

# WOMEN ACTIVISM: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATED ELITES IN MALAYSIA AND PAKISTAN<sup>i</sup>

Aurangzaib Alamgir

Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS), Quetta Pakistan.

Corresponding Author: [alamgeer84@hotmail.com](mailto:alamgeer84@hotmail.com)

**ABSTRACT:** *Women activists in both Malaysia and Pakistan can be categorized as traditionalist and reformers. While reformers advocate a modern interpretation of the Islamic text – traditionalists merely reject any fresh exegesis and strictly follow the conventional tradition thereby giving authority to men to interpret the holy Qur'an. The study focuses on the discourses of reformers both in Malaysia and Pakistan and evaluates the perception of educated elites about them. Using a quantitative approach, the population size is determined by stratified random sampling. The findings of the study suggest that the respondents have a mixed response on the strategies and programmes of the reformers depending on their individual perception.*

## INTRODUCTION

Women activism both in Pakistan and Malaysia has been an important debate in the academic discourses having connotations with fundamentalism, extremism, state politics and the women's rights organizations. Both reformers and traditionalist treat women's activism as a vital agenda not only for gender equality but also an important element for social change. Their debates and discourses are well rooted in the rise of Islamic revivalism occurring in the later part of the nineteenth century resulting in the formation of fundamentalist movements – thereby posing a threat to reformers advocating women's equal rights and status [1, 2, 3]. As a counter strategy, women groups reject fundamentalism and women oppression often justified in the name of religion [4, 5, 6, 7].

While advocating women's rights in Islam both traditionalist and reformers arrive at a different point of view but both claim that their discourses are well rooted in Islam. Traditionalist define very specific social roles for women mentioning few are; dress code, women's discouragement in media, sports and film industry and women's primary roles as house wives [8]. In contrast, reformers highlight passages from the Islamic text that supports women's involvement in all spheres of life. They question the enforced limits on women, discourage the practice of polygamy and oppose all forms of discrimination against women [9, 10].

An important approach that reformers employ in promoting women's rights is to reinterpret the Qur'an historically and culturally by referring to the early years of Islam. They reinterpret and reread the Qur'an as women and Muslim feminists and advance an exegesis that is more affirmative of women's rights [4]. Moreover, the reformers also believe that the oppression of Muslim women across Muslim societies mainly comes through patriarchal doctrines and the Islamic laws that are propagated in terms of culture and religion [11]. Indeed, there is a wide array of literature on the topic of women in Islam and many recent contributions on gender in Islam. Ideologically, the literature on both has been charged with the central argument of the interpretation of texts as the main cause for female oppression [12, 13, 14].

This study is grounded in a comparative analysis of educated elite's perception in Malaysia and Pakistan about reformers

and issues of their advocacy namely interpretation of the Quran, reformation of the Islamic *Shari'ah* law and restrictions on polygamy - to ascertain the extent to which it is translated into the local cultures of Malaysia and Pakistan. The study finds whether there is a difference of perception between Pakistani and Malaysian respondents on the reformation of the Islamic *Shari'ah* law, restrictions on polygamy and interpretation of the Qur'an by Muslim women in terms of location and field of study?

Perhaps the strongest weapon in the arsenal of fundamentalists is the emphasis on a threatened Muslim identity that goes hand-in-hand with the concept of nationalism and women as symbol of this national/religious identity. In this context, a new experience or a new idea such as women's greater role and authority in religion on the part of civil society is taken as a conspiracy to destroy the harmony at home and to promote the norms of Western society [15]. These aspects of fundamentalism can be seen at work in Malaysia and Pakistan. For instance, the Islamic fundamentalist groups in Malaysia can be seen in the form of political parties such as PAS and Islamic revivalist movements such as ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or Islamic Youth Movement) or JIM (Jamaah Islah Malaysia). These Islamic fundamentalist forces share a common ideology with that of many Islamic movements in Arab countries. Central to this Islamization project are Muslim women, their status in the family and in society. They seek to establish a society that encourages gender segregation and controls sexuality. For example, throughout the 1980s, the Islamic fundamentalists in Malaysia promoted the wearing of tudung (*hijab*) and *jubah* (a long dress that covers women's full body) as Islamic attire compulsory for all Muslim women [5].

