

**MUSLIM WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CYBERSPACE IN  
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Cyber is a term originated from cybernetics which means guide and some authors have defined cyberspace as set of inner human communications through computer and telecommunication means regardless to physical geography. Of course another definition that may offer is real electronic environment in which human communications occurs more promptly, beyond geographical borders, by its special tools as live and direct mode. In addition that cyberspace is located at environment which covers its communications, although these communications may not be on line, they are live, real and direct. Therefore, they do not greatly influence in this relation. Here this question is raised that is social activity of women in such countries by using cyberspace in accordance with special characteristics of this space results in more social partnership of women in society or using such spaces due to present conditions of these countries at international field results in more dangers and damages in the way of increasing social partnership of women, challenges that women face due to unsuitable social atmosphere as a result of gradual change in values and norms that inevitably rise in cyberspace, may result in duality of value and finally hopelessness of women in such societies.*

*Nowadays cyberspace is the medium of electronic communication used by individuals in technologically advanced contexts and countries in particular social configurations. The main topic of this article will particularly deal with Muslim women's involvement with cyberspace in the contemporary society in sub-continent and we will talk about the way Muslim women approach cyberspace, areas of their concern, and the way they take part in cyberspace social/political activities and communities through different online websites.*

## **Keywords**

*Cyberspace, Social Activity, Muslim Women*

## **Introduction**

With the growth of electronic communication, the concept of “cyberspace” has entered into everyday life. Cyberspace of everyday life provides a critical framework for understanding how the Internet takes part in the production of social space among individuals. It is intriguing to note the extent to which the internet and social media – such as Face book, Flicker, Twitter, YouTube and the like – have proven to be newsworthy topics in their own right within press coverage of the dramatic uprisings underway across the sub-continent. In fact Cyberspace is a global network with telecommunication, computer and processing systems infrastructure which enables people to use it as a social experience i.e. people of the whole world influence on each other’s social life through exchanging information, business, awareness, training, social support, direct activities, creation of artistic media, attending at political discussion. It is a new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world’s computers and communication lines. A world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form: sights, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic night. Its corridors form wherever electricity runs with intelligence. Its chambers bloom wherever data gathers and is stored. Its depths increase with every image or word or number, with every addition, every contribution, of fact or thought. Its horizons recede in every direction; it breathes larger, it complexifies, it embraces and involves. Billowing, glittering, humming, coursing, a Borgesian library, a city; intimate, immense, firm, liquid, recognizable and unrecognizable at once. Through its myriad, unblinking video eyes, distant places and faces, real or unreal, actual or long gone, can be summoned to presence. From vast databases that constitute the culture’s deposited wealth, every document is available, every recording is playable, and every picture is viewable. Around every participant, this: a laboratory, an instrumented bridge; taking no space, a home presiding over a world . . . and a dog under the table.

Cyberspace represents a novel type of communication which is electronic communication characterized as being quick. According to a science fiction writer, William Gibson, *cyberspace*

*is the collection of computing devices connected by networks in which electronic information is stored and utilized, and communication takes place.* In fact this is interconnection which creates the phenomenon of cyberspace but not computer itself.

Cyberspace actually comprises networks of linked computers, the actual space and being the storage in which information resides, the cable network through which that information is transmitted, plus the software which enables transmission. Cyberspace and its technologies enable people of different races, nationalities, and points of view connect and communicate with each other around the world.

Cyberspace is a man-made environment, an operational domain whose distinctive and unique character is framed by the use of electronics and the electromagnetic spectrum to create, store, modify, exchange and exploit information via interconnected information-communication technology (ICT) based systems and their associated infrastructures. These networked and interconnected information systems reside simultaneously in both physical and virtual space and within and outside of geographic boundaries. Their users range from entire nation states and their component organizational elements and communities down to lone individuals and amorphous transnational groups who may not profess allegiance to any traditional organization or national entity.

Technology and development cannot stop affecting on different levels of the societies around the world. In this course, followers of different religions are not of exceptions and among different religions, Muslim women participation in cyberspace has become a very significant issue. Although sometimes they are limited for some activities done on cyberspace or internet, nowadays they have particular participations and roles over there. Dr Gary R. Bunt is a lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Wales argues about Islamic Sites that

*“what makes a web site 'Islamic'? Significant issues emerge in answering this question and delineating Muslim cyberspace, associated with identity, language, patterns of behavior, and the utilization of textual and ideological sources. In addition, the cyber Islamic environment may be shaped by the application of 'Islamic' symbols, images, sound files, and different conceptual approaches towards defining 'appropriate' Internet interfaces. These components illustrate diversity with respect to interpretative, cultural, political, and linguistic concepts associated with Muslim identities”.*

### **Problems while working on cyberspace**

To enter into cyberspace, women have to overcome seemingly endless barriers. Social economic inequality, lack of knowledge in computing technology caused by gender-discriminating education, and very masculine design of the technology are viewed as some of the problems. These are some of the barriers women usually face when they attempt to go into cyberspace. Even after they succeed in logging on to cyberspace, women navigators usually end up running into another barrier. Predominantly masculine messages, implicit or explicit censorship on women's voice and frequent sexual violence in the Net are enough to frustrate women Net surfers.

