



THE TENSIONS BETWEEN CULTURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World

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The Intersection of Culture, Religion (Islam), and Women's Human Rights in Ethiopia: Private Lives in Focus

Yania Seid-Mekiye and Linda Kreitzer

Ethiopia is a diversified nation in different aspects such as religion and ethnic background. In 2007, the estimation of the Ethiopian population was 73.9 million (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2007). Ethiopia has more than 80 ethnic groups and religions. Among religious groups, the Orthodox Christian are estimated to be 43.5 percent, the Muslim population is 33.9 percent, protestant Christians are 12.6 percent, traditional religious groups are 2.6 percent, Catholic Christians are 0.7 percent, and others 0.6 percent (FDRE, 2007). In Ethiopia, women constitute half of the population (Knoema, n.d.); however, our observation indicates their status in the society is lower than that of the male population.

As a measure for the disadvantaged status of women and for protection of women's human rights, Ethiopia has signed international legal instruments such as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) (UN, 1993) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (UN, 1979). National laws such as the Constitution of Ethiopia (Government of Ethiopia, 1995, e.g., Article 35) were formulated to complement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (UN, 1948) as well as

the National Policy on Women (Government of Ethiopia, 1993), which have emphasized the protection of women's human rights.

Despite the presence of international and national legal frameworks, Ethiopian society, like other societies as described in the various chapters of this book, is mainly characterized by patriarchy where men hold more socio-economic and political power than women and exercise authority over women, both in the home and in the public sphere. Ethiopia is also a country where perceptions of religion and culture have a powerful influence over people's lives. Thus, the intersection of culture and religious texts and the translation and interpretation of these texts provide a set of social rules, which play a major role in shaping gender roles that contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality and violation of women's rights.

Cultural and Religious Texts

Different female Muslim authors have dealt with the male-centred interpretation of Islamic scriptures (Jawad, 1998; Keddie, 2012). As Jawad (1998) discussed, Muslim religious scripture is influenced by culture as well as by the viewpoints of religious scholars, who are usually males. It is not only culture. Time and place also influence the interpretation of the Quran. For instance, Keddie (2012) explains:

As in other religions, the meaning of scripture has been rendered differently in different times and places. Over the centuries the words of the *Quran* and *hadiths* have been interpreted in ways that are in accord with the beliefs and mores of the time of interpretation. (p. 4)

Keddie (2012) further points out that in past centuries, the Quran was interpreted as being far more male supremacist than its text implies, in a way that emphasized gender-biased traditions; this gender biased interpretation is still dominant among many conservative Muslims. Today, however, new interpretations of the Quran are more accepted as an important means to further gender-egalitarian laws and programs, and Muslims who believe in gender equality often interpret the Quran as supporting such equality. Despite the current egalitarian interpretations, Muslim women's

human rights are not fully respected due to male-centred interpretations that are the result of societal norms, values, and related practices.

Regarding male-dominated relationships in Muslim communities, Wadud (2006) argues that the idea of men being superior to women violates the principle of Islam that upholds the superiority/greatness of God/Allah. According to Wadud (2006), if Allah is the greatest and is unique, then there can be no other relationship between any two persons except the one of horizontal reciprocity. The horizontal plane is mutually cooperative because the role of the one can be exchanged with the role of the other with no loss of integrity. However, in the patriarchal framework, man is superior to woman, which is a relationship on a vertical plane, which in turn goes against Islam and establishes a basis for violations of women's human rights.

This study deals with the idea that interpretations of women's rights under Islam and the possible implications for women's human rights generally are profoundly affected by various socio-cultural patterns and economic factors (Barlas, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Roald, 2001). Based on this assumption, this chapter discusses the intersection of Islam and culture in relation to three specific areas of Muslim women's human rights: (1) marital relationships; (2) polygamy; and (3) property/inheritance rights.

