

Beijing+25: Has the Mask of Gender Equality Fallen?

TALK 2 - Dismantling the Gender Equality Illusions

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Assalaamu Alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakaatuhu Dear Brothers and Sisters

The former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan stated: ***“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.”***

Dear brothers and sisters, today, this view that ‘Gender Equality’ is the panacea to women’s problems and path to women’s empowerment has become ingrained in the psyché of the international community and gender activists worldwide, including in the Muslim lands. It is seen as the unquestionable means to raise the status of women, protect them from violence, advance their political, economic, educational and other rights, improve their quality of life and achieve progress within nations. Ending women’s oppression is claimed to be achieved by ending all forms of gender inequality and gender discrimination. Article 13 of the Beijing Declaration for example states: ***“Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace.”*** Hence, gender equality has been promoted as the global standard of how to judge civilised, progressive and modern states, as well as the measure of how well nations treat their women, and has become enshrined in numerous international agreements and the constitutions and laws of states worldwide. In fact, 2030 is the year pledged by the UN General Assembly to achieve gender equality globally.

Feminism and gender equality also shaped the view of the successful woman: one who is financially independent, has a successful career and shares the duties and roles of men in family life and society, including being a breadwinner for her family, rather than the one who makes her primary vocation her domestic and child-rearing responsibilities. It is unsurprising therefore, that those who opposed the ideal of gender equality were labelled as backward and anti-women’s rights, and that the Islamic social and family laws were condemned as being oppressive to women due to gender differences in various prescribed rights, duties and provisions in family life and society.

Over time, gender equality has become a sacred cow of secular states and international politics – almost untouchable and heretical to question. But a concept whose advocacy occupies the time, energies and hopes of so many, and is relied upon to lift women from oppression and injustice globally **MUST** be questioned with regards to its soundness. Surely, if we truly wish to elevate the status, rights and wellbeing of women today, then we **MUST** ask – is the adoption of feminism and gender equality policies and laws the path to achieving this, so that our efforts are not exhausted in vain. And surely, it is only right to establish, whether the concept of gender equality has the credibility to be imposed upon the nations of the world, including the Muslim lands, and to be used as the yardstick to judge the merit or deficiencies of other cultures, including Islam.

To correctly evaluate the gender equality narratives, it is first important to understand that gender equality is not simply viewing men and women as having the same worth and intellect, or ascribing women full legal, political, economic, and educational rights. Rather, it is the belief that all laws, rights, roles, duties and choices should be the same for men and women in marriage, family life and society, including equal sharing of wage-earning, domestic chores and childrearing. For example, Article 245(a) of the BPfA states: ***“Promote the equal sharing of family responsibilities through media campaigns that emphasize gender equality and non-stereotyped gender roles of women and men within the family.”*** Gender equality also includes a call for the sexual freedoms of women to be guaranteed, enabling them to engage in any relationship they wish, whether within or outside marriage, as well as the right to have full reproductive control, including access to abortion with little restriction. The Preparatory Document from the Beijing +5 UN’s Women’s conference 2000 includes the

statement: *"Ensure that women of all ages can fully realize their sexuality, free of coercion, discrimination and violence..."*

So, having understood this, let us examine the truth of some prevalent gender equality narratives

Evaluating the Gender Equality Narratives:

Do Gender Equality Policies Protect Women from Violence?

