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“Islam and Educational Equality for Muslim Women”

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I. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right for all. It is the key to success and economic growth, not only in developing countries, but also throughout the world. Education is seen as an aspect of religious freedom and an equal right within the teachings of Islam. Internationally, education is seen as a basic fundamental right for all, men and women alike.¹

According to the teachings of Islam, the acquisition of knowledge and education is essential. The duty to acquire knowledge is an obligation imposed upon every Muslim, whether male or female.² But, there are substantial gaps between the teachings of the Qur’an and the manner in which it is practiced, in particular referring to the education for girls and women.

In Muslim majority states³ literacy and educational attainment rates for girls and women are among the worst in the world.⁴ Patriarchal and traditional values have burdened women in Muslim majority communities for centuries.⁵ Although, there has been progress in women’s rights to be educated in Muslim majority states and around the world, there is still no equality. Islamic teachings denounce gender discrimination, but why then are the bulk of Muslim-majority states ranked among the lowest in gender equality in the world?

In this paper, I will discuss the history of women’s rights to education in the Islamic world and current status of women’s literacy and educational in Muslim-majority states and the

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc. A/810 at 7 (1948) [hereinafter UDHR]; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 13-14, Dec. 16, 1966, S. Treaty Doc. No. 95-19, 6 I.L.M. 360 (1967), 993 U.N.T.S. 3 [hereinafter ICESCR].

² The Prophet Muhammad said: “The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim...” Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, Hadith Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 74.

³ Wikipedia, *Islam by country*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country (Apr. 28, 2016); Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, *Member States*, (Apr. 28, 2016), <http://www.oicun.org/3/28/>.

⁴ See discussion *infra* Part IV.

⁵ ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER, *THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM* 23 (3RD ED., 2004).

international community. In Part II of the paper I will briefly describe the history of Islam and the history of advocacy for women's rights within the Islamic faith. In Part III, I will discuss the Islamic views on education and the acquisition of knowledge. I will be focusing primarily on the education of girls and women in Muslim-majority communities. I will describe Muslim women's fundamental and religious right to an education and the acquisition of knowledge. In Part IV, I will discuss the current status of girls' and women's education and literacy in specific Muslim-majority communities around the world. Part V will be highlighting current issues facing girls and women's education; I will highlight modern oppression towards girls and women's education in Muslim-majority communities in the Middle East and Western Africa. In Part VI, I will emphasize the international law and international approach to girls' and women's education and equality throughout the world. In Part VII, I focus on the power of education for women and the benefits it provides for developing countries. I address the benefits of education for women and how education is recognized as the gateway to economic security and opportunity, particularly for girls and women. In Part VIII, I discuss my solutions and strategies for empowering girls and women to be become educated. I will show Muslim-majority communities' need to recognize the importance of women's education in their economic growth and how this can be achieved by education girls, boys, women and men need on women's rights and the benefits of educating women.

Women need to be able to recognize and understand their rights to be educated and they need to be encouraged and empowered enough to do so. Islamic states have been plagued with discrimination against women, and women's education is the key to unlocking the door into developing an equal, modern, and growing society.

II. Brief introduction: Islam and Women’s Rights in early history

To understand the history of the status of women in Muslim majority communities, one must start with the pre-Islamic period.⁶ The pre-Islamic period is referred to as *al-jahiliyah*, which means “the period of ignorance.”⁷ In the pre-Islamic Arabia, women were treated as subordinate to men.⁸ Basically, women enjoyed no rights; they could be inherited as possessions or enslaved.⁹ According to the Qur’an, Arabs during *jahiliyah* would bury their daughters alive.¹⁰ Women during the pre-Islamic period were essentially viewed as property or in even more extreme circumstances, disposable.¹¹

According to Islamic tradition, in the year 610 C.E., the archangel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad Abdullah in a cave outside of Mecca and proclaimed that he, Muhammad, was “God’s messenger.”¹² From that time until his death, Muhammad received revelations, in which the Angel Gabriel spoke the very words of God.¹³ Ultimately, Muhammad’s revelations were put into writing around 650 C.E., and this is now recognized as the Qur’an, the Holy Book of Islam.¹⁴ Also, after the Prophet Muhammad’s death, narratives and reports of his deeds and sayings were written down and are now referred to as “Hadiths.”¹⁵

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ ADIL SALAHI. MUHAMMAD: HIS CHARACTER AND CONDUCT, 181 (2014).

⁹ *Id.*; ENGINEER, *supra* note 5, at 23.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 24 (citing to Qur’an 81:9).

¹¹ *Id.* at 23.

¹² S.A. NIGOSIAN. ISLAM: ITS HISTORY, TEACHING, AND PRACTICES 8 (2004).

¹³ *Id.* at 9.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ MOHAMMAD ALI SYED, POSITION OF WOMEN IN ISLAM 5 (2004).

The Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’anic revelations had a powerful role in changing the social position of women.¹⁶ The Prophet Muhammad was instructed that his message was addressed to both men and women alike, so he sought to achieve equality.¹⁷ The Prophet Muhammad did not categorize women as inferior; he viewed them as equals.¹⁸ Unfortunately, the deep-rooted history of discrimination towards women in the pre-Islamic period has placed women in unfavorable positions in Muslim majority communities around the world.

According to the Islamic faith, men and women are seen as equals.¹⁹ But, why then are women not viewed as equals in the eyes of their fathers, husbands, sons, and peers? The Qur’an promotes two main views on men and women. First, men and women are equal.²⁰ Second, men are the “maintainers” of women, meaning men are to take care of and support their wives, mothers, or daughters.²¹ Men and women textually have equal rights in all aspects of life according to teachings of Islam, but this most basic teaching is not exercised in everyday practice.

According to the Qur’an, men and women are seen as equal in the eyes of Allah. Verse 4:1 of the Qur’an says,

“O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, Who created you from a single person created of like nature his mate and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; reverence Allah through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights) and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for Allah ever watches over you.”²²

The Qur’an indicates that men and women are spiritual equals as well. Verse 4:124 of the Qur’an says, “If any do deeds of righteousness be they male or female and have faith, they will

¹⁶ NIKKI R. KEDDIE, *WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PAST AND PRESENT* 18—19 (2007).

¹⁷ SALAHI, *supra* note 8, at 182.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Qur’an 4:1, 4:124, 3:195, 33:35. ABDULLAH YUSUF ALI, *THE MEANING OF THE HOLY QUR’AN* (2011) [hereinafter Qur’an].

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Qur’an 4:34.

²² Qur’an 4:1.

enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them.”²³ This verse shows does not segregate men and women from entering Heaven. Verse 3:195 of the Qur’an says, “...Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: Ye are from, one another...”²⁴

Lastly, verse 33:35,

“For Muslim men and women for believing men and women for devout men and women for true men and women for men and women who are patient and constant for men and women who humble themselves for men and women who give in charity for men and women who fast (and deny themselves) for men and women who guard their chastity and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.”²⁵

These verses, with others demonstrate that men and women are, in the words of the Holy Qur’an, equal.

Gender inequality and oppression towards women can be found in various verses of the Qur’an. According to some verses in the Qur’an, men and women are not given equal power or rights. The Qur’an in verse 2:228 says, “...Wives have the same rights as the husbands have on them in accordance with the generally known principles. Of course, men are a degree above them in status...”

Verse 4:34 of the Qur’an states,

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all).”

²³ Qur’an 4:124.

²⁴ Qur’an 3:195.

²⁵ Qur’an 33:35.

Many Muslims believe that this verse of the Qur'an means that men are the providers, protectors, and ultimately have superiority over women.²⁶ "Some Muslims use this verse to justify the role of the male as head of the household, as the final decision-maker, and even in some cases as the spiritual authority over his wife and family."²⁷ Further, Quran verse 4:11 states, "Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females..."²⁸ and as verse 2:282 states "It should also be known that a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man."²⁹

Gender inequality and oppression towards women can also be found in the Hadiths. According to the Prophet's Hadiths, Allah's Apostle said, "If at all there is bad omen, it is in the horse, the woman, and the house."³⁰ The Prophet said, "After me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than women."³¹ The Prophet said, "If a man invites his wife to sleep with him and she refuses to come to him, then the angels send their curses on her till morning."³² Finally, "The Prophet said, "Isn't the witness of a woman equal to half of that of a man?" The women said, "Yes." He said, "This is because of the deficiency of a woman's mind"³³

Historically, Muslim women have not been treated as men's equals. Customarily, women have been viewed as wives and mothers in Muslim societies.³⁴ In practice, gender roles often affect women adversely. Women are also not seen as equals in the eyes of the law.³⁵ For example, the unequal rights of women can be seen in the area of marriage, where a man can take four wives,

²⁶ J. I. Smith, *Women in Islam: Equity, Equality, and the Search for the Natural Order*. XLVII J Am Acad Relig, 517, 518 (1979).

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ Qur'an 4:11.

²⁹ Qur'an 2:282.

³⁰ Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* Volume 7, Book 62, Number 32.

³¹ *Id.* at Volume 7, Book 62, Number 33.

³² *Id.* at Volume 7, Book 62, Number 121.

³³ *Id.* at Volume 3, Book 48, Number 826.

³⁴ VALENTINE M. MOGHADAM, *MODERNIZING WOMEN: GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST* 4 (2ND ED. 2003).