As social constructivists, the authors believe that Muslim women develop subjective meanings of their experiences as Muslim women. These subjective meanings are varied and multiple and are formed by interaction with others through religious and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. This chapter presents research that looked at the intersection of culture, religion, and women's human rights in Ethiopia. The findings reflect the human rights of Muslim women in their families, which are influenced by gender stereotypes, religious interpretations, and culture.

Methodology

For this study, a qualitative research design and descriptive phenomenology was employed. Phenomenology is a research design in which the researcher describes the essence of the experiences for individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). It helps the researcher to attain a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of

everyday experiences related to the topic of the study. The research questions were: (1) How does the intersection of cultural practices with Islam within the marital relationship affect women's human rights? (2) How do practices of polygamy in Muslim families violate women's human rights? and (3) How do women's rights to work and property inheritance rights intersect with discrimination practised in the name of Islam? To answer these questions, a purposive sampling technique was used to select study participants who have experience and perception of the direct or indirect intersection of religious interpretation, culture, gender relations, and human rights violations. As Patton (2002) indicates, "the purpose of a small purposeful random sample is credibility of the data, not representativeness" (p. 241). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from five interviewees, who were selected based on the following criteria: (1) a willingness to share life experiences; (2) experience of one of the three issues such as polygamous relations, marital relationship, and property inheritance concerns; and (3) a claim to knowledge of women's status in Islam. The first author also used her own experience of inheritance-related issues in the family and as a member of the Muslim community in Ethiopia to inform this study.

Findings Regarding Culture, Islam and Women's Human Rights in Ethiopia

This section presents three major themes: (1) the intersection of culture and Islam in the sphere of marital relationships; (2) polygamy practices and women's human rights; and (3) property and inheritance rights. The substantive argument is that Islam is understood and applied in a way that favours men and limits women's human rights in family relationships.

The intersection of culture and Islam in the sphere of marital relationships

In marital relationships discourse among Muslims, the most frequently quoted verse in the Quran is 4:34,¹ which discusses the roles of the husband and wife. The verse is translated in the sense of the husband being the head of the family/wife; some translate it in terms of the husband being the maintainer and protector and the wife as obedient to him. The overall

intention of Islam is supposed to be maintaining justice, mercy, and compassion between spouses, but the culture of patriarchy undermines the intentions of Islam.

Patriarchy and the Quran

In practice, in Ethiopia, the teaching of Islam is integrated with patriarchy and used to perpetuate gender inequality, which the study participants consider not to be the intention of Islam. One of the interviewees, Amira (pseudonym) explains:

Muslims are not living Islam [in the socio-economic aspect] and more is expected from women with the fact that we [Muslims] have a culture in which women are expected to live an Islamic life whereas the men are expected to live as they want. . . . We see the men live as they want whether they could live according to Islamic framework or not.

The above statement indicates that when only women are expected to follow the Islamic rules and regulations, the result is suppression, whereas both parties equally fulfilling their responsibilities would result in a just and fair relationship. The interviewee further indicates that legitimizing these skewed relations begins when the marriage is established. When couples live together, Islam is mostly forgotten but emerges again whenever necessary to legitimize men's power and rights, and women's responsibility. If the marriage is terminated, there is also the tendency to go back to Islamic principles and use them in a way that favours men. Similarly, another participant indicated that some Muslim husbands' act like "small gods," thus creating an unequal marital partnership of superior and inferior beings. This serves as an instrument for the violation of women's human rights in the name of Islam. Similarly, Muslim women scholars such as Al-Hibri (2000), Barlas (2002), and Wadud (1999) have different points of view on the verse and its implications in relation to human rights. These authors argue that the Quran itself has no intention of endorsing such unfair behaviour in marital relationships. The core problem is the way its teachings are adopted by most of the traditional interpreters of certain verses, which tend to be male biased.

