

Chapter 9

Epilogue—Epistemic Healing: Reclaiming Women’s Empowerment in Islamic Sources



Rabia Naguib

Abstract This epilogue concludes the journey towards a thorough and contextualized understanding of women’s empowerment in Arab and Muslim-majority societies, as presented in this book. The study debunks the narrow view and prevailing discourse from Western ideologies, offering a fresh outlook rooted in local values and Islamic teachings. It delves into the Islamic sources and teachings that inform women’s empowerment, exploring the policy implications and promoting inclusiveness in such policies. Additionally, the chapter seeks to reconcile the epistemological and cultural tensions in the discourse on women’s empowerment.

Keywords Women empowerment · Muslim-majority societies · Western ideology · Islamic teachings · Policy learning

9.1 Breaking the Mirror: Insight into the Islamic Teachings on Women’s Empowerment

This book advocates for a more nuanced approach to women’s empowerment, one that prioritizes policy learning over policy borrowing. Given the complex and sensitive nature of this issue, policymakers must take into account the unique cultural, institutional, and moral frameworks of the local context. The author calls for an “epistemic healing” (Khan & Naguib, 2019)¹ to counteract any potential harm caused by a one-size-fits-all approach and to instead empower local women and men as agents of change, capable of producing knowledge that is relevant and aligned with their own worldview.

¹ “Epistemic healing requires identifying and then calling back to the center of discussion knowledge traditions of the other that it has excluded and made peripheral” (Khan and Naguib, 2019, p. 89).

R. Naguib (✉)
Department of Public Policy, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: rabia.naguib@dohainstitute.edu.qa

Hence, it is imperative for the Arab nations to “break the mirror” and embark on their own distinctive journey towards development and progress. Adopting a passive approach of mimicking others is no longer sufficient to preserve cultural heritage and identity or to solve the unique challenges that each nation faces. The process must be guided by a comprehensive understanding of the Arab history, culture, and Islamic worldview, and upheld by ethical and moral principles. This mindset shift will enable the Arab nations to pursue a more genuine and sustainable form of development that reflects their rich and diverse cultural traditions. The benefits of this approach will not only be felt by the people of these nations but also by the global community at large.

As emphasized by the prominent sociologist and futurist, Mahdi Elmandjra (1990, p. 10), “there is no prospect for any Muslim society without effective involvement of women in the community’s affairs and the provision of the rights granted to them by Islam.” He calls for “self-criticism” and a self-reflective approach within the Islamic world, especially in Arab countries, to find solutions based on their own values and resources instead of copying the West. This scholar draws on the Islamic teachings of the Quran and Sunnah to highlight the need for just and respectful treatment of women, citing the Prophet Muhammad’s Farewell pilgrimage sermon,² as well as the Quranic verse (13:11), which states that change must come from within. Therefore, Elmandjra (1990, p. 3) views change as “an essential ingredient for a better future,” and encourages both men and women to adopt a proactive stance in their political, economic, social, and cultural endeavors while taking control of their own destiny, considering both the present and afterlife, and encompassing both the earthly and spiritual realms.

In line with this perspective, the author suggests exploring the source of Islamic principles, Sharia’a, to gain a deeper understanding of women’s empowerment. This approach allows policymakers to develop empowerment pathways that are rooted in local values and traditions, rather than solely relying on external models. This recognition of the diverse perspectives and experiences in the discussion on women’s empowerment aims to create solutions that are respectful of local norms and values.

² The “Farewell Sermon” took place in 632 AD, during which the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) addressed various aspects of Islamic faith and also spoke about the rights and responsibilities of women in Islam. In this sermon, he emphasized the equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender. He said, “All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action.”

9.2 Revisiting the Roots of Women’s Empowerment in Islamic Traditions

In order to gain useful insights for the future, we need to trace back to the source. Hence, the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah provide valuable guidance for the promotion of women’s rights and empowerment. These lessons can be summarized around several key themes, including:

