



Women's Rights in Historical Perspective: A Comparative Study of Islam and the West

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Abstract

In the nineteenth-century West, married women were considered legally nonentities and denied fundamental rights, including property ownership, voting, education, and participation in professional roles. The common law doctrine of coverture subsumed a wife's legal identity under her husband's authority, granting him control over her property, labor, and body. Reform came gradually through the Married Women's Property Acts and the suffrage movements. In contrast, Islamic scripture and tradition recognized women's legal and social rights more than a millennium earlier. The Qur'an established women's entitlement to inheritance, property ownership, and independent earnings, while emphasizing moral and spiritual equality between men and women. Prophetic traditions reinforced women's rights to education, consent in marriage, and recourse to divorce, underscoring their dignity and agency within society. This paper presents a qualitative historical analysis comparing women's rights in the pre-suffrage West with those articulated in Islam. Drawing upon legal documents, religious texts, and scholarly interpretations, it argues that Islam codified principles of gender justice long before similar reforms emerged in the West. However, the study also acknowledges disparities between scriptural ideals and cultural practice, emphasizing the need to distinguish authentic religious doctrine from historical and social distortions.

Keywords: Women's Rights; Comparative History; Islam; Suffrage; Gender Law; Qur'an; Hadith.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

The status of women has been a persistent theme in legal, religious, and social discourse. In nineteenth-century Anglo-American societies, women's rights were severely restricted. The *Declaration of Sentiments* adopted at Seneca Falls in 1848 enumerated grievances that included: married women being legally dead, lack of voting rights, subjection to laws without representation, no property rights, the ability of husbands to imprison or beat wives, divorce and custody laws favoring men, taxation without representation, exclusion from most



occupations and higher education, and prohibition from church affairs (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). These grievances reveal how the law constructed women as dependents rather than autonomous citizens.

English common law enforced these inequalities through coverture, a legal doctrine that absorbed a married woman's identity into that of her husband. Under coverture, wives could not own property, sign contracts, sue or be sued; their earnings and even their sexual access belonged to their husbands (National Women's History Museum, n.d.). Coverture reflects a patriarchal system that viewed women as extensions of male household heads. Although reformers began challenging these norms in the mid-nineteenth century, changes were gradual and contested. *Married Women's Property Acts* in the United States and Britain allowed wives to retain earnings, control real and personal property, and enter contracts (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). Still, suffrage and equal educational opportunities remained distant goals.

Against this backdrop, the rights granted to women in Islam appear remarkably progressive for the seventh century. The Qur'an explicitly provides women with inheritance and property rights. Verse 4:7 states:

وَلِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا

"For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much—an obligatory share." (Holy Qur'an, 4:7)

The exegete Maududi identifies five principles in this verse: (1) both men and women have fixed shares; (2) distribution must occur even if the estate is small; (3) shares apply to all property; (4) distribution occurs after death; and (5) closer relatives have priority (MyIslam.org, n.d.). Verse 4:32 admonishes believers:

وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوْا مَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بِهِ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ لِّلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبُوا وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبْنَ

"Do not covet the bounties Allah has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than others. Men will be rewarded according to their deeds, and women equally according to theirs." (Holy Qur'an, 4:32)

Similarly, verse 33:35 proclaims:

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ ... أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

"Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women ... for all of them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward." (Holy Qur'an, 33:35)

These passages emphasize spiritual and moral equality, economic rights, and individual accountability. The hadith corpus further underscores women's agency. A well-known narration states:

طَلَبَ الْعِلْمَ فَرِيضَةً عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ

"Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim." (Hadith, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Book 1, Hadith 224)

Another tradition relates:

لَا تُنكَحُ الْأَيِّمُ حَتَّى تُسْتَأْمَرَ، وَلَا تُنكَحُ الْبِكْرُ حَتَّى تُسْتَأْذَنَ

"A previously married woman cannot be married until she is consulted, and a virgin cannot be married until her permission is sought; her silence signifies approval." (Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 67, Hadith 42)