Furthermore, when PAS took over the reins of power in the State of Kelantan in 1990, they placed a regulation of dress code for Muslim women in public spaces. Not only that, they also promoted ideas like gender segregation that is in contrast to the traditional Muslim culture in Malaysia. These segregation efforts included: separate seating for men and women in public events, separate payment counters in markets and banks, banned unisex hair dressing saloons, and barred female employees

from night shifts. Their typical mindset is based on a belief that unveiled women bring immorality to the society. For them, modern dressing increases the incidences of rape. The primary role of Muslim women is as obedient wives and dutiful mothers [5]. Women always require the permission of a husband for outdoor activities, namely, for shopping, visiting her parents or mingling with friends [16]. In response to the Islamic fundamentalists, Zainah Anwar (Malaysian feminist) argues that instead of forcing Muslim women to live a life of segregation, Muslim men should be made responsible for their action. If men are lustful and not in self-control, why should women be made responsible for it. She further explains this point in the light of the Qur'an that commands men to lower their gaze and prevent immorality in the society.

In the case of Pakistan, Islamic fundamentalism emerged in the 1980s from two different directions: (1) General Zia-ul-Haq directives to Islamize the country by enforcing Islamization laws; (2) traditional Islam appears as a major source to govern public life. The *Deobandis*, *Ahl-i-Hadith* and the *Barelvis* each with a large following are rivals and engage in debates on theological issues. Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan contend that women's rights organizations promote a western agenda and they are enemies of Islam and Pakistan [15]. Fundamentalists oppose modernity and equate modernity with vulgarity that promotes immorality in the Pakistani society. They define Islam as anti-modern and anti-democratic. They define a very limited role for women, for instance, any sort of education that goes beyond reading the Qur'an is forbidden for them; wearing of *hijab* is compulsory; a woman's primary job is of a house wife. To reiterate the dilemma faced by women's rights groups and advocates, "all attempts to struggle on behalf of women's specific interests are viewed as treasons: treason towards the nation or the community, towards religion, towards culture, in short towards the ever-threatened identity and collusion with the external enemy" [17]. Clearly, the question of religion and a Muslim identity is not one that can be avoided by women organizations.

Many Muslim feminists are involved in reinterpreting the Qur'an, or highlighting those passages that give women more rights but have been neglected. For example, Shahidian points a verse from the Qur'an "Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth to maintain them" [18]. For Shahidian, this verse by no means refers to men's superiority over women, but reveals a social reality and men's position in marital life. In other words, men should be treated as women's "keepers" not superiors. It is apparent from the preceding discussion why women's organizations and activists turn to Islamic feminism. The threat from fundamentalists, the fear of marginalization by not only the religious community but the masses is all valid reasons for turning to Islamic feminism. Furthermore, the need to counterbalance the image as western agents, as well as the desire to promote an "indigenous" solution to women's issues that not only addresses women's concerns but also

simultaneously challenges the negative stereotypes of Muslims in the West, also push women's organizations and activists in the direction of Islamic feminism.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method chosen for this study is quantitative survey. The survey provides with an efficient means of gathering data from a large number of respondents that would not be possible under other methodological techniques such as interviews and participant observations [19]. The participants for this study come from two universities: University of Malaya, Malaysia (UM) and the University of Karachi (UoK), Pakistan. The reason why universities were chosen is based on the nature of the topic which is sensitive in both countries especially in the context of Pakistan.

Three faculties are chosen from each university namely, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Islamic Studies and the Sciences. The issues discussed in this research are academically very much linked with Islam; therefore, it is imperative to include Islamic Faculty in both universities. The issues studied in this research are also academically liked with the students of Arts and Social Sciences as they are taught in various academic disciplines, for instance, Gender Studies, Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology. In order to receive varying perceptions about the issues studied in this research, Faculty of Science is also included.

This study employs Krejcie and Morgan sample size table because of its capability to acquire information from a small group of respondents that represents the entire population. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's sample size determination, the sample size would be as follows 464. Since, the population of this study is known and divided in groups and subgroups (faculties and departments), stratified random sampling is chosen because of its ability to deal with strata and sub-strata (groups and subgroups) as argued by Albright that stratified random sampling is useful when the population is known and divided into groups and subgroups [20]. The data collected is analyzed through SPSS and the survey utilized a 5-item Likert Scale with responses as follows: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Undecided = 3, Agree = 4, Strongly Agree = 5.