³⁵ *Id.*

as for a woman can marry only one man.³⁶ Also, Muslim women can only marry Muslim men but men can marry Christians and Jews as well as Muslims.³⁷

As seen through the verses of the Qur'an and Islamic teachings, men and women are believed to have been created equal. Nonetheless historical circumstances through the centuries have often worked to the disfavor of the Muslim woman; predominant traditions of male authority have made it extremely difficult for women to take advantage of the rights guaranteed to them by the Qur'an.³⁸ Islam regards women as spiritually equal to men, but Muslim women have struggled with inequality and restrictive practices in education for centuries.

III. Islam and Education for Muslim Women

The need to acquire knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim whether male or female.³⁹ "It has been unanimously agreed by Islamic scholars that the first word revealed of the Qur'an was "Iqra" meaning "proclaim" or "Read".⁴⁰ Knowledge is an important part of the Islamic faith, and the Qur'an makes no distinction between the pursuit of education and acquisition of knowledge for men and women; it is a duty for every Muslim.

For example, verse 35:28 of the Qur'an states, "Those truly fear Allah, among His Servants, who have knowledge." The Prophet Muhammad's Hadiths highlight the acquirement of knowledge for every Muslim. For example, one Hadith states: "Seeking knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, man or woman"⁴¹ and "One who treads a path in search of knowledge has his path to Paradise made easy by God..."⁴² Further, in verses 39:9 and 7:52, respectively, of the Qur'an

³⁶ Smith, *supra* note 29, at 520.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.* at 517.

³⁹ Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, *supra* note 2.

⁴⁰ Abdulai Abukari, *Education of Women in Islam, Religious Education*, Religious Education, Volume 109, 4, 10, (2014).

⁴¹ Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, *supra* note 2.

⁴² Sunan Abu Dawud, Abu Dawood Volume 4, Book 25, Hadith 3636.

“...Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endued with understanding that receive admonition.”⁴³ Similarly: “For We had certainly Sent unto them a Book, Based on knowledge, Which We explained In detail – a guide And a mercy To all who believe.”⁴⁴ The verses do not mention or imply any prejudice towards women with regards to education and the acquisition of knowledge.

Together, the Qur’an and the Hadiths of the Prophet promote education and the acquisition of knowledge for all. There seems to be no disparity between education and the acquisition of knowledge for men and women. Women are not mentioned as inferior or unequal to men on this subject. There is nothing in the Qur’an declaring that women should not be educated or be denied the opportunity to acquire knowledge. The Islamic faith gives women the right to pursue an education; it emphasizes the value of education for both men and women. But this belief is not being translated, as can be seen from the current state of women’s education and literacy rates in Muslim majority communities.

IV. The Current State of Women’s Education in Muslim Majority Countries

The Muslim majority countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia have a distinct gender disparity in literacy and education rates. The high illiteracy rates among women in Muslim majority states directly correlates into the lack of education for women. As data cited below establishes, Muslim countries are among the lowest in the world in literacy and education rates in women.

According to the CIA World Factbook⁴⁵ on literacy: Afghanistan: male 52%, female 24.2%; Egypt: male 82.2%, female 65.4%; Iran: male 91.2%, female 82.5%, Iraq: male 85.7%, female

⁴³ Qur’an 39:9

⁴⁴ Qur’an 7:52

⁴⁵ The World Factbook is a reference resource produced by the Central Intelligence Agency with almanac-style information about the countries of the world.

73.7%; Pakistan: male 69.5%, female 45.8%; Saudi Arabia: male 97%, female 91.1%; Yemen: male 85.1%, female 55%; Malaysia: male 96.2%, female 93.2%; Tunisia: male 89.6%, female 74.2%; and Indonesia: male 96.3%, female 91.5%⁴⁶. As seen by the findings of the CIA World Factbook, all of the countries listed above have a gender disparity in terms of literacy rates between men and women. The finding of the World Factbook show that almost every Muslim majority and/or Muslim declared state has a gender gap for literacy rates.⁴⁷ Literacy rates are directly linked to education rates. Therefore, if there is a gender gap in literacy rates, there is a gender gap for education rates.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations system established in 1946.⁴⁸ The EFA Global Monitoring Reports was started by UNESCO in response to the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments, which was ratified by 164 governments in 2000.⁴⁹ The EFA Global Monitoring Reports monitor progress, highlight remaining gaps, and provide recommendations for the global sustainable development agenda of 2015.⁵⁰ The monitoring report assesses the progress made towards the Education for All goals, and analyses whether or not commitments are being upheld and suggests possible ways to continue measuring progress.⁵¹

⁴⁶ CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, THE CIA WORLD FACTBOOK. 2013-14, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/>.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ UNESCO, Article 1

http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15244&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

⁴⁹ UNESCO. THE 2015 GLOBAL MONITORING REPORT – EDUCATION FOR ALL 2000-2015: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES. 1 (2015), <http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2015/education-all-2000-2015-achievements-and-challenges#sthash.9E3AGfaz.dpbs>.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at i.

