent to marriage is established in the Prophet's explicit teaching:

«لَا تُنْكَحُ الْبِكْرُ حَتَّى تُسْتَأْذَنَ، وَلَا تُنْكَحُ الثَّيِّبُ حَتَّى تُسْتَأْمَرَ»<sup>8</sup>

*Translation: "A virgin should not be married until her permission is sought, and a previously married woman should not be married until her consent is obtained."*

The Prophet distinguishes between the virgin (bikr), who may be shy and whose silence is considered consent, and the previously married woman (thayyib), whose explicit consent is required. The principle is clear: marriage requires the woman's free consent. Forced marriage—marriage without consent—is invalid under Islamic law. Pakistani law criminalizes forced marriage, but enforcement is weak, and social norms often pressure women to comply with family decisions. Religious education emphasizing the woman's right to consent is essential for changing these practices.

The right to divorce is recognized in Islamic law, though the procedures differ between men and women. Men have the unilateral right of ṭalāq (repudiation). Women have the right to seek divorce through khul' (divestiture) or judicial dissolution. A verse in Surah al-Baqarah establishes khul':

﴿فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَا فِيمَا افْتَدَتْ بِهِ﴾<sup>9</sup>

*Translation: "There is no blame upon them for what she gives up to obtain her freedom."*

This verse permits a woman to initiate divorce by returning her dowry or forgoing her financial rights. The Prophet approved khul' in cases where a woman found her husband repulsive and feared she could not uphold her marital duties. This establishes that marriage is not an indissoluble bond; women who are trapped in unhappy or abusive marriages have a legitimate Islamic mechanism for exiting. Pakistani family courts grant khul', but the

process can be lengthy, costly, and socially stigmatizing. Reforms that make khul' more accessible and less stigmatized would align with Islamic principles. The responsibility to provide for the family rests primarily on men in classical Islamic law. A verse in Surah al-Nisa establishes this allocation:

﴿الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ﴾<sup>10</sup>

*Translation: "Men are maintainers and protectors of women because God has given some of them advantage over others and because they spend of their wealth."*

The term "qawwāmūn" has been subject to extensive debate. Classical interpretations read it as "in authority over," implying male leadership and female obedience. Contemporary interpreters, reading the verse in light of its context and the Qur'an's overall egalitarian ethic, argue that "qawwāmūn" means "responsible for" or "providers for." The justification given is twofold: natural differences (which may be biological, social, or both) and financial responsibility. If a woman is financially independent, the rationale for male authority diminishes. This interpretation opens space for alternative family arrangements where both spouses contribute financially and share decision-making authority.

Classical exegete Muḥammad al-Ṭabarī, in his comprehensive commentary, notes multiple interpretations of this verse:

«اِخْتَلَفَ أَهْلُ التَّأْوِيلِ فِي مَعْنَى الْقَوَّامَةِ، فَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمْ: هِيَ الْوَلَايَةُ وَالْأَمْرُ وَالنَّبِيُّ، وَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمْ: هِيَ النَّفَقَةُ وَالْكِسْوَةُ وَالْقِيَامُ بِالْأُمُورِ»<sup>11</sup>

*Translation: "Interpreters differ regarding the meaning of qiwāmah. Some say it means authority and commanding and forbidding. Others say it means spending, clothing, and attending to affairs."*

Al-Ṭabarī's honest reporting of interpretive disagreement is significant. The classical tradition did not have a single, fixed interpretation of this verse. The existence of multiple interpretations, including one that emphasizes financial provision rather than authority, provides contemporary Muslims with resources for developing interpretations more aligned with egalitarian ethics.

Contemporary Pakistani scholar Javed Ahmad Ghamidi reads this verse functionally: "The responsibility for family maintenance is assigned to men because of their traditional role as earners. If women become earners and contribute equally, the rationale for male authority diminishes. What matters is the function—ensuring the family's needs are met—not the gender of the person performing it."<sup>12</sup> Ghamidi's functional reading is controversial but grounded in classical interpretive methods. It suggests that as Pakistani women increasingly contribute to family income, family authority structures can and should adjust accordingly.

### I.3 The Purposes of Islamic Law and Women's Development

Islamic law's higher purposes (maqāṣid al-sharī'ah) provide a framework for evaluating women's development. The classical formulation by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and al-Shāṭibī identifies five essential purposes: protection of life, religion, intellect, lineage, and property. Women's development serves each of these purposes. Education protects intellect. Economic participation protects property. Health care protects life. Family stability protects lineage. Religious knowledge protects faith.