A pilot study was conducted before the actual data collection. The pilot study helped to test assumptions in relation to the research objectives of the study [19]. The correlation coefficient was .75 and .67 respectively meaning that there is a strong relationship and this relationship is not happening by chance at 95 per cent confidence interval or  $p < .05$ .

## RESULTS

### Findings on Islamic *Shari'ah* Law based on Location and Field of Study

Table 2 presents the results on Islamic *Shari'ah* Law based on location. For seven Islamic *Shari'ah* Law items, five of them show significant results, these items are B1, B4, B5, B6, and B7.

**Table 2: Mann Whitney U Test on Islamic *Shari'ah* Law**

<i>Shari'ah</i> Law	Location	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
B1: Islamic <i>Shari'ah</i> law Protects Women's Rights	UM	270.28	18578.00	48959.00	-5.87	.000
	UoK	199.02				
B2: Muslim women enjoy equal status under the Islamic <i>Shari'ah</i> law	UM	243.44	24429.50	54810.50	-1.70	.088
	UoK	222.81				
B3: Islamic <i>Shari'ah</i> law sufficiently protects women in the context of polygamy	UM	232.93	26720.00	57101.00	-.06	.946
	UoK	232.12				
B4: Islamic <i>Shari'ah</i> law sufficiently protects women in the context of divorce	UM	246.38	23788.50	54169.50	-2.19	.028
	UoK	220.20				
B5: The Muslim women's issues in the <i>Shari'ah</i> Courts are to be dealt with not only by male judges but also female judges	UM	264.33	19875.00	50256.00	-4.97	.000
	UoK	204.29				
B6: Enactment of <i>Hudud</i> laws to deal with criminal matters	UM	276.67	17184.50	47565.50	-7.03	.000
	UoK	193.36				
B7: Reformation of the <i>Shari'ah</i> law by Islamic Feminists	UM	219.03	23876.50	47747.50	-2.11	.035
	UoK	244.44				

**Table 5: Mann Whitney U Test on Polygamy**

Polygamy	Location	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
C1: Polygamy is a social or moral issue	UM	231.27	26545.50	50416.50	-.19	.845
	UoK	233.59				
C2: Polygamy is a form of sexism	UM	198.41	19382.50	43253.50	-5.32	.000
	UoK	262.71				
C3: Would you like to have a polygamous marriage	UM	255.45	21810.50	52191.50	-3.75	.000
	UoK	212.16				
C4: As polygamy is an Islamic practice, it cannot be questioned	UM	261.97	20389.50	50770.50	-4.62	.000
	UoK	206.38				
C5: Polygamy brings more benefits to men than women	UM	211.49	22234.50	46105.50	-3.33	.001
	UoK	251.12				
C6: Polygamy should be banned	UM	218.33	23725.50	47596.50	-2.22	.026
	UoK	245.05				
C7: Divorce affects women more than men	UM	213.41	22651.50	46522.50	-3.04	.002
	UoK	249.42				
C8: The laws pertaining to the practice of polygamy should be made stricter.	UM	239.76	25232.00	55613.00	-1.15	.249
	UoK	226.07				
C9: The laws pertaining to the practice of polygamy should be implemented and followed properly.	UM	253.36	22266.00	52647.00	-3.34	.001
	UoK	214.01				
C10: Reformers calls for restriction on polygamy	UM	233.74	26544.50	56925.50	-.20	.841
	UoK	231.4				

The results show that UM compared to UoK students' agree on statements such as Islamic *Shari'ah* law protects their rights; Islamic *Shari'ah* law sufficiently protects women from divorce; Muslim women's issues in the *Shari'ah* Courts can be dealt with not only by male judges but also female judges and they also agree with the enactment of *Hudud* laws to deal with criminal matters. In contrast, UoK students' support reformers efforts to reform Islamic *Shari'ah* law.

#### Findings on Polygamy

Table 5 presents the results on polygamy. For the eleven polygamy items, seven of them yield significant results; these items are C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C7 and C9.

The results show that UoK students agree on statements such as polygamy is a form of sexism; polygamy brings more benefits to men than women; divorce affects women more than men; and that polygamy should be banned. Subsequently, the level of agreement among UM students is higher in terms of their involvement in a polygamous marriage; polygamy is an Islamic practice and it cannot be questioned and that polygamy laws should be implemented and administered properly.