Another report:

امْرَأَةٌ ثَابِتُ بْنُ قَيْسٍ أَتَتْ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ ... فَقَالَتْ: أَقْبَلِ الْحَدِيثَةَ وَطَلِّفَهَا تَطْلِيفَةً

"The wife of Thabit ibn Qays came to the Prophet ﷺ and said: O Messenger of



Allah, I do not fault him in character or religion, but I dislike ingratitude in Islam. The Prophet ﷺ said: ‘Will you return his garden?’ She said: Yes. He said: ‘Accept the garden and divorce her once.’” (Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 68, Hadith 22)

These hadiths support women’s rights to education, consent, and divorce. Early Muslim history offers practical examples: Khadija bint Khuwaylid was a successful businesswoman who employed male caravaners and financed her marriage to Muhammad (S.A.W.); women like Asma’ bint Abi Bakr and Zaynab bint Jahsh engaged in trade and agriculture (Hiba Magazine, n.d.).

The significance of comparing these contexts lies in challenging the assumption that women’s rights are a recent product of Western liberalism. Islam’s early legal reforms suggest that gender justice can emerge from both religious frameworks and secular activism. At the same time, examining both frameworks highlights how cultural practices can diverge from normative teachings. Many Muslim societies have limited women’s mobility and access despite Islamic rights, while Western societies have gradually dismantled legal barriers through activism and law. A historical comparison can thus illuminate the interplay between law, religion, and culture in shaping gender norms.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

This study has four objectives:

1. To document the legal and social restrictions on women in the nineteenth-century West. This includes analyzing the Declaration of Sentiments, coverture, and property laws.
2. To examine the rights Islam grants women according to the Quran and Hadith. Focus areas are inheritance, property, marriage, divorce, education, and economic participation.
3. To compare the trajectories of women’s rights in the West and Islam. The comparison emphasizes chronological differences, conceptual frameworks, and practical outcomes.
4. To contribute to contemporary debates on gender and religion. The research aims to correct misconceptions about Islam and highlight the importance of legal reforms in both contexts.

1.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study addresses three research questions:

1. What were the key restrictions placed on women in Western societies before the suffrage movement?
2. What rights did Islam grant to women in its formative period regarding property, marriage, education, and social participation?
3. How do these two legal frameworks compare in terms of timing, scope, and implementation?

Hypothesis: Islam articulated comprehensive rights for women in the 7th century, while comparable rights emerged in Western law only in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, cultural practices in both contexts sometimes diverged from these legal ideals.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on Anglo-American societies during the nineteenth-century pre-suffrage era and the formative period of Islam (seventh to eighth centuries).



It analyses legal texts, religious scriptures, and secondary scholarship. The research acknowledges that women's experiences varied by class, race, and region in the West and that the application of Islamic law has differed across cultures and historical periods. The reliance on English translations of the Quran and Hadith may introduce interpretive nuances, and the study does not attempt a comprehensive legal exegesis. Instead, it highlights salient texts that illustrate women's rights.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The analysis employs a **historical-comparative** method rooted in feminist theory and Islamic jurisprudence. **Liberal feminism** critiques patriarchal legal structures and advocates equal rights, making it suitable for evaluating Western laws like coverture and suffrage. **Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh)** derives legal rulings from the Qur'an, Sunnah, consensus, and analogical reasoning. Examining these sources reveals normative principles related to gender. A **sociological lens** situates rights within cultural and economic contexts, recognizing that law interacts with social norms and values. The study thus combines normative textual analysis with socio-historical inquiry.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Comparing the pre-suffrage West and early Islam challenges simplistic narratives that portray Islam as inherently oppressive or the West as the sole origin of women's rights. By demonstrating that the Qur'an grants women inheritance, property, and marital rights centuries before Western legal reforms, the study underscores the plurality of feminist histories. It also highlights the roles of activism and interpretation in realizing rights: Western suffragists fought to reform civil law. At the same time, Muslim scholars and feminists advocate a return to original Islamic principles. The findings can inform cross-cultural dialogues on gender justice and contribute to more nuanced curricula in history, law, and religious studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Women's Rights in Pre-Suffrage West