⁵¹ *Id.*

According to a report released by UNESCO, Afghanistan had just 72 girls enrolled for every 100 boys.⁵² The regional gender parity index⁵³ for primary enrollment in the Arab States⁵⁴, 0.93 in 2012, represented improvement but not parity.⁵⁵ There has been a clear trend of reducing gender disparity in the primary gross enrollment ratio for a majority of countries in the Arab States, often starting from a point of severe disadvantage for girls.⁵⁶ Benin, Burkina Faso and Morocco, while not achieving parity, made progress. Afghanistan, the lowest ranking country in 1999, has overcome immense obstacles to raise its estimated primary gross enrolment ratio for girls from less than 4% in 1999 to 87% in 2012, resulting in its gender parity index increasing from 0.08 to 0.72.⁵⁷ Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal progressed faster in 1999–2012 than in 1990–1999.⁵⁸ Comoros, Morocco and Pakistan built on progress from the 1990s to move towards gender parity after Dakar.⁵⁹ As displayed in the UNESCO report, Muslim-majority communities are ranked among the lowest in gender equality.

Also, the Muslim world's showing in the 2015 Global Gender Gap report, compiled by the World Economic Forum ("WEF"), is even worse than in previous recent years, when 17 of the bottom 20 were states with Muslim-majority populations.⁶⁰ The WEF's 2015 Global Gender Gap Report measured disparities between men and women.⁶¹ The survey, covering a total of 145 countries last year, measures gaps between women and men in four key areas: political

⁵² *Id.* at 156.

⁵³ Gender parity index (GPI): Ratio of female to male values of a given indicator.

⁵⁴ Arab states as defined by UNESCO: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

⁵⁵ EFA, *supra* note 46, at 156.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, THE GLOBAL GENDER GAP REPORT 2015, AT 3.

⁶¹ *Id.*

empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival.⁶²

The 20 countries at the bottom of the 2015 overall gender gap list, in order from the lowest-ranked, are Yemen, Pakistan, Syria, Chad, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, Mali, Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Guinea, Turkey, Benin, Algeria, Tunisia, and Angola.⁶³ With the exception of Benin and Angola, all are Muslim-majority states. The highest-ranking Muslim-majority state in the WEF survey is Kazakhstan in 47th place, and the highest-placed Arab state is Kuwait, in 113th position.⁶⁴ The 15 countries at the bottom of the educational attainment list, in order from the lowest-ranked, are Chad, Benin, Guinea, Yemen, Angola, Ethiopia, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Liberia, Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mauritania, and Burundi.⁶⁵ These statistics establish that 10 out of the bottom 15 in the area of education attainment were Muslim-majority states.

Beyond just enrollment, literacy is perhaps the most critical educational outcome, can differ widely by gender in many of these nations.⁶⁶ In Mali, for instance, just 25% of women were considered literate, versus 43% of men.⁶⁷ Similarly, Chad had female and male literacy rates of 28% and 47% respectively.⁶⁸ As displayed in the WEF's 2015 Global Gender Gap report, Muslim-majority communities are ranked among the lowest in gender equality.

According to the World Bank, around half of the world's out-of school females live in 10 countries, Nigeria, Pakistan, India, Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire, Philippines, Bangladesh, Niger,

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.* at 8—9.

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 10.

⁶⁵ WEF, *supra* note 56, at 10.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 57.

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

Yemen, and Burkina Faso.⁶⁹ 7 of the 10 countries that hold the half of the world's out-of-school females are Muslim-majority states. The World Bank also reported on the 10 countries with the largest gender disparities in primary enrollment rates.⁷⁰ Afghanistan, Chad, Yemen, Pakistan, Cote d'Ivoire, Niger, and Guinea all made the list for the top 10 countries with the greatest gender disparity in primary education rates.⁷¹ Again, making 7 out of 10 countries Muslim majority states.

As seen in these statistical and international reports, gender inequality in education and literacy rates are a critical issue in Muslim majority communities, but education for girls and women is also a critical issue across the world.

V. International law on Educational Equality for Women

Gender discrimination and inequality in education are not isolated phenomena in Muslim majority communities. The importance of education has been highlighted by a number of international conventions, such as, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Program of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.⁷² The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, recognized that women's literacy is key to empowering women's participation in decision-making in society and to improving families' well-being.⁷³ In addition, the United Nations has articulated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which emphasize education's essential role in building democratic societies and creating a foundation for sustained economic growth.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ The World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2012, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² UN, *International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action*, ¶ 4.18.

⁷³ UN, *Platform of Action, Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing, China, September 4-15 1995, ¶ 69; UN, *The Beijing Declaration*: ¶ 13, 14, and 17.

⁷⁴ See generally United Nations, "Millennium Development Goals: About the Goals," www.developmentgoals.org/About_the_goals.htm.