Religious preaching programs

Supporting the views of the Muslim women scholars mentioned above, four of the study participants, Amira, Nefisa, Zainab, and Naeema (pseudonyms), indicated that in their religious preaching program, Muslim preachers (most of whom are men) treat scriptures in a way that perpetuates a teaching of superiority among men and makes them unaccountable for how they treat their wives. Often this leads to the violation of women's human rights. For instance, Nefisa explained:

The *daees* [preachers] tell you the types of Hadith [sayings of the prophet, which are stated by the respective men of the time] that perpetuate the superiority of men without considering the other side of the Hadith. They just tell you the Hadith supports their superiority; however, there are several Hadith that help people to be morally kind. Since they are the ones who are preachers, they tell you what is good for them. Of course, they are superior in the culture too, since we [women] grew up with the expectation of going to the kitchen while they are expected to enjoy and work. And the *daawa* [The act of preaching in the Muslim religion] program tells you to [only] be obedient and explains the right of man [husband], but your [women's] rights are not told to you.

The idea that men automatically gain the right to be the leader of the family, as commonly accepted and practised among Muslims, reflects inequality and represents a violation of women's rights (Al-Hibri, 2000; Barlas, 2002 & Wadud, 1999). Furthermore, Barlas (2002) argues that even though the Quran charges the husband with being the breadwinner, it does not designate him head of the household. This interpretation is strongly motivated to sustain the patriarchal system that is very dominant among Muslims (Adnan, 2004).

Women, obedience, and human rights

It is not only culture and men's understanding of Islam that have an impact on women's human rights protection and violations. Some women

understand Islam as protecting their rights, whereas others interpret some women-related issues in the Quran literally, word-for-word, instead of considering the context. As a result, they disregard the justice aspect of Islam, thus keeping themselves within the abusive relationship. For instance, one participant, Zainab (pseudonym) justified her husband's right over her as follows:

I believe that the husband is '*ameer*' (leader), so that he must be respected, accepted, be loved and [I must] always be truthful to him. As a Muslim woman this is what is expected from me, so I must apply it. The problem is that what if my husband could not be a respected Muslim husband? Should I obey or what? I do not want to be obedient in the issue which is not important to me and to the family.

Similarly, another participant, Naeema, explained that though there is the idea of obedience in Islam, husbands who do not value women's rights need to be stopped.

I do not accept boosting their ego with telling them that "Allah ordered women to be obedient," as we must be capable to stop our husbands using that [Islamic expectation of women's obedience] to their advantage. It is not always so since there is the place to be obedient and disobedient. You must consider whether the person is worthy enough to obey him or not. I am trying to be obedient when he deserves and when I do not believe, I just "pretend," which he considers positively; since as any traditional person, they want us [women] to say OK [in any kind of interaction]. When their [husband's] action is beyond the limit and touching our [women's] dignity, then we must stop them.

Contrary to the above quotations, Amira offered another understanding of obedience:

It is Allah, who ordered me to be obedient, not he. Even if he is a bad man, I must be obedient considering that I will get a return [reward] from Allah. I believe that Allah ordered me to do so and even if the man is bad, Allah will make him good to me.

Similarly, another participant explained:

In Islam, there is no formula of I do not care. Whether he becomes obedient or disobedient to me, Allah says for me to “be obedient” so that I must be obedient, but we are in competition with each other. Therefore, we are not living as Islam.

Thus, women’s understanding of obedience in the Quran are different depending on their own cultural and religious socialization.

Male role as protector

Al-Hibri (2000) states that men can be *qawwamuna* (responsible/ protector/maintainer) when they fulfill two conditions: (1) being the financial maintainer of the woman; and (2) possessing the qualities needed to advise the woman in reaching a decision when she needs his help to do so. Like Barlas (2002) and Wadud (1999), Al-Hibri (2000) also argues that without these two qualifications, which may change from time to time and from one situation to another, men may not even assume to provide advice, let alone to be a responsible protector/maintainer. It is also further argued that the exegesis that establishes the husband as a ruler over his wife or, at the very least, as the head of the household, ignores the fact that the Quran appoints women and men as each other’s mutual protectors. In verse 9:71–72, it states that “the believing men and women are allies of one another. They enjoy what is right and forbid what is wrong. . . . Allah has promised the believing men, the believing women gardens beneath which rivers flow . . . (translated by Saheeh International, 2004), which it could not do if men were superior to women (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999).