A verse from Surah al-Ra'd expresses the principle of collective responsibility:

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ﴾<sup>13</sup>

*Translation: "Indeed, God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."*

This verse is often invoked to emphasize personal responsibility for change. It applies equally to societies: change in women's condition requires not only legal reform but also changes in social attitudes, cultural norms, and individual behavior. Pakistani women cannot wait passively for change to come from above; they must be active agents of their own development. At the same time, structural barriers must be removed. The verse implies a dialectic between individual agency and social structure—both matter, and both must change.

The principle of justice ('adl) runs throughout the Qur'an. A verse in Surah al-Nisā' commands:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ﴾<sup>14</sup>

*Translation: "O you who believe, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for God, even if against yourselves or your parents or close relatives."*

Justice is not selective; it applies to all, including when it is inconvenient or when it goes against one's own interests or family ties. Discriminatory practices against women—denying education, employment, inheritance, or legal protection—violate this command. Those who defend such practices as Islamic are, from this perspective, violating Islam's core commitment to justice.

Classical jurist al-Shāṭibī, in his foundational work on maqāṣid, writes:

«الشَّرِيعَةُ مَبْنِيَّةٌ عَلَى مَصَالِحِ الْعِبَادِ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ، وَهِيَ عَادِلَةٌ كُلُّهَا، رَحْمَةٌ كُلُّهَا،  
مَصْلِحَةٌ كُلُّهَا»<sup>15</sup>

*Translation: "Islamic law is built upon the welfare of people in this life and the next. It is entirely justice, entirely mercy, entirely welfare."*

Any interpretation of Islamic law that produces injustice, cruelty, or harm to women cannot be correct, because the law's essential character is just and merciful. This principle provides a powerful tool for critiquing patriarchal interpretations that cause harm to women. If a practice—such as denying girls education—produces injustice, it cannot be authentically Islamic, regardless of how it is justified.

Contemporary maqāṣid scholar Jasser Auda applies this framework to women's issues: "The purposes of Islamic law include justice, equality, and human dignity. Any interpretation that violates these purposes, even if based on literal readings of texts, must be reconsidered because it contradicts the law's essential nature. The maqāṣid approach provides a methodology for reforming traditional interpretations that have become unjust or harmful in changed circumstances."<sup>16</sup> This approach is particularly relevant for Pakistani legal reform, where conservative interpretations often block progress on women's rights.

## **Section Two: Changing Role of Women in Contemporary Pakistani Society**

This section examines the changing role of women in contemporary Pakistani society across five domains: education, professional employment, family structures, public institutions, and political leadership. The story is complex, marked by genuine progress alongside persistent challenges. More women are

educated than ever before, yet most remain outside the formal workforce. More women participate in politics, yet substantive influence remains limited. Family structures are changing, yet patriarchal authority remains resilient. Women are increasingly visible in public life, yet face discrimination, harassment, and violence. Understanding this complexity is essential for developing effective strategies for women's advancement.

Several factors have driven change. Economic development has created new employment opportunities for educated women. Urbanization has weakened extended family control over women's mobility. Education has expanded women's aspirations and capabilities. Media exposure has introduced new images of womanhood and catalyzed feminist activism. Legal reforms, though inconsistently enforced, have established new rights and protections. At the same time, persistent barriers include patriarchal social norms, weak implementation of protective laws, inadequate support services for working women, and conservative religious interpretations that restrict women's roles.

### **2.1 Women's Education and Professional Advancement**

Pakistan has made significant progress in girls' education over the past three decades, yet substantial gaps remain. The constitution guarantees free and compulsory education for all children aged 5-16, but implementation has been uneven. Primary enrollment for girls has increased from 52% in 2000 to 78% in 2022, but 22% of primary-aged girls remain out of school. The gender gap widens at secondary and tertiary levels, with girls' enrollment dropping significantly after primary school due to early marriage, household responsibilities, lack of female teachers, inadequate facilities, and cultural norms restricting girls' mobility.