Firstly, it is a widespread belief that gender equality policies and laws secure respect for women and protects them from violence and abuse. The Beijing Declaration for example, claims that abuse and violence targeted at women is due to ***"the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men."*** However, despite countless gender equality acts and legislation being enshrined within states across the world over many decades, domestic violence, sexual harassment, abuse and rape against women are still rampant and even rising within such nations. This includes countries which have focussed intensively on changing the traditional gender roles within the family structure which is claimed reflect 'unequal gender power relations' such as the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker – and which are presumed by the UN and others to be a key causal factor for violence against women. A report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in 2014 based on a major survey of 28 EU member states, most of which have stringent gender equality laws, stated that around one in three women across the EU have experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse since the age of 15. Moreover, the Scandinavian countries which score amongst the highest in the World Gender Equality Index, also suffer higher rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women than in other parts of Europe – a reality that has been termed the *'Nordic paradox'*. For instance, a 2016 report published in the Social Science and Medicine journal stated that the lifetime prevalence of violence against women perpetrated by partners in Denmark is 32%, Finland is 30% and Sweden is 28%. One of the authors of the report, Enrique Gracia of the University of Valencia, Spain stated, *"High prevalence IPV against women and high levels of gender equality would appear contradictory.....Despite this paradox being one of the most puzzling issues in the field, interestingly, this is a research question rarely asked and one that remains unanswered."* Furthermore, according to 2018 data from the global research firm IPSOS, the percentage of women who have experienced sexual harassment in Sweden was 81%, in Denmark 80%, 75% in France and 68% in Britain – despite these states priding themselves on their scale of gender equality legislation.

In the Muslim world, Tunisia and Turkey, which are hailed as leaders in gender equality in the region also demonstrate this paradox with their high levels of violence against women. Tunisia for example introduced its Personal Status Code in 1956 which reformed many of its family and social laws along secular and gender equality lines; in 2011 it lifted all reservations to CEDAW; and in 2014 it established full gender equality in its new constitution. However, the country has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the world – 60% according to its Ministry of Women, Family and Childhood (2016), while a study, published by the Center for Research, Study, Documentation and Information, found that 70-90% of women in the country had been victims of sexual harassment from 2011 to 2015.

It is clear therefore, that ensuring equality between men and women in society is not a recipe for respect and the protection of women. The treatment of women depends on the views and values that are propagated within any society of the worth and honour of the woman. In capitalist liberal societies, a contradiction exists between the call for respect for women and the concept of personal and sexual freedom that nurtures mindsets within many men of viewing and treating women as their desires dictate, with no sense of accountability to a Creator for their actions. Furthermore, within such states, businesses are allowed to objectify and sexualize the bodies of women for profit, whether in advertising, entertainment or pornography. This inevitably devalues the status of women, contributing to violence,

sexual harassment and other crimes against them. In addition, under secular and other man-made systems, where the human mind is promoted as the arbiter of views and actions rather than the dictates of God, oppressive, non-Islamic traditions, such as forced marriages, honour killings and other practices which harm women or promote a lowly view of them, have flourished. Alongside this, the absence of clear laws which regulate the interaction between men and women as well as the lack of adequate punishment for transgressions against the dignity of women, also escalates violence against them. And finally, the lack of clear rules regarding the rights and responsibilities of men and women within marriage and family life to ensure harmony in the family unit, has created confusion and conflict in marital responsibilities, which also contributes to violence. This is a reality exacerbated by gender equality.

Will Gender Equality Lift Women from Poverty?

Another narrative promoted by the Beijing Declaration is that the feminization of poverty, or the disproportionate rise of poverty amongst women globally compared to men is due to: **“gender disparities in economic power-sharing”**, obstacles to employment, and the **“rigidity of socially ascribed gender roles and women's limited access to power...and productive resources,”** like capital, land ownership and inheritance. The UN states that **“Empowering women in the economy and closing gender gaps in the world of work are key to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”** and that **“Economies grow, when more women work”**. The argument therefore, is that increasing women's employment and equalizing their presence in the workplace with men through “strengthening the promotion of gender equality” in domestic and public roles, and in economic policies and programmes, will lift women and nations out of poverty.

However, if this is the case, then why is it that despite decades of intensive propagation of gender equality agendas within states globally, and huge numbers of women in employment within countries, today, almost half the world's population – 3.4 billion people – still struggle to meet basic needs, according to the World Bank? Why is it that in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the female share of the agricultural labour force is the highest in the world, with women performing more than 50 % of agricultural activity, that more than half of the world's extreme poor live in this region? And why is it, that in those countries which pride themselves on the scale of their gender equality laws, and have had a large increase of women enter their workforce in recent decades such as the US and Britain, that the level of female poverty remains dire? In 2018, around 13% of women lived in poverty in the US, while the poverty rate for single-parent families with no husband present was 25% (Poverty USA). This is in the midst of the longest period of sustained GDP growth in U.S. history. In Britain, despite it being the fifth largest economy in the world, figures released in March 2019 by the UK government's Department of Work and Pensions, showed that one fifth of women in the country are in poverty; nearly a quarter (23%) of single female pensioners are poor, the highest figure in 15 years; and 45% of single parents – the vast majority (90%) of which are women – are living in poverty.