In particular, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), defines discrimination against women as

“...any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”⁷⁵

By accepting the Convention, States commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms, including abiding by Article 10, which necessitates equal opportunity in education for female students and encourages co-education. It also provides equal access to athletics, scholarships and grants as well as requires “reduction in female students' drop-out rates”⁷⁶. States that have ratified CEDAW have committed themselves to taking positive action to end discrimination against women. This means incorporating the principle of equality of men and women in their legal systems, abolishing laws that discriminate against women and, if necessary, establishing new ones that make discrimination illegal. They are

⁷⁵ UN, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Dec. 18, 1979, 1249 U.N.T.S. 13.

⁷⁶Article 10: “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women: (a) The same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories in rural as well as in urban areas; this equality shall be ensured in pre-school, general, technical, professional and higher technical education, as well as in all types of vocational training; (b) Access to the same curricula, the same examinations, teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality; (c) The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods; (d) The same opportunities to benefit from scholarships and other study grants; (e) The same opportunities for access to programmes of continuing education, including adult and functional literacy programmes, particularly those aimed at reducing, at the earliest possible time, any gap in education existing between men and women; (f) The reduction of female student drop-out rates and the organization of programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely; (g) The same Opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education; (h) Access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning.”

also obliged to make sure that individuals, organizations or companies do not discriminate against women. Out of 194 countries, 187 have ratified. All but 3 Muslim-majority states have signed or ratified this international treaty. Iran, Somalia, and Sudan are the only Muslim-majority countries that are not parties to the CEDAW. This means that 44 of the 47 Muslim-majority states are parties and have to abide by the provisions, in particular Article 10.

According to the World Bank, girls currently represent 48 percent of the world's primary school enrollment and boys represent 52 percent.⁷⁷ Even though this gender gap has decreased in the last few decades, girls still account for 55 percent of all out-of-school children—meaning that, on average, for every 100 boys out-of-school, there are 122 girls.⁷⁸

With this being said, this is not only an issue for Muslim Majority communities, educational inequality is an international problem, which is addressed through numerous international treaties. Throughout the world, female enrollment at the primary level has grown from 87 percent in 1990 to 94 percent in 2004.⁷⁹ In many countries, many more boys than girls are enrolled in school.⁸⁰ But, the progress is slow and especially challenging in Muslim majority communities as evidenced by the previously mentioned statistics. The right to education is an international human right.⁸¹ Gender, specifically educational, inequality is a global issue but is predominantly seen in Muslim majority states.

VI. Current Issues – Modern Oppression in Women's Education

⁷⁷ The World Bank Group, *World Development Indicators*, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>.

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ THE WORLD BANK, *GIRL'S EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: GENDER EQUALITY, EMPOWERMENT AND GROWTH* 3 (MERCY TEMBON & LUCIA FORT 2008).

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ UDHR, *supra* note 1; ICESCR, *supra* note 1.

Although there have been improvement among Muslim majority communities in the form of literacy rates and education rates, there are still numerous societal obstacles and hardships that continue to obstruct and prevent girls and women from obtaining an education. Terrorist groups, such as the Taliban in the Afghanistan and Pakistan and Boko Haram in Nigeria, have caused great difficulties for girls' education for Muslim majority communities.⁸²

Girls and young women in the Middle East have suffered particularly inordinate hardships in their pursuit of education. Afghanistan is known to be one of the hardest places in the world to be a woman.⁸³ Nine out of ten women are illiterate: about 40 percent of Afghan girls attend primary school, with only one in 20 girls attending beyond the sixth grade.⁸⁴ Also, the education rate for Pakistani women is among the lowest in the world, over half of Pakistani girls are not educated, and according to the World Economic Forum Gender Parity Report, Pakistan has the world's second lowest rate of female employment.⁸⁵

In Afghanistan, the Taliban⁸⁶ have burned down girls' schools and have thrown acid in the faces of female students.⁸⁷ "The majority of Afghan women living in areas ruled by the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 were banned from attending formal schooling."⁸⁸ Girls and young women were expelled from schools and colleges, and the Taliban ordered that 'all schooling was forbidden to girls over the age of eight.'⁸⁹ During the Taliban regime, many women, who had previously been teachers, secretly began to educate young girls in their neighborhoods to try to continue girls'

⁸² See *infra* discussion below.

⁸³ UDHR, *supra* note 1, at 183.

⁸⁴ <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx>

⁸⁵ GLOBAL GENDER GAP REPORT, *supra* note 56, at 27.

⁸⁶ "Taliban a fundamentalist Islamic militia in Afghanistan" Dictionary.com <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/taliban> (April 28, 2016).

⁸⁷ Aryn Baker, *Afghan Women and the Return of the Taliban*, Time Magazine, Aug. 9, 2010, at 9.