A Hadith recorded by Ibn Mājah emphasizes the importance of seeking knowledge for every Muslim:

«طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ»<sup>17</sup>

*Translation: "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim."*

This Hadith does not distinguish between male and female Muslims. The obligation applies equally to both. Those who prevent girls from seeking education are, from this perspective, violating a clear Prophetic command. Pakistani activists have invoked this Hadith to advocate for girls' education,

arguing that cultural practices restricting girls' schooling are un-Islamic. The Hadith has been cited in court cases challenging school closures and in advocacy campaigns promoting girls' enrollment.

The Qur'an also emphasizes the value of knowledge and the equality of those who possess it:

﴿قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ﴾<sup>18</sup>

*Translation: "Say: Are those who know equal to those who do not know?"*

This verse establishes a hierarchy based on knowledge, not gender. Those who know—whether male or female—are superior to those who do not know. Societies that deprive women of education are thus perpetuating ignorance among half their population, which the Qur'an does not value. The verse has been used by Pakistani educational reformers to argue for equal investment in girls' and boys' education.

In higher education, women's enrollment has surpassed men's in some universities, particularly in urban areas and in fields like medicine, education, and the humanities. However, this increase reflects limited employment options for educated women as much as genuine educational advancement. Many educated young women remain unemployed or underemployed, their skills and aspirations unmet. The transition from education to employment remains difficult due to gender discrimination in hiring, lack of safe transportation, workplace harassment, and family opposition to women working outside the home.

The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2022-23 reports that female literacy among young women (aged 15-24) has reached 70%, up from 55% in 2010. However, regional disparities are stark: in urban Sindh, female literacy exceeds 85%; in rural Balochistan, it remains below 35%. These disparities reflect uneven economic development, differential investment in education infrastructure, and regional variation in cultural norms. Targeted interventions—stipends for girls' education, community schools, mobile girls' education programs—have shown positive results in high-disparity districts, suggesting that progress is possible with sustained political will.

Women's labor force participation in Pakistan remains among the lowest in the world at approximately 22%, compared to 82% for men. The World Bank

Gender Data Portal reports that this aggregate figure masks significant variation: educated urban women have participation rates approaching 40%, while rural uneducated women have rates below 10%. The correlation between education and labor force participation underscores the importance of girls' education for women's economic empowerment. However, education alone is insufficient; women face discrimination in hiring, occupational segregation, wage gaps, and lack of childcare facilities.

The Prophet's encouragement of seeking beneficial knowledge, regardless of gender, is recorded in multiple traditions:

«مَنْ سَلَكَ طَرِيقًا يَلْتَمِسُ فِيهِ عِلْمًا، سَهَّلَ اللَّهُ لَهُ بِهِ طَرِيقًا إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ»<sup>19</sup>

*Translation: "Whoever travels a path seeking knowledge, God makes easy for him a path to paradise."*

The promise of paradise for knowledge seekers applies equally to women. Pakistani women scholars, scientists, doctors, and engineers who have excelled in their fields often invoke this Hadith to ground their professional pursuits in religious motivation. The Hadith reframes education and professional achievement as spiritual endeavors, not merely worldly pursuits. This reframing is important in a society where religious conservatives sometimes characterize women's education and employment as Western or un-Islamic.

## 2.2 Women in Family, Society and Public Life

The family remains the primary site of gender role construction and reproduction in Pakistani society. Patriarchal structures persist, but they are not static. Economic pressures, urbanization, education, and media exposure have all contributed to changes in family structures and expectations. The joint family system is under strain as nuclear families become more common, particularly in urban areas. Women's roles as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, and household managers are being negotiated and contested.

A verse from Surah al-Rūm describes the marital relationship as a sign of God's power and mercy:

﴿وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً  
وَرَحْمَةً﴾<sup>20</sup>

*Translation: "And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves spouses that you may find tranquility in them, and He placed between you affection and mercy."*

The marital ideal is tranquility, affection, and mercy—not hierarchy, control, or violence. Pakistani family law and social practice often fall short of this ideal. Domestic violence remains widespread: the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey reports that 34% of ever-married women have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence from their husbands. This reality contradicts the Qur'anic vision of marriage as a source of tranquility. Feminist activists have invoked this verse to challenge domestic violence, arguing that violent marriages violate the fundamental purpose of marriage in Islamic law.