The failure of ‘gender-equality’ policies and programmes to tackle female poverty effectively is due to the fact that poverty does not have its roots in unequal gender roles in family life and society, nor in gender disparities in employment or economic power-sharing. Rather, poverty affecting women and nations is due primarily to the flawed capitalist system which rules states today and which dominates the global political and economic landscape. The faulty economic basis of this system focusses on increased growth and production and superficial GDP figures which have little relation to the financial hardships of ordinary citizens, rather than focusing on the effective distribution of wealth amongst the people; while capitalist free-market policies concentrate wealth in the hands of the few while impoverishing the masses. We see in many western states for example, governments have provided multi-billion bailouts to banks and wealthy companies, while simultaneously slashing government spending on social welfare for the poorest members of their society. The director of campaigns and policy in the charity Oxfam, Matthew Spencer, said: *“The way our economies*

are organised means wealth is increasingly and unfairly concentrated among a privileged few while millions of people are barely subsisting.” Capitalism’s interest-based system, the privatization of vital natural resources, patency laws on medication, allowing the hoarding and monopolization of land, gold and other valuable assets by a wealthy elite, and inhumane tax-policies are just a few examples of how capitalism cripples individuals and nations with debt, enriches the wealthy at the expense of the poor, crushes the economy of states creating mass unemployment, and makes good quality health care and education unaffordable to millions. All this, alongside environmental destruction and the fuelling of wars for profit which cause mass migration and are also primarily the result of capitalist policies and agendas – are the root cause of the intractable scale of poverty affecting women, men and children across the world. In Sub-Saharan Africa for instance, economies have been crippled by capitalist structural adjustment programmes imposed upon nations by the World Bank and IMF since the 1980’s which have forced countries to increase interest rates; to slash government spending, including on health and education; privatise state-owned enterprises; and use agricultural land for cash-crop production for export rather than to feed their own people. It is therefore not surprising that poverty, including amongst women, increased dramatically in the region as a consequence.

Is Gender Equality Required for the Progress of Nations?

Finally brothers and sisters, the UN and Beijing Declaration promote the narrative that gender equality in politics, economics and family life is essential for the progress and development of nations and for peace and security. For example, the UN Economic Commission for Europe argues that without fulfilling SDG 5 - *Sustainable Development Goal Gender Equality - “no other Sustainable Development Goal will be achieved by 2030”*. However, there is no correlation between the scale of gender equality policies and laws implemented within a state, or attained in politics, economics and social life, and the level of progress and development achieved within the nation. In Rwanda for instance, women have outnumbered men within its parliament for over a decade. Currently, over 60% of its MP’s are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union). However, the poverty rate in the country stands at around 40% (World Bank, 2019). Similarly, Mexico and South Africa have had high numbers of female parliamentarians for many years (currently 48% and 42% respectively). Yet the economic situation in these countries also remains dire, while their education and health care systems are broken. Mexico for example ranks last in education among the OECD countries, while in South Africa, in 2018, only 5 out of 696 public health facilities met the government’s 80% pass mark for health standards. And I ask you – what kind of progress was there for women or the state under the prime ministership of Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, or Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, or Theresa May of Britain? The facts speak for themselves! Furthermore, according to the World Economic Forum 2013 Report, some of the highest female labour participation rates in the world are in Malawi, Mozambique and Burundi where women make up a larger portion of the workforce than men. However, these countries are hardly role models for liberation from poverty, nor world leaders in provision of good quality public services. In Afghanistan, a country which was subjected to a fierce feminist agenda following the US occupation in 2001, and where a myriad of gender equality bills were signed into law and programmes implemented, the state of education and health care remains dismal. Today, over 40% of all schools in the country do not have buildings, an estimated two-thirds of Afghan girls do not go to school (Human Rights Watch, 2017) and 84% of women in the country are illiterate (Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization, 2017). In health care, a 2017 report by Afghanistan’s Minister of Public Health revealed that more than 50% of pregnant women did not have access to essential health services and more than 50% of births took place without nursing facilities.