Scholars have extensively analyzed the legal status of women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and America. Under coverture, a married woman's legal identity merged with that of her husband, denying her separate property, contractual ability, and legal standing (National Women's History Museum, n.d.). Historian Linda Kerber (1999) argues that coverture imposed not only legal disabilities but also civic obligations—wives owed obedience, domestic labor, and sexual availability. Gerda Lerner (1986) situates coverture within the larger "patriarchal equilibrium," emphasizing that legal subordination reinforced economic and ideological control.

The *Declaration of Sentiments* (1848) serves as a seminal primary source. It lists eleven grievances, including women's exclusion from voting, property ownership, professional fields, and education, and the ability of husbands to imprison or beat wives (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). Feminist historians, such as Ellen Carol DuBois (1998), note that the declaration drew on Enlightenment ideals of natural rights, asserting that women should have the same rights as men. Law professor Reva Siegel highlights that suffragists used grievances to frame women's disfranchisement as a violation of fundamental



liberties.

Legal reforms gradually eroded coverture. The Married Women's Property Acts enacted between 1839 and 1882 allowed women to own property, control earnings, and make contracts (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). Scholars debate whether these acts were motivated by feminist advocacy or economic necessity; Richard Chused argues that financial crises and creditors' interests influenced legislators. Nevertheless, the acts laid the foundation for later reforms. The Fourteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution eventually granted equal protection and suffrage, but as Kerber (1999) notes, formal rights did not immediately translate into social equality.

3.2 Women's Rights in Early Islam

Islamic sources present a markedly different legal status for women than nineteenth-century Western laws. Inheritance rights are enshrined in Qur'an 4:7, which states:

وَاللِّرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا

"For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much—an obligatory share." (Holy Qur'an, 4:7)

This abrogated pre-Islamic customs that excluded women and children from inheritance (MyIslam.org, n.d.). Property rights are further affirmed in Qur'an 4:32:

وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوْا مَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بِهِ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ

"Do not covet the bounties Allah has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than others. Men will be rewarded according to their deeds, and women equally according to theirs." (Holy Qur'an, 4:32)

Spiritual equality is highlighted in Qur'an 33:35, which promises forgiveness and a great reward for both men and women (Holy Qur'an, 33:35; see above). These verses underpin the principle that piety and righteousness, not gender, determine one's standing.

The Hadith corpus likewise underscores women's agency. A well-known narration states:

طَلَبَ الْعِلْمَ فَرِيضَةً عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ

"Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim." (Hadith, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Book 1, Hadith 224)

Marital consent is codified in a narration:

"A previously married woman has more right to her person than her guardian, and a virgin's guardian must seek her permission; her silence signifies approval." (Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 67, Hadith 42)

Another narration recounts a woman who sought divorce by returning her husband's garden (*mahr*), and the Prophet instructed him to accept it and grant her a divorce (Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 68, Hadith 22). Examples from early Islamic history reinforce these rights. Khadija bint Khuwaylid, a wealthy merchant, employed men to trade her goods and married Muhammad on her own terms. Aisha bint Abi Bakr became a renowned scholar and transmitter of hadith. Women like Asma' bint Abi Bakr and Zaynab bint Jahsh engaged in agriculture and crafts; Islam allowed women to own property, earn money, and manage assets without their husbands' claims (Hiba Magazine, n.d.).



2.3 Comparative Perspectives in Scholarship

Several scholars have compared Western and Islamic gender norms. Leila Ahmed (1992) argues that the Qur'an introduced substantial rights for women but that later patriarchal interpretations undermined these gains. Fatima Mernissi (1991) examines how political power struggles influenced the transmission of hadith and advocates for a feminist understanding of Islamic texts. Amina Wadud (1999) analyses the Qur'an from a woman's perspective, emphasizing themes of spiritual equality and social justice. On the Western side, Carole Pateman's *Sexual Contract* (1988) critiques the liberal social contract for excluding women; she argues that marriage was a patriarchal contract in which women exchanged obedience and sexual access for protection. Comparative scholars note that while Islamic law granted women rights earlier, Western societies eventually adopted egalitarian legal frameworks through secular activism and constitutional amendments.