⁸⁸ DIAH ARIANI ARIMBI. READING CONTEMPORARY ISSUES OF WOMEN AND ISLAM IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES 45 (2009).

⁸⁹ *Id.*

education.⁹⁰ Also as a show of its outright ban on women's education, the Taliban shot a Pakistani school-girl and the young women's rights activist Malala Yousafzai in 2012.⁹¹ Due to Malala Yousafzai's incident, the Pakistan government was condemned by the international community and various human rights organizations. As a result, Pakistan is held accountable to examine the education system for women in Pakistan.⁹²

In Afghanistan and in Pakistan, the Taliban used their version of Islam to claim that educating girls is "un-Islamic".⁹³ The Taliban used this as an excuse for their terrorist tactics of bombing and burning of schools for girls, and throwing acid into the faces of girls walking to school.⁹⁴ Muslim women's right to education in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been strongly oppressed by political movements groups such as the Taliban.

Also, a militant group in Western Africa has displayed its disapproval of girls' education in the Islamic faith. Boko Haram⁹⁵ is an Islamic militant group in Nigeria.⁹⁶ Its objective is to create insurgency that will establish an Islamic state in Nigeria.⁹⁷ Boko Haram promotes an extreme vision of Islam, which makes it "*haram*" or forbidden, for Muslims to take part in any political or social activity associated with Western society, including women's education.⁹⁸ In 2014, Boko Haram abducted over 200 girls from a school in the northeast town of Chibok and held them captive at their insurgent camps.⁹⁹ The abduction sparked international attention and

⁹⁰ COLLEGE GUIDE WORLD, PLACE OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN, 87 (2014).

⁹¹ *Id.*

⁹² Human Rights Watch, *On Malala Day, A Speech that Moves the World* (July 12, 2013) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/12/malala-day-speech-moves-world>.

⁹³ *Id.*

⁹⁴ *Id.*

⁹⁵ The term Boko Haram is translated as 'Western education is a sin'.

⁹⁶ Samuel Oyewole, *Rescuing Boko Haram's Schoolgirl Victims*, *New Zealand International Review*, 41, 1, 25 (Jan. 1, 2016).

⁹⁷ *Id.*

⁹⁸ *Id.*

⁹⁹ ALEXANDRIA STAFFORD, RISING TERROR GROUPS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, 52 (2014).

intervention.¹⁰⁰ In March 2015 Boko Haram declared its loyalty to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and renamed itself the Islamic State in West Africa.¹⁰¹

From the shooting of Malala Yousafzai by the Taliban to the abduction of over 200 school-girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, some severe measures have been taken to prevent what Islamic extremists see as the “Westernization” of the Middle Eastern culture. These examples are proof of the current and real life threatening situations girls and women face in trying to take advantage of their right to be educated.

VII. The Power of Education for Women in Muslim Majority Communities

According to the studies and statistics cited above, there is an overwhelming disparity between women’s literacy rates and educational attainment rates in Muslim majority states. Also, there are still societal adversities attached to women’s attainment of education by militia groups, such as the Taliban in the Middle East and Boko Haram in Western Africa. Although, there has been improvement throughout Muslim majority communities on the literacy and educational front, there is still a vast disparity between men and women. Muslim majority communities need to recognize the benefits of girls and women’s education.

Education for women has countless benefits for society. “Educating girls and women is critical to economic development.”¹⁰² Girls and women’s education is vital for economic development and growth.¹⁰³ Female education also has been shown to reduce poverty and create powerful poverty-reducing synergies.¹⁰⁴ The rise in female education has yielded numerous benefits. “As female education rises, fertility, population growth, and child mortality fall and

¹⁰⁰ OYEWOLE, *supra* note 91, at 27.

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 25.

¹⁰² The World Bank, *supra* note 75, at Xvii.

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

family health improve.”¹⁰⁵ The increase in girls’ access and enrollment has also increased women’s participation in the work force.¹⁰⁶ As women’s educational rates rise, more women enter the workforce, but women’s participation in the work force is still low.¹⁰⁷ In the Middle East, only 20 percent of women ages 15 and older are in the labor force, the lowest level of any world region.¹⁰⁸ In the Middle East, the highest levels of female work force participation are found in Lebanon, Morocco, Turkey, and Yemen, where women constitute more than 25 percent of the labor force.¹⁰⁹ In Indonesia, which is home to the world’s largest Muslim population, women make up 38 percent of the labor force.¹¹⁰ These numbers show that women are the minority in the work force in Muslim majority countries. Women’s increased education leads to more women in the work force, therefore increasing women’s earning capacity, which in turn, positively effects child nutrition, and socio-economic factors.¹¹¹ Educated women are better informed about their legal rights and become more active in their communities.¹¹²

Women’s education also has an effect on the age of girls or women at marriage and the age at first birth in Muslim majority states.¹¹³ For example, Egyptian women with no education were married on average at age 18, and had their first child by age 20.¹¹⁴ But, Egyptian women with an education married at the average age of 23, and had their first child by 25.¹¹⁵ Also, in Turkey, 22

¹⁰⁵ Roudi-Fahimi, Farzaneh, and Valentine M. Moghadam. *Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa* (2003), <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Reports/2003/EmpoweringWomenDevelopingSocietyFemaleEducationintheMiddleEastandNorthAfrica.aspx>

¹⁰⁶ *Id.*

¹⁰⁷ United Nations, *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics* (2016) <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/ww2000/table5d.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ *Id.*

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*

¹¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹¹ Farzaneh, *supra* note 100.