Hence, it is clear, that it is not a deficiency in gender equality which is the impediment to the development of nations. Rather, it’s flawed political systems, failed economies, endemic corruption, conflict, insecurity, harmful environmental policies, and the existence of rulers and regimes that are bereft of any vision of how to secure their people’s needs and no genuine

care for their wellbeing. The poor quality of girls' education in many states for example, is not due to a lack of gender equality policies....it's a result of huge underfunding of schools and training of teachers, unsafe school environments and because many poor families cannot afford to educate their children. In many countries, maternal mortality and women's health in general is dismal, not because of inequality between men and women in access to health services, or lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health.....but due to gross underinvestment in public health care, malnutrition and substandard living conditions affecting women due to poverty, and exploitative health insurance policies and health systems dominated by the private sector which has transformed medical treatment into an exploitative business...all under governments who view health care and education as a luxury rather than a basic right.

Furthermore, the failure to achieve peace and security in war-torn states such as Afghanistan and Yemen, or protect the rights of women affected by persecution and conflict, as in Syria, or in Myanmar or China.... is not due to the lack of women involved in conflict resolution, decision-making or peace-missions. What have female leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Sheikh Hasina for example, done to protect the blood and rights of Rohingya women and girls? No, the lack of security and protection affecting millions of women internationally, is due to the presence today of a global capitalist nationalistic world order that is devoid of any morality – a system which fights and fuels wars for profit; ignores genocides; supports dictatorships who fulfil the interests of colonial western states; has no political will to defend the oppressed and slaughtered, unless there is political or economic gain; and accepts for women and children to languish, starve and freeze to death in inhumane refugee camps or drown at sea due to toxic nationalistic policies which refuse to provide them dignified sanctuary. Therefore, if we wish to see true progress, security and peace for women in states across the world, it is not more gender equality that should be our goal, but changing this conscienceless, immoral capitalist world order.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion brothers and sisters, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with its gender equality agenda has failed to deliver on its promises for women and girls of lifting them from oppression, protecting them from harm and improving their quality of life. Indeed, the call for gender equality will NEVER solve the countless problems that women face today. This is because its flawed approach to studying all issues from a narrow gender perspective fails to examine the true root causes and solutions to these problems in an objective and enlightened manner. Rather, it diverts attention from the clear fact that it is the values, ideologies and systems present within states which define the status, rights and wellbeing of women, rather than gender inequalities. Gender equality has therefore served as a smokescreen, distracting attention and efforts in countering the capitalist, socialist, liberal and other man-made values, ideologies and systems that govern nations today which are the root causes of the problems women face globally. In doing so, it has only prolonged the oppression and suffering of women. However, if we genuinely wish to improve the lives of women, it is these causal factors that we need to address.

Therefore, gender equality is a false and misleading standard for evaluating the quality and progress of women's lives and nations, as well as judging the merit or deficiencies of other cultures and belief-systems. It is concept therefore that we as Muslim men and women we should reject – from both an Islamic and rational perspective. Indeed, if we truly desire a brighter future for the women of this world, the first step is to rid ourselves of the gender equality illusions. Allah (swt) says, ﴿وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَسَرَابٍ بِقِيَعَةٍ يَحْسَبُهُ الظَّمْآنُ مَاءً حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَهُ لَمْ يَجِدْهُ﴾ ***“But the Unbelievers - their deeds are like a mirage in sandy deserts which the man parched with thirst mistakes for water, until when he comes up to it, he finds it to be nothing, and there he finds Allah, so He pays back to him his reckoning in full; and Allah is quick in reckoning.”*** [An-Nur: 39]