Contrary to the existing position that computer-mediated communication tends to be gender-neutral, there are remarkable differences between styles of messages posted by female and male. They have different ethical codes in their communication.

### **Muslim Women's areas of concern: Cyber Feminists**

An objective framework was developed with reference to the most pressing challenges faced by Muslim women in contemporary societies. These key issues of women's rights on political participation, education, work, family, and social participation were discussed and analyzed in the light of women-centered approach.

Muslim women are involved with different online social communities and in this course they usually try to be considered and identified as Muslim. For instance Cyber feminists must begin by clearly formulating cyber feminisms' political goals and positions, strategic and politically savvy uses of these technologies which facilitate the work of a transnational movement that aims to infiltrate and assault the networks of power and communication. To be effective in creating a politicized feminist environment on the net that challenges its present gender, race, age and class structures Cyber feminism must criticize utopian and mythic constructions of the net, and strive to work with other resistant net groups in activist coalitions. Cyber feminists need to declare solidarity with transnational feminist and postcolonial initiatives, and work to use their access to communications technologies and electronic networks to support such initiative.

From another aspect, Butler's (1990) concerns about feminist attempts at liberation as active processes of creating the "sexed body" which is evident in how cyber-feminists crusades against the "veil". Interestingly, the aforementioned cyber-feminist narratives are not stereotypical, Western images of Muslim "sexed [female] bodies" oppressed by Islam but rather cyber-narratives by the now fancy-term "native feminists".

Moreover, Sarojini Sahoo, a key figure and setter of Third World Feminism in contemporary in Oriya literature, is an Indian feminist writer who has won different awards of the Orissa Sahitya Academy (1993), the Jhankar Award (1992, the Bhubaneswar Book Fair Award, and Prajatantra Award claims that for the Indian, Third World Feminism is not a 'gender problem' or confrontational attack on male hegemony but an integral part of femaleness separate from the masculine world. Her feminism is constantly linked to the sexual politics of a woman speaking against the view which sees women as second-class citizens in India. Third World postcolonial feminists argue that oppression relating to colonial experiences, particularly racial, class, and ethnic oppression, has marginalized women in postcolonial societies.

### **Islamist Feminists**

The term 'Islamic feminism' appeared for the first time during the 1990s in various parts of the world, but notably in the work of Iranian Muslim scholars, such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Afsaneh Najmabadeh, published in the women's journal, Zanan. Ziba Mir-Hosseini obtained her first degree in Sociology from Tehran University and her PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge where she is a research associate. She also works as a freelance consultant on gender and development issues. Mir-Hosseini, an Iranian anthropologist, has done extensive fieldwork in rural and urban Iran as well as in urban Morocco, and is the author of *Marriage on trial: a study of Islamic family law in Iran and Morocco* (1993). Furthermore, she is a filmmaker who has documented contemporary issues faced by women in Iran. Her award-winning documentary, *The Runaways* (2001), set in Tehran, tells about young girls who were forced to run away from their families because of abuse and intolerable restrictions.

Nowadays through the mainstream of Muslim women's interaction and participation, there is a sense of understanding about their role in online cyberspace. There are a variety of ways in which Muslim women in sub-continent define and shape their position within the

different Islamic framework in cyberspace environment. One of these frameworks can be viewed under the concept of “Islamist Feminism” in which this concept itself brings about different arguments among them.

Some Muslim women refer to their form of feminism, namely their project of articulating and advocating the practice of Qur’anically mandated gender equality and social justice, simply as a ‘women’s movement’; ‘Middle Eastern feminism’; or as ‘Islamic feminism’ in order to distinguish Islamic definitively from Western feminism but from another aspect of that many Muslim women do not accept the phenomenon of feminism because they associate this concept with western point of view and culture and not Islamic context.