#### Findings on Interpretation of the Qur'an by Muslim Women

Table 1.7 presents the results of the Mann Whitney U Test. For the six items for interpretation of the Qur'an, three of them yield significant results; these items are D1, D4 and D5. The results show that UM compared to UoK students tend to agree that Qur'an gives liberty not only for Muslim men but also Muslim women; the interpretation of the Qur'an is male dominated and that the women's voices are repressed or muted in the interpretation of the Qur'an.

#### DISCUSSION

Findings of the study illustrate that UM compared to UoK students' agree that the Islamic *Shari'ah* law sufficiently protects their rights; Muslim women's issues in the *Shari'ah* Courts are to be dealt with not only by male judges but also female judges and they agreed on the enactment of *Hudud* laws to deal with criminal matters. The reasons for UM students support can be understood in way that the *Shari'ah* law practiced in Malaysia is unlike the *Hudud* law in Pakistan that had provisions like hand cutting for theft and stoning for adultery [21]. Many respondents in UM believe that the problem is not the *Shari'ah* law but its administration. The administrative problems in the *Shari'ah* system in Malaysia have been discussed in several studies.

**Table 8: Mann Whitney U Test on Interpretation of the Qur'an**

Interpretation of the Qur'an Location	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
D1: The Qur'an gives liberty not only for Muslim men but also Muslim women	UM UoK	248.24 218.55	23382.50	53763.50	-2.47 .013
D2: <i>Ulema</i> who only comprised of men are the only authorized people who should interpret the Qur'an	UM UoK	226.13 238.15	25424.50	49295.50	-1.03 .301
D3: Learned Muslim men and women although not <i>Ulema</i> can also be involved in the interpretation work	UM UoK	222.67 241.21	24671.00	48542.00	-1.53 .125
D4: According to reformers, the interpretation of the Qur'an is male dominated	UM UoK	247.33 219.36	23580.50	53961.50	-2.29 .022
D5: Reformers believe that women's voices are repressed or muted in the interpretation of the Qur'an.	UM UoK	248.42 218.39	23344.00	53725.00	-2.48 .013
D6: Women should be allowed to interpret the Qur'an?	UM UoK	238.65 227.05	25473.00	55854.00	-.97 .329

For instance, a study suggests that *Shari'ah* law in Malaysia is not supportive of women as a woman has to wait for several years before her plea for divorce is heard in the court [22, 23]. Furthermore, the *Shari'ah* Courts have made it difficult for Muslim women to receive a fair hearing because there are no female judges [24, 25].

In the context of Pakistan, respondents tend to agree that Islamic *Shari'ah* law protects women from divorce and they are also more supportive of reformers efforts to reform Islamic *Shari'ah* law. This support is based on women's experiences with Islamic laws in Pakistan as Muslim women in Pakistan have suffered extensively due to the

implementation of Islamic laws [15]. This is consistent with Quraishi who argues that under the *Hudud* and *Shari'ah* laws, women have been subjugated and accused of adultery [21]. In addition, *Hudud* has been a source of discrimination against women and that the law has no clear foundations in the Qur'an [26].

In terms of polygamy, UM students agree that since polygamy is an Islamic practice it cannot be questioned. There are two different angles where UM student's perception can be analyzed: (1) they do not agree that polygamy should be banned and agreed to be involved in it if required and (2) they are in favor of more strict laws

regarding polygamy. The reason why UM students think so is based on the fact that Quranic instructions on polygamy are permissive. Therefore, they are in favor of the practice of polygamy. However, they are aware of the cases where polygamy has been abused. This is consistent with a study that highlights the administrative problems like courts inability to stop a polygamous marriage and the non-uniformity of laws in Malaysia [23].

In contrast, UoK respondents agree that polygamy is a form of sexism and it brings more benefits to men than women and they demanded a ban on polygamy. They also agree that divorce affects women more than men. The reason why UoK students are more reluctant to enter into polygamous marriages is because of women's experiences and sufferings in the patriarchal culture practiced in Pakistan. Under tribal norms, the decision on a women's marriage is taken by the parents without the consent of their daughters. These findings are consistent with several studies. For instance, various studies have questioned the relevancy of polygamy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, recommended restrictions on polygamy and argued that it mistreats women [9, 10]. Others argued that it makes women inferior to men as they can simply pronounce the word '*talak*' (divorce) to initiate a divorce to be approved, whereas women have to go through long channels to acquire this right [27].