The way religion makes a difference in marital life depends on many factors, including the importance of religion to the individual and the

extent of devoted practices, as well as specific beliefs and the rewards expected from faith (Hatch & Schumm, 2003). Meanwhile, the Quran says, “Be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. . . . So follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just. . . .” (Quran, 4:135, translated by Saheeh International, 2004). Therefore, unless Muslim women come to terms with justice within Islam and become empowered, it will be difficult to deal with Muslim women’s rights violations in the name of religion and culture. This means that a continuous effort of educating Muslim women is necessary to help them become aware of the patriarchal culture within Islam that is used as pretext against Muslim women’s human rights.

Polygamy Practices and Women’s Human Rights

Polygamy is one of the most controversial topics in relation to Islam and women’s rights. This is caused by differences in the interpretation of the Quran verses 4:3,² and 4:129,³ which talk about men’s alternative choices for multiple marriages to two, three, or four women, meanwhile warning men of their responsibility of maintaining justice among wives.

The Quran and polygamy

The verses having to do with fairness in the Quran can be understood in two ways, in material terms and in terms of love/compassion. The quotes state that “you will never be able to be equal [in feeling between wives], even if you should strive [to do so].” In this case, the inability to be fair, particularly in terms of love and compassion, is recognized. In the meantime, the Quran also states, in verse 4:3, that if you cannot give justice to all wives then marry only one (translated by Saheeh International, 2004).

Hassen (2006) indicates that though polygamy was permitted by the Quran and it was only used in the context of safeguarding the property or rights of orphans, it has been widely misused in Muslim families (Hassan, 2006; Jawad, 1998). In addition, Islam regulated polygamy by limiting the number of wives and presented it as the then solution for the social crisis that happened because of the increasing number of widows and orphaned children, which was the result of the war between the followers of Islam and those against it (Barlas, 2002; Hassan, 2006; Jawad, 1998). In addition, in the Ethiopian context, having more than one wife can be a social choice

and solution. For instance, when the first wife gets tired and unable to satisfy her husband sexually, and if the husband's sexual desire is strong, they have to agree on one of the following alternatives: (1) he has to abstain and live without satisfaction; (2) he has to divorce her and marry another woman; (3) he has to establish an extramarital relationship; or 4) she has to agree that he will have a second marriage. With these alternatives, either both partners compromise in each other's interests or they quit their marriage based on consent. However, the reality is different. In Ethiopia, most polygamous marriages among Muslims happen regardless of the first wife's agreement. Men marry as they wish, whether the first wife agrees or not. In this case, the first wife's status as partner is meaningless; instead the woman's status in that family is as the sexual property of the husband.

Polygamy and women's status and health

Among the knowledgeable members of the Muslim community, polygamy may be attributed to lack of understanding of women's status in Islam, chauvinistic attitudes, or to men ignoring the first wife and marrying as they wish. The case of one study participant is presented as follows:

Munira (pseudonym) separated (not divorced) from her husband and had six children and lived for 20 years with her husband. When she gave birth to her 6th child, her husband left her for another woman and married this woman secretly. This second wife of the family was widowed and had two children. After two months of his second marriage, he told Munira about this second marriage. She said there were two reasons for his marriage: 1) "the woman [his second woman] is alone and needs a supporting person near to her"; and 2) his right to a second marriage. Her argument was that "if he wanted to marry another woman, he has to let me know before that marriage, and at that time, I may allow him. But what he did was to undermine me with the perception that I cannot do anything." When Munira heard about the marriage of her husband, she left her husband's home with her three younger kids to go to her mother's home. When she was requested to return to him, Munira provided two

alternatives: 1) divorce; and 2) leave his second marriage. The man refused to divorce either woman as he wanted to be married to both. Munira was requesting . . . a divorce until the data collection for this research but the man continued to refuse. She has also requested to have some of his property for her children and again the man refused to respond. At the time of this study, she was living with her six children as a single mother in her brother's house. After her separation, she was criticized not only by him, but also by the rest of the men from her ethnic community due to her rejection of his second marriage. Right after his marriage, she had experienced psychological and emotional violence that was observed on her face as well as weight loss (which she also mentioned as an impact of her condition).