¹¹² *Id.*

¹¹³ *Id.*

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

¹¹⁵ *Id.*

percent of girls 15 to 19 years old who had no education or who had not completed primary school were already mothers or pregnant, compared with only 2 percent of girls who had completed secondary or higher education.¹¹⁶ These statistics show that female education has a direct effect on the age of marriage and the age of first birth.

By promoting women's rights to education and access thereto, Muslim majority states can reduce poverty and promote economic growth. "...liberating women by giving them equal access to education means the elevation of the nation's status."¹¹⁷ Education is a key part of strategies to improve an individual's societal advancement and societies economic and social development. By educating women, they have the power and knowledge to make to choices as to whether they want to abide by traditional gender roles or pursue a different path. Education is one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality and lays a foundation for sustained economic growth. One of the most effective ways to fight poverty and bolster poor communities is through investing in education, particularly that of girls. Schooling not only can be a precursor for women and girls to stand up to the injustices they witness, it can also help foster economic growth and stability.

VIII. Empowerment Strategy for Women

As shown above, women's education is the gateway to economic growth, due to the fact that investing in education is a means the reduction of poverty and an increase in development. Governments around the world place considerable emphasis on investments in human capital through the provision of schooling.¹¹⁸ The 2006 World Bank Gender Action Plan ("World Bank 2006") addressed economic aspects of gender equality and recognized education as the most

¹¹⁶ *Id.*

¹¹⁷ ARIMBI, *supra* note 83, at 50.

¹¹⁸ The World Bank, *supra* note 75, at 24.

critical pathway to its achievement.¹¹⁹ The presentations of the World Bank 2006 demonstrated that female education is essential for economic growth and poverty reduction.¹²⁰ In addition to generating extra income, investments in female education have other economic and social benefits.¹²¹ Moreover, the social benefits associated with schooling, particularly women's schooling, suggest that primary schooling investment is a priority.¹²²

Muslim majority societies must begin to educate men and women and boys and girls, about girls' and women's rights to education. As a society, they must encourage women to take advantage of their rights, specifically their right to be educated. Traditionally, Muslim communities have been dominated by male's suppression over women. So, the answer to what can be done to help women achieve educational and overall equality is education and empowerment.

Education is one of the most critical areas of empowerment for women. Liberation of women is a problem that must be addressed by both men and women, and not only by women.¹²³ Muslim societies must offer girls and women basic education by law. But by offering them education in an encouraging and informed manner, they will be enabling them to make genuine choices over the kinds of lives they wish to lead. Society as a whole needs to be taught that empowering women to take advantage of their rights, contributes to the health and productivity of whole families and communities, and they improve prospects for the next generation. But, the education and empowerment must not just be taught to girls and women. More importantly, boys and men need to be knowledgeable on the rights of girls and women. They need to be taught how to encourage and empower their daughters, wives, and mothers to seek their rights to be educated.

¹¹⁹ *Id.* at 4.

¹²⁰ *Id.*

¹²¹ *Id.* at 5.

¹²² *Id.*

¹²³ Francis Salome, *Empower the Women! Empower the Nation!*, Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity 34, 33 (2011).

Educational reform means that Muslim women have equal access to education, and that education not be limited to just household, motherly, or traditional education.¹²⁴ Educational opportunities need to be extended to *encourage* women to be actively participants in social, economic, and their community.¹²⁵ Many of women cannot enjoy access to education because of lack of economic and social support. Not only does women's literacy enhance women's independence by giving them more access to non-traditional gender roles, but it gives women the opportunity to learn their rights and become active and productive members of society.¹²⁶ By improving literacy and educational rates for women in Muslim-majority states, it would lead to overall equality in women's rights, which further facilitates women's growth within the household and in society.

It also came out clearly that achieving gender equality would require investing in the education of both girls and boys, while maintaining a balance between them.¹²⁷ Efforts to improve the education of girls in some countries have resulted in significant increases and progress in female enrollments, but a slight regression in male enrollment and participation is becoming a cause for concern.¹²⁸ Programs can successfully empower Muslim women and help them access the education that will prepare them for leadership roles.