1. Recognition of equality of worth and complementarity: Islam, as emphasized in the Qur’an, recognizes the equality and complementarity of men and women both in their spiritual essence. The verse in Surah An-Nisa (4: 1) states, “*O humankind, reverence your Lord, who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and dispersed from the two of them multitudes of men and women.*” This verse highlights the common origin of both genders, as they are created from the same soul, and both contribute to the formation of humanity. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) referred to women as “the counterparts” or “conjoined twins” (شقائق) of men, emphasizing the close relationship and mutual dependence between the two genders. This belief in the inherent worth and dignity of women is a core aspect of Islamic teachings and serves as a basis for the rights and protections afforded to women in Islam.
2. Emphasis on free will and freedom of choice: The verses in the Qur’an, such as Surah Al-Kahf (18:29) “*Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (faith),*” and Surah Al-Baqarah (2: 256) “*There shall be no compulsion in religion,*” emphasize the importance of personal freedom in matters of faith and belief. The Qur’an affirms that belief in God should stem from one’s own free will, without coercion or force, as this is integral to the idea of accountability. Every individual is responsible for the choices they make and the actions they take and will be held accountable for these in the afterlife. Deprivation of free will negates this accountability, as one cannot be held responsible for choices and actions made without freedom of choice. Therefore, as highlighted by El-Ali (2022), the patriarchal notion of men as all-powerful guardians of women, which has been unfortunately transformed into law in some cultures, goes against the monotheistic belief and essence of Islam and takes away from the God-given dignity of women. This view of women as subordinate conflicts with the fundamental principle of equality and dignity established in the Qur’an.
3. Equality in responsibilities and rewards: The Quran emphasizes the principle of equality between men and women in terms of obligations and rewards. The verse, “and there is no burden on one that is another’s burden” (Al-Isra, 7:15), asserts the principle of individual responsibility and that no one can bear the burden of another person’s deeds. Other related verses underscore the idea of justice and equality in the eyes of God and that each soul (males and females) will be rewarded according to their deeds without any injustice.³ They also emphasize the

³ “Whoever does a good deed, whether male or female, and is a believer, those shall enter the Garden, and they shall not be wronged (the equivalent of) so much as a dent in a date-stone” (Women, 4:124). “Whoever does a bad deed will only be repaid its equivalent, while whoever does a

importance of truth and fairness in the evaluation of people's actions regardless of gender.

4. **The Right to Education:** The arrival of Islam marked a critical juncture in Arab history, signaling the end of the Age of Jahiliya (ignorance) and the beginning of a new era of knowledge and enlightenment. The Quran and Sunnah place great importance on the value of obtaining knowledge and make it an obligation upon every individual. The verse "And say, 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge' (Ta-Ha, 20:114)" serves as a reminder to continually strive for self-improvement and expresses humility in recognizing the need for divine guidance and support in the pursuit of knowledge. This is evident through the many accounts of female scholars and intellectuals in Islamic history, including the Prophet's wives, who were known as the mothers of the believers and served as teachers to both men and women.⁴ The University of Qarawiyin, founded in 859 AD by Fatima al-Fihri, further highlights the emphasis on education for and by women in Islamic society.
5. **Equal right to earnings:** According to Islamic principles, both men and women have the equal right to retain the earnings they receive through inheritance or their own efforts. This is emphasized in the verse "for men is a share of what they have earned and for women is a share of what they have earned" (Quran 4:32). This verse lays the foundation for the belief that all individuals, regardless of gender, have the right to own property and benefit from their labor. The principle of equality in the distribution of earned income and property rights is a cornerstone of Islamic teachings.
6. **Right to Advocacy:** This right in Islam is exemplified in the story of a woman who advocated against the pre-Islamic practice of divorce (Zihar). She approached the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) and challenged the unjust nature of the practice, focusing her arguments on the welfare of her children and the preservation of the family unit. Ultimately, God ruled in her favor, and this practice was abolished through a revelation in the chapter (Surah) named "Al-Mujadila," meaning "The Pleading Woman." The verse states, "God has heard the words of the woman who disputed with you [Prophet] about her husband and complained to God: God has heard what you both had to say. He is all-hearing, all-seeing." (58:1). This story highlights the importance of advocating for one's rights and the impact of women's voices in promoting positive change. It also underscores the significance of giving women a platform to have their voices heard and the necessity of ensuring their well-being.

good deed and believes, whether male or female, shall enter the Garden where they will be rewarded without measure" (Forgiver, 40:40); "And God created the heavens and the earth with truth, and so that each soul may be rewarded what it has earned. And they will not be wronged" (Kneeling, 45:22).

⁴ It is reported that Aisha taught 232 men and 67 women; Umm Salama (Hind) taught 78 men and 23 women; Umm Habiba (Ramla) taught 18 men and 2 women; Hafsa taught 17 men and 3 women. (El Ali, 2022, p. 83).