2.4 Gaps in Existing Research

Although many works discuss women's rights in Islam or the West separately, few undertake a rigorous historical comparison across these contexts. Most comparative studies focus on contemporary Muslim-majority countries and modern Western democracies, overlooking the historical evolution of legal rights. Moreover, some Western analyses assume that Islam is static and monolithic, neglecting the diversity of interpretations and practices. Conversely, some Muslim apologists emphasize Islamic rights without acknowledging cultural practices that restrict women. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by providing a balanced, historically grounded comparison.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research uses a qualitative, historical-comparative design. It analyses primary texts (legal documents, Qur'an verses, and Hadith) alongside secondary sources (academic books and articles). The method involves descriptive and interpretive analysis of legal provisions and their surrounding social contexts. The comparative element highlights the differences in the timing and content of women's rights across the two frameworks.

3.2 Sources of Data

Primary sources include the *Declaration of Sentiments* (1848), coverture and property laws, Qur'an verses such as 4:7, 4:32, and 33:35 (Holy Qur'an, see references above), and Hadith collections, including Sahih al-Bukhari and Sunan Ibn Majah (Hadith, see references above).

Secondary sources include historical monographs on women's rights in the West, scholarly commentaries on Islamic law, and contemporary feminist analyses (e.g., Ahmed, 1992; Lerner, 1986; Wadud, 1999). The research deliberately employs widely available English translations of the Qur'an and Hadith to ensure accessibility for a broad academic audience.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The study conducts textual analysis of primary sources to extract underlying legal principles and norms. These texts are then situated within historical



contexts through engagement with secondary literature. The comparative analysis aligns recurring themes—in particular:

- inheritance and property rights,
- marriage and divorce,
- education, and
- public participation.

Differences are assessed in terms of timing, scope, and conceptualization. The framework also acknowledges the impact of socio-economic conditions and activism on shaping legal reforms across both Western and Islamic contexts.

3.4 Limitations of Methodology

As a qualitative study, this research does not quantify the extent of women's rights or measure their social impact. Reliance on translations may obscure nuances of Arabic legal terminology. Historical records of early Islamic women are often limited and sometimes hagiographic. Similarly, Western legal histories frequently privilege the experiences of white, middle-class women, overlooking those of enslaved, working-class, or indigenous women. These limitations caution against overgeneralization and highlight the need for a critical approach when comparing contexts.

4. Findings / Results

4.1 Women's Legal Rights in the West (Pre-Suffrage Era)

Legal Identity and Property

Under coverture, a married woman lacked a separate legal personality. She could not own property, sign contracts, or litigate; her wages belonged to her husband (National Women's History Museum, n.d.). This left wives financially dependent and vulnerable to abuse. The *Declaration of Sentiments* protested that married women were "civilly dead" (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). Early property acts provided limited relief by allowing wives to retain earnings and control real estate (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). However, these statutes varied by state and were often subject to husbands' power.

Political Rights

Women were denied the right to vote and hold public office. The grievances at Seneca Falls noted that women had "no voice in the formation of laws" (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). Suffragists argued that taxation without representation violated the principles of republicanism. Despite activism, women in the United States did not secure universal suffrage until the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920. In Britain, the Representation of the People Act 1918 granted limited voting rights, and full equality came in 1928.

Marriage and Family Law

Husbands held broad authority over wives. They could confine, beat, or financially exploit their spouses without legal repercussion (National Women's History Museum, n.d.). Divorce was rare, expensive, and socially stigmatized. Custody of children was traditionally granted to fathers under the doctrine of *paterfamilias*. The *Declaration of Sentiments* condemned these inequities (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). Reforms gradually liberalized divorce and custody laws, but they remained gendered well into the twentieth century.