When polygamy is practised in disregard of the will of wives, it affects women's social status, economic position, and health, and consequently, it violates women's human rights such as the right to dignity and security. According to Abd Al 'Ati (1995), the role of the husband in the Quran states that it is his solemn duty to God to treat his wife with kindness, honour, and patience, to keep her honourably or free her from the marital bond honourably, and to cause her no harm or grief. Therefore, this participant's case is contrary to Islam and the Ethiopian Constitution's rights to liberty and freedom.

Polygamy hurts first wives, as well as second or later wives, emotionally and psychologically. As there are many negative factors that could arise in a polygamous marriage, one might question why a young woman would enter a polygamous marriage with an older man, or at least a married man. Is marrying a married man the right of women or not? As mentioned earlier, the marital relationship in patriarchal society does not involve only those who are in the relationships; there is also the societal institution itself that mainly depends on the society's cultural traditions. When women get divorced, are widowed, or are relatively older, their chances to marry single men are limited.

Therefore, women in such societies are obliged to marry, if possible, a single man; otherwise, they will join the already established family as

the second, third, or fourth wife. For instance, one of the first author's cousins, who is in a polygamous relationship, mentioned to her that "no one wants to be the second wife unless it is with the intention of having children." There is also one of the first author's sisters, who stayed in Saudi Arabia for a decade, and when she came back to Ethiopia, she was much older. Therefore, she was obliged to marry as the second wife. This is because Ethiopian society does not allow women to stay single, and she is forced to have children. Thus, to submit to the society's expectations, women also do not want to stay single or remain childless. In the meantime, it is prohibited to give birth outside of marriage. Therefore, in this case, it is the societal culture that forces women to engage in the polygamous marriage. However, women involved in polygamous relationships see it as in their interest to get married. To summarize, women's engagement in a polygamous marital relationship holds a hidden power of gender inequality that perpetuates itself, which in turn makes violations of women's human rights (such as the right to freedom) a normal part of daily life.

The right to work, and inheritance of property

The Quran generally supports women's rights to acquire, hold, use, administer, and organize property and inherit family property, though there are certain differences in the understanding of the Quran's prescription of family inheritance. However, property inheritance as a right of women in Islam was hijacked by the oppressive socio-economic context of the then pre-Islamic Arabia, and the socio-cultural context of the society in which Muslim women lived and the expected role or function of a male or female within it (Barlas, 2002; Jawad, 1998; Syed, 2004).

The right to work and own property

In relation to work and property rights, throughout the first author's experience as a member of the Muslim society, Muslim women in general can work and own property, which is also supported by the Quran.⁴ However, there are two special cases in which women are denied work and property rights: (1) level of understanding of Islam; and (2) the socialization of women to be dependent on family males. First, in some Muslim families, women are denied the right to work because of the assumption

that it is the husband who is supposed to be the breadwinner. Although the Qur'an charges the husband with the duty of being the breadwinner in the verse 4:34, this does not mean women cannot or should not provide for themselves. It simply means that the Qur'an does not expect women to be the breadwinners (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999). For example, husbands who are unable to provide for their wives' make them economically needy throughout their life. Second, in most families, women grow up and are socialized to be dependent on the men of their family, and therefore they do not challenge the status quo. Despite these facts, if male family members agree (which also depends on the wife's ability to claim their rights), or she is determined to work and become independent, the wife can work and control her own property. However, the problem is that Islam is used to prohibit women's right to work instead of emphasizing men's responsibilities. For instance, Zainab explained:

Most Ethiopian married Muslim status is really confusing in many aspects. This is because, firstly, there is no system that protects women in terms of Sharia. Theoretically, the Sharia system protects women. In the place where there is the application of Islam, women and children must not get hungry. Before the beginning, when women are created, fathers are responsible to fulfil at least their basic needs. . . . If there is no father, the uncle is responsible to protect her. But, in our case, which uncle thinks and feels responsible to protect women and children? If there is no uncle, then a brother is responsible, [and] here again, there might not be a brother, and even if there is, they are busy. When she gets married, the husband is responsible. And, even if it is a must for her to work and protect herself, she does not have access, with the fact that Muslim men understand that women must stay at home. Therefore, women are denied access to education, and then job and then to protect herself. When she is denied access to work, then she is also denied access to power.