7. **Right to Political Participation and Leadership Positions:** Such right is enshrined in Islam for both women and men. In the early days of Islam, women were actively involved in the *bay’ah*, or the allegiance to the political system led by the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). Hence, women in the early Islamic tradition were granted the right to vote much earlier than in the West, where women did not gain this right until the twentieth century. As a testament to the leadership capabilities of women, Omar appointed a literate woman named Al-Shifa’ as the minister of trade and commerce, giving her the important task of overseeing the commercial marketplaces. Furthermore, the example of the Queen of Sheba serves as a demonstration of the ability of women to hold influential positions and participate actively in political life.

In conclusion, the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah offer a rich source of guidance for advancing women’s rights and empowerment. The core principles of Equality and complementarity, free will, equal responsibilities and rewards, education, property ownership, earnings, political participation, and leadership all affirm the inherent dignity and worth of women in Islamic traditions. These foundational concepts provide the framework for the protection of women’s rights in Islam, and it is important to advocate for these rights in Arab societies where cultural and political factors have at times led to deviations from the ideals set forth in Islamic teachings. Policymakers can utilize these principles to enact laws and policies that empower and protect women and ensure that they have access to the necessary resources and support to actively participate in society.

9.3 Women in Power: Lessons from the Queen of Sheba in the Quranic Text

Given the controversies regarding women’s political participation and leadership in Muslim communities, we turn to the example of the Queen of Sheba, as portrayed in the Quran, for insightful lessons and policy recommendations. The Queen of Sheba, who presided over a wealthy and influential kingdom in Yemen, was renowned for her wisdom and fairness as a leader. The story of the encounter between Queen Belquis and King-Prophet Solomon is recorded in the Quran (Surah Al-Naml, 27: 15–44) and provides a fascinating and educational account of their interactions. From both the Queen’s and King’s perspectives, the story offers valuable insights into the dynamics of leadership and decision-making. When King Solomon sent a letter demanding her submission, Queen Belquis consulted with her advisors, who acknowledged her authority and awaited her command. Instead of submitting to King Solomon’s demand, the Queen chose to send a gift, which he rejected and threatened military action if her people did not submit. Eventually, Queen Belquis was invited to King Solomon’s palace and was impressed by its magnificence, ultimately submitting to God along with King Solomon. This story underlines the significant role that women can play in decision-making and demonstrates the positive results that can come

from female leadership. It can serve as valuable source of inspiration and guidance for policymakers, offering important policy implications and lessons to consider, which can be succinctly summarized as follows:

1. **Clearly articulating the issue and engaging relevant stakeholders:** She said: *“O Counselors, A crucial letter has been received by me, it is from King Solomon and begins with the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. It states: “Do not be haughty towards me and come to me in submission” (27:29–31).* The initial stage in the policymaking process is identifying the problem and setting the agenda. Hence, it is imperative for a policymaker to articulate the issue clearly and engage relevant stakeholders and experts.
2. **Decision-making style based on consultation:** she asked: *“O counselors, advise me in this matter, for I make no decision without your counsel or your presence” (27:32).* Queen of Shiba’s decision-making style was based on consultation, which is an effective way of ensuring that decisions are made based on the collective wisdom of the community. By seeking the advice of her council, the Queen of Shiba was able to make informed decisions that were in the best interest of her people. Policymakers can learn from this by ensuring that women are involved in decision-making processes and that their perspectives are valued and considered in policy formulation.
3. **Trust in women’s leadership and wisdom:** They replied: *“We are men of strength and of great military might, but the decision rests with you. So we await your command” (27:33).* The counselors acknowledged the Queen’s authority and were eager to follow her judgment, in spite of their own physical power and military capability. This trust in the Queen of Sheba’s leadership and wisdom highlights the significance of acknowledging and appreciating the abilities and knowledge of women. It underlines the need for policymakers to support women in assuming leadership positions and to acknowledge their contributions to the decision-making process.
4. **Diplomatic choice:** She decided: *“I shall send them a present and see with what reply my envoys will return” (27:35).* The Queen of Sheba’s choice to send a gift to the messengers and assess their response showcases her diplomatic acumen. Policymakers can take lessons from this by promoting women’s involvement in diplomatic endeavors and by valuing the distinct skills and perspectives that women bring to conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.
5. **Condemnation of wars and imperialism:** She said: *“When the kings invade a town, they ruin it and humiliate its dignified inhabitants; This what they always do⁵” (27:34).* The Queen of Shiba’s denunciation of wars and imperialism demonstrates her commitment to peace and stability. Policymakers can learn from this by promoting peace and non-violent conflict resolution and by taking actions to prevent wars and armed conflicts.