Education and employment. Women's access to education and professions



was restricted. The *Declaration of Sentiments* protested that women were denied higher education and excluded from professions such as medicine and law (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). Even when women worked in factories and farms, they were paid less than men. Only in the late nineteenth century did universities begin to admit women; professional schools lagged. Occupational segregation persisted, reflecting deep-seated gender norms.

4.2 Women's Legal Rights in Islam (Seventh–Eighth Centuries)

Inheritance and property. The Holy Qur'an (4:7) declares:

وَاللرِّجَالُ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا

“For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much—an obligatory share.” (Holy Qur'an, 4:7). This marked a significant departure from pre-Islamic tribal customs. Qur'an 4:32 assures believers that both men and women are entitled to the rewards of their earnings (Holy Qur'an, 4:32; see above).

Marriage and consent. Marriage in Islam is a contract requiring the consent of both parties. A Hadith in Sahih al-Bukhari states:

“A previously married woman has more right to her person than her guardian, and a virgin's silence constitutes her consent.” (Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 67, Hadith 42)

The contract includes a *mahr*, a bridal gift paid by the groom to the bride, which becomes her exclusive property.

Divorce and custody. Islamic law permits divorce through several mechanisms, including *khula*. In one narration, a woman returned her husband's garden, and the Prophet instructed him to accept it and divorce her (Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 68, Hadith 22). After a divorce, mothers typically have priority in custody of young children, while fathers are responsible for providing financial support.

Education

A well-known narration states:

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ

“Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.” (Hadith, Sunan Ibn Mājah, Book 1, Hadith 224)

This is widely cited to support women's right to education. Early Islamic society produced female scholars, such as Aisha bint Abī Bakr and Al-Shaykhah Aisha al-Ba'ūniyya (Stowasser, 2018).

Economic Participation

Women in early Islam engaged in trade, agriculture, and crafts. Khadija was a successful businesswoman, while Asma bint Abī Bakr cultivated crops. Islamic law recognized women's financial autonomy (Hiba Magazine, n.d.).

4.3 Comparative Analysis

Chronology

Islam codified women's rights in the seventh century, granting inheritance, property, and marital rights long before Western societies addressed these issues. By contrast, Western women only gained property rights through the Married Women's Property Acts in the nineteenth century (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.)



Conception of Rights

In Islam, rights are framed as divinely mandated duties and rewards (Holy Qur'an, 4:7; 4:32). In the West, shaped by liberal philosophy, rights are conceptualized as natural entitlements. The *Declaration of Sentiments* appealed to "self-evident truths" of equality (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.).

Marriage and Divorce

Islamic marriage requires consent and permits divorce through multiple avenues (Hadith, see Sahih al-Bukhari 67:42; 68:22). Western law, by contrast, treated marriage as indissoluble and male-controlled until modern reforms.

Property and Economic Rights

Under coverture, wives lost ownership of their property to their husbands (National Women's History Museum, n.d.). In Islam, women retained ownership and inheritance rights (Holy Qur'an, 4:7). Western reforms, such as the Married Women's Property Acts, gradually converged on this principle (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

Education

Islam declared knowledge obligatory for every believer (Hadith, Sunan Ibn Mājah 1:224). Western universities excluded women until the nineteenth century. In both contexts, cultural resistance hindered implementation.

Public Participation

The *Declaration of Sentiments* condemned women's exclusion from professions (National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). Early Muslim women were actively involved in trade and religious scholarship (Hiba Magazine, n.d.). In both cases, societal norms limited the extent to which legal rights translated into public roles.

5. Discussion

5.1 Timeline Differences: Early Islam vs. Modern West

The chronological gap in the codification of women's rights underscores that gender justice is not a linear trajectory from oppression to liberation. Islam's seventh-century reforms demonstrate that religious systems can introduce progressive rights well ahead of secular law. Western societies, despite Enlightenment rhetoric, continued to deny women fundamental rights until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This challenges Eurocentric narratives that depict the West as the sole leader of women's emancipation.