The above quote indicates that women's right to work is affected directly and indirectly. In some Ethiopian Muslim families, men claim that it is their right to control their wives, and in the name of sharia they refuse to allow their wives to go out to work. There are also cases where, when female students go to high school, it is assumed they are ready for marriage, and that this is a priority for Muslim girls. After marriage, they mostly depend on their husbands' income and the level of his awareness and devotion in supporting them. Therefore, in the case of women's right to work, the nature of rights abuse is directly and indirectly influenced by the culture of the society and level of understanding of Islam.

Family property and inheritance right

Among most Ethiopian Muslims, including the first author's own family, the problem of inheritance and property ownership lies in the nature of the woman's right to own family property and inheritance rights. From Islamic point of view, the existing rule for sharing family inheritance is that women are entitled to half of that of the male family members, which is stated in Quran verses 4:11, 4:12, and 4:176. These verses indicate that a daughter gets half of what a son gets, a brother receives double shares compared to his sister, and the share of the surviving wife is half of what a surviving husband would receive from the deceased family member. The purpose of the differential rule of inheritance is that the male is expected to fulfill all family responsibilities, whereas the female invests her share for personal purposes unless she wants to share with family. However, these female family members' inheritance rules are used to discriminate against women (Jawad, 1998; Syed, 2004).

As stated above, verses of the Quran such as 4:34⁵ and 65:6–7⁶ stipulate that all financial family responsibility belongs to male family members. But in most families in Ethiopian Muslim society, it is the opposite when it comes to taking care of their families. Many women in general, and Muslim women in particular, become the heads of their households and play a major part in providing for their families. What is the solution where Muslim men fail to fulfill their family maintenance responsibility and Muslim women become the sole responsible persons in the family maintenance, domestic, and reproductive roles as well? In this case, first, women must consider verses such as 4:32⁷ and 4:40⁸ from the Quran to

protect their rights, which may be violated through the misogynistic interpretation of verse 4:34 of the Quran.

Secondly, the right to get a *mahr* (dowry/obligatory marriage gift) from their husbands, stated by 4:4⁹ of the Quran, would give women financial security in their marital lives. Therefore married women have to maintain such rights to address the problems they experience when the issue of inheritance and property rights becomes contested. Thirdly, in cases where the woman of the family cannot get married, or the male family member, whether he is father, brother, or son, does not fulfill his responsibility, it would be necessary to examine the provisions of the Quran in 2:180¹⁰ and 2:181¹¹ that deal with bequests which provide additional rights to the property of the deceased, apart from the Quranic shares stated earlier.

Despite different problems related to the interpretations of the Quran and the presence of Quran-based solutions, the woman's contribution, and her family responsibilities, the gender-differentiated Islamic inheritance rules have mostly endured. Also, most Muslim women abstain from challenging the apparent discrimination practised in the name of Islam due to their low level of knowledge about their status in Islam, lack of awareness of how to deal with their rights as Muslims, and their belief that submitting to the male family members is the duty of women.

In addition, in the context of property and inheritance rights for women, culture seems to have prevailed. This means that in Muslim society and community, customary norms through family and ethnic community structures seem to have overshadowed Islamic principles of justice by making property and inheritance rights often merely theoretical, or even used to disadvantage women. For instance, one interviewee, Zainab, stated that the "real intention of the *Sharia* [Muslim-based law from the Quran, Hadith, and consensus of Muslim religious scholars] and its safety and protection mechanism[s] for women and maintenance of justice are forgotten. Instead they are used as a pretext to deny women their socio-economic rights." The customary understanding of sharia is also in terms of restricting women rather than benefiting/protecting their rights and maintaining justice. Sharia does not oppose humanity, so the denial of women's rights and protection is opposite to sharia; however, sharia is used as a pretext to deny women's basic rights.