⁵ This sentence has two potential interpretations: (1) It could be part of the speech delivered by the Queen of Sheba, used to reinforce her previous statements, and (2) It could be a parenthetical statement from God, added in support of the Queen’s words, and thus asserting her wisdom and sound judgment.

6. **Acknowledgements of truth and submission to God:** She said: “*O my Lord, I have certainly wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon to Allah, Lord of the worlds*” (27:44). The submission of the Queen of Sheba to God and her admission of her wrongdoing demonstrate her virtuous character, humility, and dedication to justice. This event highlights the spiritual equality between men and women, as she submitted directly to God and not to King Solomon, showcasing the monotheistic belief and rejection of submission or subordination to any human being. Policymakers can take inspiration from this by advancing ethical leadership and combating discrimination to ensure equality for all individuals, regardless of gender.

In conclusion, the account of the Queen of Sheba in Islamic literature offers a powerful illustration of the role of women in political leadership and decision-making.⁶ This story provides valuable insights into the importance of clear problem identification, consultation-based decision-making, trust in female leadership, diplomatic strategies, opposition to wars and imperialism, and submission to Allah (God). These lessons can serve as a source of inspiration for policymakers, promoting ethical leadership, combating discrimination, and ensuring equality for all individuals regardless of gender. Furthermore, this example highlights the potential of Islamic teachings to be a rich resource in better understanding the concept of empowerment and shaping locally relevant policies. The story also showcases the empowering narrative style of allowing the women’s voice to be heard rather than having someone speak on their behalf.⁷

9.4 *Tamkeen*: The Islamic Path to Empowerment

The book posits the idea that empowerment cannot be granted by external forces or a third party. This belief is in line with the Islamic perspective that the source of all power and success lies solely with God, the Almighty. The verse Al Imran (3, 26), which states,

⁶ The story of the Queen of Sheba in the Quran contradicts the authenticity and validity of certain falsely attributed sayings to Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), such as the one instructing men to not consult with women and ignore their advice. This also calls into question the legitimacy of the saying that “those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity.” Despite agreement among many prominent Muslim scholars that these statements are either completely false, weak (da’if), isolated (ahad) or specific to a particular situation, they are still culturally used by some as religious arguments to prevent women from taking leadership positions and making decisions.

⁷ This book adopts a similar approach by granting women the opportunity to define key concepts based on their personal perceptions and experiences. It draws on the voices and narratives of women to construct a context-sensitive and well-founded understanding of women’s empowerment in the GCC region.

“Say, ‘O Allah! Lord of all power, You grant power to whomever You will and take it away from whomever You please, and confer honor and dignity on whomever You will and disgrace whomever You please. All good lies in Your hand. Verily, You are the Possessor of full power to do all You will,”

affirms the ultimate power and control that Allah holds over everything, including empowerment. This means that individuals can be empowered through the grace and will of Allah. The Arabic term used for empowerment in the Quran is “Tamkeen,” which is applied at both the individual and collective levels.

The Quran offers numerous examples of empowerment, such as the story of Prophet Yusuf (12:56), which states: “We empowered Yusuf in the land to live where he chose. We bestow Our blessings on anyone We please and do not waste the rewards of the righteous,” and Dhul qarnayn in Surah Alkaf (18:84), who was “empowered throughout the land and given access to all things.” These verses stress the importance of being deserving and righteous in order to gain power and emphasize that this is ultimately determined by Allah’s will and provision, rather than solely by one’s own efforts.

At the collective level, Surah Al-Hajj (22:41) says, “Those whom, if We empower on earth, they establish prayer and give zakat, and command with kindness and abstain from the abominable,⁸ and to Allah belongs the outcome of all matters.” This verse calls for individuals to live a life of God-consciousness and fulfill their moral and social responsibilities by promoting kindness, avoiding harmful actions, and observing religious duties like prayer and zakat. This message applies to everyone regardless of gender, highlighting the significance of balancing moral responsibility and accountability in building a harmonious community. By fulfilling these obligations, people can remain mindful of their relationship with God and their responsibility to care for others and to behave ethically, working towards establishing a just society that is guided by moral values.