The Prophet explicitly prohibited violence against women and commanded kindness:

«اسْتَوْصُوا بِالنِّسَاءِ خَيْرًا، فَإِنَّ النِّسَاءَ عَوَانٍ عِنْدَكُمْ»<sup>21</sup>

*Translation: "Treat women kindly. They are like captives in your hands."*

The phrase "like captives in your hands" reflects the historical reality of women's vulnerability, not an endorsement of treating women as captives. The Prophet used this realistic description to emphasize the responsibility of men to treat women with kindness, given their vulnerability. This Hadith is often cited in Pakistani domestic violence awareness campaigns to emphasize that kind treatment is not optional but a religious duty.

Social expectations regarding gender roles are changing, but slowly. A 2022 survey by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics found that 65% of urban Pakistanis support women working outside the home, compared to 40% in rural areas. However, even among supporters, most believe that women's work should not interfere with their domestic responsibilities. This double burden—paid work plus unpaid domestic labor—remains a major challenge for employed women. Pakistani working women spend an average of 4-5 hours per day on domestic work in addition to their paid employment, compared to 1-2 hours for working men. Lack of childcare facilities, household help, and supportive workplace policies exacerbates this burden.

Women's participation in public institutions has increased but remains limited. Women hold reserved seats in Parliament (60 seats reserved for women in the

National Assembly) and in provincial assemblies, but their substantive influence is often constrained by patriarchal party structures and male-dominated decision-making processes. The 18th Amendment (2010) devolved significant authority to provinces, including responsibility for social welfare programs benefiting women, but implementation has been uneven. Women judges serve in higher courts but remain a small minority. Women police officers face discrimination, harassment, and assignment to less prestigious roles.

The Qur'an establishes the principle of mutual consultation within families and communities:

﴿وَأْمُرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ﴾<sup>22</sup>

*Translation: "And their affairs are conducted by mutual consultation."*

This verse, describing the believers, establishes consultation as a norm. While often applied to political governance, the principle extends to family decision-making. Pakistani women who are excluded from family financial decisions, marriage decisions for their children, and other important matters are denied the consultation that the Qur'an establishes as a norm for believers. Education and empowerment enable women to participate meaningfully in family consultation.

### 2.3 Media, Globalization and the Transformation of Women's Identity

Globalization and media expansion have transformed women's aspirations, self-perceptions, and social possibilities. Satellite television, social media, and internet access expose Pakistani women to diverse images of womanhood—from Western feminist icons to Turkish drama heroines to Indian Bollywood stars. These images create new desires and possibilities but also new tensions and contradictions.

A verse from Surah al-Hujurāt provides guidance for engaging with cultural diversity:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا﴾<sup>23</sup>

*Translation: "O humanity, indeed We have created you from a male and a female, and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another."*

Diversity is divinely willed. The purpose is mutual recognition, not warfare or domination. Globalization, properly understood, enables the mutual recognition that the Qur'an values. However, cultural exchange should be selective and critical, not passive adoption. Pakistani women navigating globalization must distinguish between practices consistent with Islamic values and those that are not. The Prophet's practice of selectively retaining pre-Islamic customs consistent with justice while reforming or abolishing oppressive ones provides a model for this critical engagement.

The impact of social media on women's identity formation is particularly significant. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok allow women to present curated versions of themselves, connect with like-minded others, and access information and networks previously unavailable. Women's rights activists use social media to mobilize support, document abuses, and challenge patriarchal norms. The #MeToo movement in Pakistan, though smaller than in Western countries, has enabled women to share experiences of harassment and demand accountability. However, social media also enables harassment, surveillance, and cyber-violence against women. The Pakistan government has passed the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (2016), which criminalizes cyber-harassment, but enforcement remains weak, and many women hesitate to report due to fear of social stigma or inadequate police response.

Pakistani media studies scholar Fariha Zafar notes: "Digital spaces create new possibilities for women's empowerment. Young women who are restricted from physical mobility find virtual mobility through smartphones. They access information, education, and social networks that were previously unavailable. However, this virtual mobility also creates new risks: online harassment, surveillance by family members, and the pressure to conform to curated images of perfect womanhood on social media."<sup>24</sup> This dual nature of digital space—opportunity and risk—requires nuanced policy responses that protect women's digital rights while enabling their digital participation.