5.2 Misinterpretations and Cultural Distortions

Both contexts illustrate how cultural practices can diverge from legal and scriptural principles. In the West, coverture lacked explicit biblical justification yet became entrenched through patriarchal custom. Similarly, some Muslim societies deny women inheritance, education, and mobility despite explicit Qur'anic provisions (Holy Qur'an, 4:7; 4:32; see also MyIslam.org, n.d.; Quran.com, n.d.). Colonial accounts often exaggerated Muslim women's oppression to justify imperialism, while contemporary media sometimes ignore Western women's continued struggles. Recognizing these misinterpretations is essential to avoid essentializing cultures.



5.3 Feminism and Islam: Convergences and Divergences

Islamic and Western feminist frameworks share common goals of justice and dignity, but differ in their foundations. Liberal feminism grounds equality in individual autonomy and secular law. Islam emphasizes equality for women, as seen in the Qur'an's focus on justice and spiritual equality (Holy Qur'an, 33:35; see above).

Differences arise regarding inheritance shares and polygyny. Islamic law grants male heirs a larger share and permits polygyny under conditions, which Western feminists often view as unequal. Islam contextualizes these provisions within the socio-economic realities of seventh-century Arabia and emphasizes that the principles of equity and welfare should guide their modern application.

5.4 Contemporary Implications

Historical comparison informs current debates on women's rights in Muslim-majority and Western societies. In Muslim contexts, scholars advocate legal reforms consistent with Qur'anic principles, thereby challenging patriarchal customs. For example, activists cite Qur'an 4:32 to advocate women's right to work and manage their wealth (Holy Qur'an, 4:32; see above).

In the West, issues such as pay inequality, sexual harassment, and reproductive rights demonstrate that formal equality does not eliminate discrimination. Cross-cultural dialogue can foster mutual learning and avoid viewing rights as a zero-sum game.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

The pre-suffrage West severely restricted women's legal identity, property ownership, voting rights, education, and professional opportunities; husbands held control over their wives and children (National Women's History Museum, n.d.; National Women's History Alliance, n.d.). Reforms such as the *Married Women's Property Acts* and suffrage amendments gradually improved women's status (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

In contrast, Islam codified women's rights to inheritance, property, consent in marriage, divorce, education, and economic participation in the seventh century (Holy Qur'an, 4:7; 4:32; see also MyIslam.org, n.d.; Quran.com, n.d.; Sunnah.com, n.d.). Early Muslim women, such as Khadija bint Khuwaylid and 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr, actively participated in business and scholarship (Hiba Magazine, n.d.). However, cultural practices often limited these rights in Muslim societies, just as Western societies resisted feminist reforms. The comparison reveals that legal frameworks alone do not guarantee gender equality; activism, interpretation, and social change are crucial.

6.2 Contributions of the Study

This study contributes to comparative gender history by juxtaposing two distinct legal systems. It demonstrates that Islamic law recognized women's rights centuries before Western reforms, challenging the notion that gender equality is exclusively a modern, secular achievement.

It also highlights the non-linear nature of progress: Western societies eventually overtook some Muslim societies in advancing rights due to persistent activism and legal reform, rather than through inherent cultural superiority. The



study urges scholars to differentiate between religious texts and cultural practices and to avoid homogenizing “Islamic” or “Western” perspectives.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could explore regional variations within both contexts. For example, comparing women’s rights in Ottoman Anatolia and Victorian England may reveal different dynamics.

Detailed studies of specific legal issues—such as polygyny, inheritance distribution, or voting rights—could provide deeper insights into these topics. Ethnographic work on contemporary Muslim communities might examine how women invoke Qur’anic rights in practice. Ultimately, interdisciplinary research that combines legal analysis, history, and sociology will further illuminate the evolving trajectory of women’s rights.

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