When it comes to culture, particularly in rural Ethiopia, families often fear that it is inappropriate for a girl to be given property because she will eventually marry and leave her natal family to become part of her husband's family. Thus, if she takes any property with her, she essentially removes it from her family to a new family. In this way, women only receive a half-share of the property from the natal family in inheritance form as well as of her own property from her husbands' family. Therefore, women experience double restrictions of property and inheritance rights. Recently, the Ethiopian government ordered wives' names to be registered in the land ownership registration at *Kebele/district* level. The registration was done but mostly remains in name only; the right to use and control the land and related products remains in the hands of men. Thus, access to property is theoretically there in most parts of rural Ethiopia in the land rights registration card, but control and benefit of the land is minimal. In this regard, it is not the country's official law governing women's rights to property but rather culture and gender that are governing the women's economic rights. In most Muslim communities this is associated with Islam, which silences women from claiming any kind of property rights.

Discussion

The Quran¹² addresses the priority of justice in human relationships, which is also the basis for women's human rights in Muslim society. However, in Muslim families or communities women's human rights are violated in the name of Islam by interpreting some verses from the Quran and the prophetic Hadith that permit differential treatment of women and men based on their functional roles. This interpretation stems from a lack of understanding of the context of the ' verses, which were originally revealed as a solution for specific problems. If women's human rights are to be protected, the religious sources must be interpreted in the context of the period in which they were written and the spirit of the message—especially equity—must be applied to our times (Barlas, 2002; Jawad; 1998; Wadud, 1999). Organizing Muslim women in different associations and dealing with their rights as women has paramount importance in this regard. Some Muslim male scholars can also help when women try to make a difference. Moreover, with the current political condition of the country,

Ethiopia has a great opportunity to use Islamic rules and regulation in the way that is more favourable to women in the context of the time. This is because currently Ethiopia is undergoing dramatic political change that has affected the civil rights of citizens and equal representation of women in ministerial positions. This political change is also impacting Muslims' participation in party politics, which the authors believe will encourage interpretation of the religious sources that is more compatible with equity and protection of human rights of women in socio-economic and political aspects of the country.

In addition to consideration of the verses of the Quran in the context of their original revelation, holistic understanding of the Quran would be part of a healing solution for gender justice within Muslim communities. Usually individual verses are taken out of context, distorting the intended meaning and purposes. Therefore, to enable better understanding of the Quran as a basis for the Muslim women's human rights protection, all verses related to the same subject should be taken into consideration when finding an appropriate interpretation. Wadud (1999) states:

The way to believe in 'the whole of the book' (3:119) is to recognize that 'spirit' of the book and accept its worldview, vision, and ultimate intent. In examining the Qur'an, we need 'to accurately determine the rationales behind its statements, comments and injunctions'. (p. 81)

The above quote from a Muslim female scholar, Amina Wadud, indicates that unless Muslim scripture (Quran) is understood and interpreted holistically, it is be easy for it to be co-opted by specific societal cultures and gender relations within Muslim families that in turn legitimize violations of women's human rights in the name of Islam.

When dealing with Ethiopian Muslim women's human rights, focusing on the woman's rights as an individual rather than as part of the extended family, and basing them on international laws and disregarding religious precept, does not address the challenges of the majority of Muslim women. Individualistic advocacy, based on a secularist view of women's human rights, may be important for a few educated Muslim women who are not dependent on the economic support of their families. But a relativist