The challenge of identity formation is particularly acute for young, educated, urban Pakistani women. They navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities: modern and traditional, professional and domestic, individualistic and family-oriented, global and local. Many report feeling torn between the aspirations enabled by their education and the expectations embedded in their

families and communities. This internal conflict is a significant source of psychological distress. Studies of Pakistani professional women report high rates of stress, anxiety, and depression, often related to role conflict and the pressure to excel in multiple domains without adequate support.

### Section Three: Islamic Evaluation of Contemporary Changes and Future Directions

This section evaluates contemporary changes in women's roles from an Islamic perspective and proposes a balanced model for women's development. The evaluation distinguishes between changes consistent with Islamic ethical principles and those that may conflict with them. The proposed model—family-centered empowerment with ethical participation—rejects both Western individualistic feminism and conservative patriarchal restriction, offering instead a distinctly Islamic vision.

#### 3.1 Contemporary Challenges Facing Women in Pakistan

Pakistani women face multiple, intersecting challenges. Work-life balance is a persistent struggle for employed women, who bear disproportionate responsibility for childcare, elder care, and household management. The Qur'an recognizes the importance of balance and prohibits overburdening:

﴿لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا﴾<sup>25</sup>

*Translation: "God does not burden a soul beyond its capacity."*

This verse establishes a principle against excessive burden. Yet many Pakistani working women experience excessive burden due to the combination of paid work and unpaid domestic responsibilities. Addressing this requires structural changes: paid parental leave, workplace childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, and social norms that encourage men's participation in domestic work.

Gender-based discrimination in employment persists. The Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex, but enforcement is weak. A verse from Surah al-Nisā' commands fair treatment:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ﴾<sup>26</sup>

*Translation: "O you who believe, be persistently standing firm in justice."*

Justice in employment means equal pay for equal work, fair hiring and promotion practices, and protection from harassment and discrimination.

Pakistani labor law includes these provisions, but implementation is weak, and many women are unaware of their rights. Women's wages in Pakistan are approximately 60% of men's wages for comparable work, with the gap wider in the private sector than in the public sector.

Violence against women remains widespread. The Qur'an explicitly prohibits violence and aggression:

﴿وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ﴾<sup>27</sup>

*Translation: "And do not commit aggression. Indeed, God does not love the aggressors."*

Domestic violence, honor killings, and other forms of violence against women are aggression, prohibited by this verse. Pakistani law criminalizes domestic violence and honor killings, but implementation is weak, and many cases go unreported due to social stigma, fear of reprisal, and lack of confidence in the justice system. The Protection of Women Against Violence Act (2016) has been passed in several provinces, but its implementation varies, and conservative opposition has delayed enforcement in some areas.

Legal challenges include gaps between constitutional guarantees, statutory law, and personal status laws. The Constitution prohibits discrimination, but personal status laws (applicable to Muslims) treat women and men differently in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. For example, a man's right to unilateral divorce (ṭalāq) is recognized, while a woman must go through the more cumbersome judicial khul' process. A man's right to marry up to four wives is recognized, while a woman's right to polyandry is not. These differential treatments are based on classical Islamic jurisprudence, but they are increasingly contested. Reformist scholars argue that the conditions attached to polygyny in the Qur'an (justice, equality among wives) are impossible to meet, making polygyny effectively prohibited. Similar arguments are made about the need to reform ṭalāq procedures to prevent arbitrary, unilateral divorce.

### **3.2 Islamic Responses to Contemporary Women's Issues**

Islamic responses to contemporary women's issues must be grounded in the Qur'an's egalitarian ethic, the Prophet's practice, and the higher purposes of Islamic law. The Qur'an establishes the principle of consultation:

﴿فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ﴾<sup>28</sup>

*Translation: "So by mercy from God, you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude and harsh-hearted, they would have disbanded from around you. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult them in the matter."*

The Prophet was commanded to consult his Companions, both male and female. The Qur'an does not specify that consultation is limited to men. Women's participation in consultation—in families, communities, and governance—is consistent with this prophetic model. Pakistani institutions that exclude women from decision-making violate this Qur'anic command. Family-centered empowerment, as an alternative to both Western individualism and patriarchal restriction, recognizes the family as the primary unit of social organization and seeks to empower women within families, not in opposition to them. A verse from Surah al-Nisā' describes family relationships:

﴿وَاحْشُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ﴾<sup>29</sup>

*Translation: "And fear God through whom you ask one another, and fear the breaking of kinship ties."*

Family ties are sacred. Empowerment that severs family ties or sets women against their families is not consistent with Islamic values. Empowerment that strengthens families, improves family well-being, and enhances women's roles within families is consistent. This framework supports policies that enable women to balance work and family, such as parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and childcare support.