On the other hand there are groups of Muslim women who value Islamic Feminism and their attempts are towards introducing all whose western ideas and ideals to Muslim societies by converting them with a “thin Islamic veneer”. Therefore, the use of this term is justified and this argue extends to another level of dispute among Muslim women in which some of them oppose women’s oppression in Muslim societies by referring to Islamic principles and some others who strongly deny it. The challenges faced by Muslim women have been interpreted against a western feminist framework, thus causing more harm than good. The resultant predicament is the subject of this study in which Muslim women’s own attitudes and responses to their present circumstances and future prospects are explored. Moreover, Islamic feminism was assessed to determine how it related to and coped with social change and how effective it has been in seeking to assert rights and find justice for women through historical, anthropological, socio-political and hermeneutical approach.

Islamic feminists try to trace and bring about equality of rights between men and women and they claim that currently women’s place is in “unnatural setting”, thus their psychological reaction is nothing but promoting women’s status and it is merely felt in cyberspace context. Islamist feminists advocate women’s active participation in all spheres of life, although they see the role of a wife and a mother as the principal ways of female self-fulfillment. In online websites they argue that these roles are re-conceptualized and given a higher socio-political esteem in the Islamic society. On the other hand Muslim feminists strongly believe that gender equality is seen in Islam, because the only message of the Qur’an regarding this issue is

egalitarian. Obviously they tend to popularize those messages concerned about egalitarian rather than those with patriarchy sources.

Islamic feminisms comprise a broad area with a variety of methodologies. South African scholar, Shaikh, identifies different modes of feminist expression among Muslim women: feminist writings (from scholarship to fiction); everyday activism such as social services, education, and the professions; and organized movement activism. Shaikh is a good example of feminist scholars who have taken part in the world-wide network on women's issues. It was her work, "Islam, feminisms and the politics of representation", in online Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research (JESWT) arousing interest in the importance of participation in academic society. Sa'diyya Shaikh uses the term 'feminist' as a description of Muslim women's activities that are aimed at transforming masculinity social structures.

### **Secular Feminists**

There is another category called "Secular Feminist" in cyberspace as well, who do not use Islam as their theoretical framework. They find and see Islam as problematic in the struggle against women's oppression; as a result they try to make some bonds with western communities of feminism rather than communicate or co-operate with Islamic idea holders.

### **Holists; Gender Justice Supporters**

This group of active women on cyberspace holds the idea that Islam has introduced gender justice and although women and men's rights and responsibilities are different, they are equally important as believers in the eyes of God and their functions are equally important and necessary. They refuse to accept the concept of "gender equality" on the grounds that women's and men's Islamic rights and responsibilities are not identical. Therefore, they distance themselves from non-Muslim feminists. Gender justice is understood as fulfillment of men's and women's needs (which are different because males and females are different biologically); according to men's and women's different natures, believers assigned different responsibilities. For example, looking after children and home is seen as women's duty, whereas men are the breadwinners.

Supporters of gender justice believe that the different character of their roles is an elevation of their status: “We are women and the core of the family. We lay the foundation of its construction”. In their understanding, they are not required to seek employment, and are given the privilege of bringing up their own children; in return, they expect to be provided for and safeguarded by their husbands. They state that Islam does not force upon them a double burden of work, which has to be endured by non-Muslim women. Men are also expected to follow the Prophet’s example and participate in household activities.

### **Traditionalists**

Some women claim and take the position that Islam has introduced a hierarchy of genders, and often quote the Qur’anic verse which supports this: “Men have a degree (of responsibility) over women” (2:228). While egalitarians argue that it means that men are physically stronger than women and therefore they are protectors of women. Traditionalists claim that men have been created as intellectual and superior to women. They emphasize that women, due to their biological functions, are more susceptible to the effects of hormones, and, as a result, are more emotional than men. In particular, traditionalists hold a belief that wives are obliged to obey their husbands, which is recommended in a Hadith narrated by Abu Dawud (2141). They argue that this hierarchy ensures smooth functioning of the family and community. In contrast to other groups, traditionalists do not see a discrepancy between Islamic scriptures and Muslim practices. What other Muslim women contest as patriarchal interpretations and cultural influence, traditionalists see as legitimate Islamic law.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion this paper highlights Muslim women’s concerns on cyberspace and online websites. The role of Internet in these exchanges is significant, as they would not be possible prior to the emergence of the Internet which has allowed Muslim women from different locations across the world and particularly in sub-continent to create their own online spaces and supporting their own ideas under the shadow of Islam. In these spaces, they communicate, educate themselves and discuss different understandings of Islam. These conversations also



indicate that control of discourses related to women's status in Islam is now shifting. Muslim women at the grassroots level, having been a topic of books and articles produced by Islamic scholars, journalists and academics, are now creating their own, alternative discourses. Muslim women define their status, engage with Islamic sources and select which scholars they wish to follow implicitly or explicitly. They express their views on Islamic issues and have a defined agenda which stems from a strong belief in God and commitment to their faith.

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