view, rather than a universalist claim of human rights, is important for the protection of the' human rights of the majority of women in the current context of gender relations among the Ethiopian Muslim population. This is because advocating for the rights of women as individuals, while they live in the Muslim family, will not help women to achieve their intended rights; rather it may result in annihilation of individual women or resistance of the Muslims in general, or disintegration of families. Therefore, working for the protection of each woman's human rights for the benefit of all with whom she lives is of paramount importance to the empowerment of women and protection of their rights. Besides, some restrictions made on the rights and responsibilities of Muslims that emanate from the Quran also need to be considered from the relativist perspective of human rights. Therefore, advancement of Ethiopian women's human rights can better be addressed through a relativist perspective of human rights.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Social work practice related to women's human rights advocacy must separate religion from culture by engaging in textual analysis to uncover the Islamic perspective of women's human rights. To maintain Muslim women's human rights protection, there needs to be a Muslim-based system that teaches about justice and fairness in the family. Social workers need to advocate for just relationships and work with Muslims who can understand them. Social workers need to advocate for the establishment of a system to abolish or reinterpret the unjust readings and interpretations of Islam's scriptures and help Muslims who hold extreme patriarchal views and understanding to move toward balanced, fair, and just relationships.

To protect their human rights, Muslim women must help their men to assume their own responsibilities as indicated in the Quran, rather than accepting the burden themselves. Muslim women must express their concerns in a manner that helps their voices to be heard in the family rather than keeping silent. This is because Islam does not order any person to be oppressed; rather it calls everybody toward justice (Quran, 4:135). Muslim women must take this into account in their discussion of their human rights protection. Advocacy should be the major role of social workers in promoting women's human rights. Empowerment sessions directed

toward, for example, training women and establishing stronger associations of Muslim women that specifically promote women's understanding of their rights in Islamic scriptures, are of paramount importance. The focus must be on the way Islam and culture intersect to negatively affect the human rights of Muslim women in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The intersection of patriarchal culture with Islamic understanding of women's rights among Muslim society normalizes violations of women's human rights. Unless Muslim women come to terms with justice within Islam and become empowered, it will be difficult to deal with Muslim women's rights violations in the name of religion and culture. Therefore, a continuous effort of education, training, and advocacy is vital in helping Muslim women become aware of these intersections, which are used as pretexts to violate their 'rights.

NOTES

- 1 Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in absence what Allah would have them guard. But those from whom you fear arrogance—first, advise them; [then if they persist] forsake them in bed; and finally, strike them (translated by Saheeh International, 2004).
- 2 And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three, or four. But, if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one. . . . (4:3, Saheeh International, 2004)
- 3 And, you will never be able to be equal [in feeling] between wives, even if you should strive [to do so]. So, do not incline completely [toward one] and leave another hanging (4:129, Saheeh International, 2004)
- 4 “. . . to men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn” (Quran 4:32, Saheeh International, 2004).
- 5 Men are in charge of women by [rights of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. . . .
- 6 65:6. Lodge them [in a section] of where you dwell out of your means and do not harm them in order to oppress them. and if they should be pregnant, then spend on them until they give birth. And if they breastfeed for you, then give them their payment and confer among yourselves in the acceptable way. . . . 65:7. Let a man of wealth spend from

- his wealth, and he whose provision is restricted, let him spend from what Allah has given him. Allah does not charge a soul except [according to] what He has given it.
- 7 And do not wish for that by which Allah has made some of you exceed others. for men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned.
 - 8 Indeed, Allah does not do injustice, [even] as much as an atom's weight; while if there is a good deed, He multiplies it and gives from Himself a great reward.
 - 9 And give the women [upon marriage] their [bridal] gifts [obligatory] graciously. But if they give up willingly to you anything of it, then take it in satisfaction and ease.
 - 10 Prescribed for you when death approaches [any] one of you if he leaves wealth [is that he should make] a bequest for the parents and near relatives according to what is acceptable—a duty upon the righteous.
 - 11 Then whoever alters it [i.e., the bequest] after he has heard it—the sin is only upon those who have altered it.
 - 12 O you, who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is more worthy of both. So, follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just. And if you distort [your testimony] or refuse [to give it], then indeed Allah is ever, with what you do, Acquainted (Quran, 4:135, translated by Saheeh International, 2004).

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