In terms of interpretation of the Qur'an by Muslim women, UM students agree that Qur'an gives liberty not only to Muslim men but also Muslim women and therefore they supported reformers view that the interpretation of the Qur'an is male dominated and women's voices are repressed or muted in the interpretation of the Qur'an. On the one hand UM respondents agree that interpretation of the Qur'an is male-dominated and yet on the other hand they are not necessarily in favor of reformers to interpret the Qur'an. These findings are inconsistent with several studies. For instance, some studies contend that the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an made by men mainly depict the male perspective [13]. When present, the female voice is reflective of the male vision, viewpoint and longing [12].

61.4 per cent respondents in UoK remain undecided on statements on interpretation of the Qur'an. This is because interpretation of the Qur'an is a sensitive matter and it seems likely that many do not dare to speak on the issue. In other words, they may agree that Muslim women be allowed to interpret the Qur'an but may be afraid to articulate this least they be accused of apostasy [7, 27].

## CONCLUSION

From reformers point of view, there are certain factors that encourage Muslim women to reread and reinterpret the Qur'an. For instance, in Muslim societies the notion of equality between men and women has been a controversial one – as historically women have not been treated as men's equal. This system of inequality has been imposed by certain administrators and rulers and unfortunately it is often justified in the name of Islam. Before the advent of Islam, Arabs lived in a tradition-bound and male-dominated society – where women were treated as men's property with the right of marriage and divorce by will. Moreover, women were denied

the right to have a husband of their choice and female infanticide was common.

With the advent of Islam, women's position and status improved considerably. Muslim women could have a husband of their choice, limited practice of polygamy, no female genocide, inheritance rights and equal respect and treatment as that of a man. Although, Islam treats men and women equal, however the traditional interpretations of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* could not help to change the dominant position of men in Muslim societies [5].

These aspects of Qura'nic interpretations can be seen at work in both Malaysia and Pakistan as discussed in the literature review. Such interpretations of Qur'an do not favor women and mainly depict a male perspective. Therefore, reformers favor an interpretation of the Qur'an that protects women's equality in Islam. By doing so, they seek to spread the universal message of the Qur'an that guarantees women rights and equality.

The findings of this study contribute further to the above debate. The findings suggest that there are areas where reformers strategies are well received by the respondents of the study. For instance, their efforts to address the administrative issues in the *Shari'ah* system both in Malaysia and Pakistan are well received by the respondents of the study. However, the findings also suggest that respondents are not in favour of reformers groups to involve in the interpretation of the Qur'an. The main reason given is reformers ineligibility towards Arabic language and not knowing the rules of interpretation. A common perception about reformers in both Pakistan and Malaysia is that they are not trained theologians and therefore, respondents are not in their favour interpretation of the Qur'an.

Another factor that creates perception about reformers is the language of their advocacy. For instance, they interchangeably use words like 'ban' and 'restrict' while doing advocacy on polygamy. In case, they use the word ban, the perception goes negative because respondents believe that banning polygamy is never an option as it is against the Qur'anic instructions. But when they use the word restrict, support is more positive as respondents believed that Qur'anic instructions on polygamy as restrictive.

To conclude, throughout this research, I made an effort to disclose the complications that Muslim women activist face in both Pakistan and Malaysia. While doing so, I reached a conclusion that the rights accorded to women in Islam are impressive and somehow comparable with universal human rights, for instance, right to life, liberty, justice, speech, work and privacy. I am also convinced that Qur'an supports the equality between genders and that it is the patriarchal interpretations that are oppressive of women. I have reached a conclusion that Islamic feminism and its fundamentals are negotiable and there is enough room for debates. Such debates will not only help us to understand that we should take into account the religious, cultural, political, economic and social realities to work within the set boundaries but also make common grounds appropriate to social change within Islam and with particular reference to women. For women's rights activists, it is not easy to bring about a change in gender relations both in Pakistan and Malaysia where the traditional approach is still dominant; however it is possible

to take whatever steps they can in a right direction – regardless of how big or small these efforts are.

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