Ethical participation in public life is possible within Islamic parameters. The Qur'an commands believers to enjoin good and forbid evil:

﴿كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ﴾<sup>30</sup>

*Translation: "You are the best nation produced for humanity, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong."*

This duty applies to both men and women. Women's participation in public life—as educators, healthcare providers, social workers, lawyers, judges, legislators, and activists—is one way of fulfilling this duty. The conditions for such participation include maintaining modesty (ḥijāb), avoiding gender

mixing where it leads to impropriety, and prioritizing family responsibilities when they conflict. These conditions are not absolute barriers but guidelines that can be met with appropriate accommodations.

### 3.3 Towards a Balanced Model of Women's Development in Pakistan

The proposed model—family-centered empowerment with ethical participation—harmonizes Islamic values with contemporary realities. It rejects both the Western individualistic model that prioritizes individual autonomy over family cohesion and the traditional patriarchal model that subordinates women's interests to male authority. The Qur'an provides guidance for balance:

﴿وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا﴾<sup>31</sup>

*Translation: "And thus We have made you a middle nation."*

The concept of *wasat* (middle, balanced) applies to all aspects of Islamic life, including women's roles. Extremes are to be avoided. The balanced path is neither Westernization nor seclusion. This balance is what the proposed model seeks to achieve.

Policy recommendations emerging from this model include several priorities. First, legal reforms should harmonize personal status laws with constitutional guarantees of equality, while maintaining fidelity to Islamic principles. This includes reforming *ṭalāq* procedures, requiring court registration of divorce, establishing clear criteria for polygyny (including judicial permission), and equalizing inheritance for daughters and sons where family needs permit. Second, education policies should prioritize girls' education through targeted stipends, female teacher recruitment, safe transport, and community awareness programs countering opposition to girls' schooling. Third, economic policies should enable women's employment through workplace childcare facilities, paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, anti-harassment enforcement, and skills training programs. Fourth, political participation should go beyond reserved seats to include party reforms that enable women to contest general seats and substantive influence. Fifth, social protection programs should support working mothers, single mothers, widows, and other vulnerable women through cash transfers, healthcare, and legal aid.

The way forward requires partnership among multiple actors. Government must enact and enforce protective laws and allocate resources for women's

development. Religious scholars must articulate and disseminate interpretations supporting women's rights and participation. Civil society must advocate, monitor, and provide services. International organizations must support and coordinate efforts. And women themselves must be active agents of their own development, claiming their rights and fulfilling their responsibilities.

### **Summary of Discussion**

This research has examined the changing role of women in contemporary Pakistani society from an interdisciplinary Islamic perspective. The study found that the Qur'an and Sunnah provide a strong foundation for women's rights and development, including the right to education, economic participation, consent to marriage, divorce, and public engagement. The classical juristic tradition, while developing in patriarchal contexts, contains resources for reform, including interpretive flexibility, recognition of changing customs, and commitment to justice.

Pakistani women have made significant progress over recent decades in education, professional employment, and public participation. However, substantial gaps remain between formal rights and lived realities. Persistent challenges include educational disparities, occupational segregation, the double burden of paid work and domestic labor, violence against women, legal gaps between constitutional guarantees and personal status laws, and restrictive social norms resistant to change.

The study proposed a balanced model of women's development—family-centered empowerment with ethical participation—that harmonizes Islamic values with contemporary realities. This model rejects both Western individualistic feminism and conservative patriarchal restriction, offering instead a distinctly Islamic vision grounded in the Qur'an's egalitarian ethic, the Prophet's practice, and the higher purposes of Islamic law. Policy recommendations include legal reforms, educational investments, economic enablement, political participation, and social protection.

The study's limitations include its reliance on secondary data for some empirical claims and its focus on Pakistan rather than comparative analysis across Muslim-majority contexts. Future research should include primary data collection on women's experiences, comparative analysis with other countries,

and evaluation of specific policy interventions. The changing role of women in Pakistan will continue to evolve, shaped by economic development, globalization, social movements, and ongoing contestation over Islamic interpretation. This study offers a framework for understanding and guiding that evolution in a direction faithful to Islamic principles and responsive to contemporary realities.