The Islamic vision of empowerment, as outlined in the Quran, recognizes the role of divine will in granting empowerment and the importance of personal faith and morality in achieving it. Policymakers can play a significant role in promoting this vision by creating educational programs that emphasize religious understanding and moral values, acknowledging the role of divine will, and adopting the Arabic term “Tamkeen” in national initiatives to raise awareness of the Islamic perspective on empowerment. By doing so, they can work towards creating a virtuous and just society where individuals can cultivate a closer relationship with God and be accountable for their actions in both the worldly and transcendental realms. This perspective diverges from the Western perspective and model of empowerment, resulting in an epistemological discord and a collision of values.

⁸ “يأمرون بالمعروف وينهون عن المنكر” is oftentimes translated as “enjoin what is right or just and forbid what is wrong or evil”, or “to honour and forbid dishonour.” It is directed to others, but it has also a reflexive meaning. *Maarouf* in Arabic is “what is known as such” and *Munkar* meaning “senseless” (El Ali, 2022, p.109).

9.5 Towards More Inclusive Pathways: A Call to Action

It is crucial to understand the different cultural, philosophical, and ideological foundations of women’s empowerment and how they shape the way it is perceived and practiced. Western perspectives are predominantly shaping the understanding of women’s empowerment and framing the policies diffused globally. These perspectives are often influenced by liberal values, neoliberal ideologies, and modernist philosophical ideas. The Western-oriented conception of empowerment emphasizes self-reliance and autonomy, promoting a self-determined and Promethean self. However, this approach may not align with Islamic teachings and philosophy, which stress the importance of submission to God and obedience to His commands. This emphasis on community and spiritual values over individualism and personal gain sets Islamic philosophy apart from Western-oriented perspectives. The clash between these two value systems can lead to a cultural and worldview conflict.

In his extensive body of work, ElMandjra examined the tension between Western and Islamic values and the issues arising from their interaction. He posited that the West’s cultural and political dominance over the Islamic world has caused a collision of values. He argued that Western modernity conflicts with the cultural and religious practices of Islam, and that Western values such as individualism, consumerism, and materialism, are incompatible with Islamic values that stress the importance of community, spiritual fulfillment, and the well-being of the collective. In his book “The Clash of Civilizations” (1996, p. 246), Samuel Huntington acknowledges ElMandjra as the first scholar to use the expression “Civilizational War” in reference to the 1991 Gulf War. However, ElMandjra (2005) presents a contrasting view from Huntington’s perspective. His thesis is fundamentally preventive, emphasizing that most future armed conflicts will stem from cultural differences and that the only solution to prevent them is through better cultural communication. On the other hand, Huntington’s thesis is inherently prescriptive, identifying non-Judeo-Christian civilizations as the potential source of future dangers.

It is imperative to acknowledge the influence of Western ideologies on our understanding of women’s empowerment and to consider alternative perspectives and cultural values. By embracing the diversity of worldviews and value systems, we can broaden our understanding of women’s empowerment and develop policies that are more culturally sensitive and inclusive. In this vein, this book strives to offer a unique contribution by highlighting the significance of a nuanced and context-specific approach to women’s empowerment in Arab and Muslim-majority societies. It advocates for the adoption of locally conceived policies that involve the participation of local stakeholders and invites scholars and students to conduct further research that amplifies the voices of underrepresented groups. By fostering a more inclusive conversation on the topic, we can move beyond a narrow, monolithic view and develop a deeper appreciation of the complexities surrounding women’s empowerment and other critical topics.

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Rabia Naguib is an Associate professor of Public Policy at Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. She holds a PhD in Strategic management with a minor in Philosophy from HEC Montréal. She acted as Director of the Executive MBA at the University of Sharjah. She was recognized for her contributions to scientific research and teaching with the distinguished Faculty Member Award. Dr. Naguib also served as a Local Tutor for postgraduate students at the University of Leicester, and supervised DBA students as a Visiting Fellow at Nottingham Trent University. Her research on women's empowerment and female entrepreneurship has been well-funded, with competitive grants from GERPA (Gender Economic Research and Policy Analysis), and QNRF (Qatar National Research Fund) as LPI and PI. She has an established record of publications in academic books and in international peer-reviewed journals.

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