Girls and women need to be empowered. Empowerment is associated with ensuring dignity and an interconnected framework of rights and wellbeing among girls and women in education. Empowerment signals a connection with economic, social, cultural and political relationships

¹²⁴ ARIMBI, *supra* note 83, at 45.

¹²⁵ *Id.*

¹²⁶ *Id.*

¹²⁷ *Id.* at 50.

¹²⁸ *Id.*

beyond the education system, both as sites for the realization of education empowerment, and the building of the insights and attributes associated with empowerment and education.

Muslim societies can introduce societal policies and programs to increase the numbers of women and girls in education. These policies and programs should be strive to increase the numbers of women and girls in education and should consider how education can empower women: through social norms and values on gender, through institutions, and through the equal distribution of educational resources. But, educating girls does not stop in the classroom; their values need to continue to be reinforced while at home. Educational and support staff should be trained and supported to be aware of the impact of gender roles and stereotypes on their students. Families, as a whole need to be informed on the rights and benefits of women's education and the effects of gender roles. Providing a safe and supporting education that builds girls' confidence as well as academic achievement will help to end the cycle of discrimination

Another more difficult suggestion would be to return to the Qur'an and conduct a study to reassess the value system within it. A reevaluation may lead to new ideas and norms. The Qur'an alone is the word of Allah and should be the first and most important source of interpretation of women's rights. While looking into the core values and lessons entrenched within the text, one must also look to other Islamic sources, such as the hadith and the shari'ah. Those who stress gender reform, say that the decline of women's position was due to the historical patriarchal systems, not to what was in the Quran.¹²⁹ Greater emphasis on the words of the Quran as a major determinant in the position of women should be reevaluated and reflected to show the true meaning of the prophet and his views on women's rights.

IX. Conclusion

¹²⁹ KEDDIE, *supra* note 16, at 19.

According to sacred and holy book of the Qur'an, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and numerous international laws and treaties, Muslim girls and women have an equal right to receive an education. In Muslim majority communities, there is an obvious disconnect between girls and women having the right to education in theory and exercising that right in practice. The literacy and educational disparity between men and women in Muslim majority communities is factually indisputable. Although there has been progress to gender equality for education, it unfortunately still exists and progression has been slow in Muslim majority communities.

Muslim women have faced centuries of oppression and discrimination, but the key to success and growth of any Muslim society is education and empowerment, specifically geared towards women in Muslim majority communities. Education is viewed as a fundamental human right leading to empowerment and awareness, as opposed to being regarded solely as a means of bringing about economic growth and political stability.¹³⁰ To be truly empowered, women must also be able to make choices and this can only be done through education.¹³¹ If girls and women are not aware on their rights to become educated, then the vicious cycle will continue to turn.

Education of girls and women is imperative to the development of Muslim majority communities around the world. Education is important for everyone, but it is a critical area of empowerment for girls and women. This is not only because education is an entry point to opportunity but also because women's educational achievements have positive effects within the family. Not only do girls and women need equal access to education, but both men and women need to be educated on girls and women's rights and the power of encouragement. Muslim authorities need to overcome centuries of discrimination and oppression, and empower Muslim

¹³⁰ The World Bank, *supra* note 75, at 197.

¹³¹ *Id.*

girls and women to become educated, and through education they can become integral members of society.

Education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights. It promotes individual freedom and yields important development benefits. Education for females is a powerful tool that can economically and socially lift nations out of poverty and propel economic growth. When empowered through education, women are able to overcome their circumstances and their self-doubt and exercise more autonomy over their lives.¹³² It is important for girls and women to receive education, especially in Muslim communities, that will open their minds, think critically, and consider people and events in new ways.¹³³

Islamic law and international treaties lay down legal obligations for the right to education. These laws and instruments promote and develop the right of every person to enjoy access to education of good quality, without discrimination or exclusion. It is for the Islamic governments and Islamic people to fulfill their obligations under the Qur'an and the international treaties they are party to, providing education for *all* of good quality and to implement and monitor more effectively education strategies.

Education for women brings numerous benefits. Providing girls and women with an education helps break the cycle of poverty: educated women are less likely to marry early; and are more likely to send their children to school. When all children have access to a quality education rooted in human rights and gender equality, it creates a ripple effect of opportunity that influences generations to come.¹³⁴ Closing gender inequality in education increases overall gender equality, which is important both in itself and because it ensures equal rights and opportunities for people

¹³² *Id.*

¹³³ *Id.*

¹³⁴ UNICEF, *Girls' education and gender equality*, Education (July 23, 2015), http://www.unicef.org/education/bege_70640.html

regardless of gender. Though there has been progress in Muslim majority communities, they still remain some of the worst in the world in regards to gender equality in education, and more can be done. Muslim communities, men and women alike, need to promote the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad and the words of Allah in the Qur'an to promote and encourage girls and women to become educated, so together as a society their communities can prosper.