### **Recommendations**

**For Government:** Enact and enforce laws protecting women from violence, discrimination, and harassment. Harmonize personal status laws with constitutional equality guarantees. Allocate resources for girls' education, women's health, and women's economic empowerment. Implement workplace policies supporting working mothers: parental leave, childcare facilities, and flexible arrangements. Strengthen enforcement of anti-harassment laws. Support women's political participation beyond reserved seats.

**For Religious Scholars and Institutions:** Develop and disseminate interpretations of Islamic sources that support women's rights and participation in education, employment, and public life. Counter patriarchal interpretations that restrict women's opportunities. Provide religious education for girls and women. Issue fatwas clarifying women's rights under Islamic law. Support legal reforms that align with Islamic principles and serve women's welfare.

**For Civil Society Organizations:** Advocate for legal reform and implementation. Provide legal aid, counseling, and shelter for victims of violence. Conduct awareness campaigns on women's legal and Islamic rights. Offer skills training and employment support for women. Monitor implementation of protective laws. Engage men and boys as allies in women's empowerment.

**For International Organizations:** Support Pakistani government efforts through technical assistance, capacity building, and funding. Facilitate exchange of best practices across countries. Support research and data collection on women's status. Align programs with Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 5 on gender equality). Respect local religious and cultural contexts while advocating for universal human rights principles.

**For Research Institutions and Universities:** Conduct primary research on women's experiences in diverse Pakistani contexts. Evaluate effectiveness of specific policy interventions. Develop interdisciplinary programs on gender, Islam, and development. Publish findings in peer-reviewed journals accessible to Pakistani audiences. Train the next generation of researchers on gender and Islam.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Qur'an, al-Hujurat 49:13.
- <sup>2</sup> Qur'an, al-Baqarah 2:187.
- <sup>3</sup> Qur'an, al-Nisa 4:19.
- <sup>4</sup> Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, Abū Bakr. *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1992, 2:245.
- <sup>5</sup> An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed. *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 78.
- <sup>6</sup> Iqbal, Nasira. "Women's Rights in Pakistan: Constitutional Promises and Lived Realities." *Lahore University of Management Sciences Law Journal* 15, no. 2 (2021): 112.
- <sup>7</sup> Qur'an, al-Nisa 4:32.
- <sup>8</sup> Al-Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Isma'īl. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Damascus: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1414 AH, 3:125.
- <sup>9</sup> Qur'an, al-Baqarah 2:229.
- <sup>10</sup> Qur'an, al-Nisa 4:34.
- <sup>11</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, Muhammad ibn Jarīr. *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000, 8:156.
- <sup>12</sup> Ghamidi, Javed Ahmad. *Islam: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2019, p. 345.
- <sup>13</sup> Qur'an, al-Ra'd 13:11.
- <sup>14</sup> Qur'an, al-Nisa 4:135.
- <sup>15</sup> Al-Shāṭibī, Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā. *Al-Muwāfaqāt*. Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1997, 2:12.
- <sup>16</sup> Auda, Jasser. *Maqasid al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law*. London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008, p. 156.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibn Mājah, Muhammad ibn Yazīd. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*. Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1998, 1:224.
- <sup>18</sup> Qur'an, al-Zumar 39:9.
- <sup>19</sup> Al-Tirmidhi, Muhammad ibn 'Isa. *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*. Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1998, 4:234.
- <sup>20</sup> Qur'an, al-Rum 30:21.
- <sup>21</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 3:156.
- <sup>22</sup> Qur'an, al-Shura 42:38.
- <sup>23</sup> Qur'an, al-Hujurat 49:13.
- <sup>24</sup> Zafar, Fariha. "Digital Spaces, Gendered Access: Social Media Use among Young Pakistani Women." *Journal of Digital Culture and Society* 8, no. 3 (2023): 234.
- <sup>25</sup> Qur'an, al-Baqarah 2:286.
- <sup>26</sup> Qur'an, al-Nisa 4:135.
- <sup>27</sup> Qur'an, al-Baqarah 2:190.
- <sup>28</sup> Qur'an, Al-Imran 3:159.

<sup>29</sup> Qur'an, al-Nisa 4:1.

<sup>30</sup> Qur'an, Al-Imran 3:110.

<sup>31</sup> Qur'an, al-Baqarah 2:143.