

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ISLAMIC RESPONSES: A STUDY OF PREVENTION AND PROTECTION MECHANISMS FOR MUSLIM WOMEN

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Abstract:

This research article explores gender-based violence (GBV) from an Islamic perspective, focusing on the preventive and protective mechanisms available for Muslim women. While GBV is a global human rights concern, its impact on Muslim women often intersects with religious, cultural, and societal factors. This study critically examines the foundational Islamic teachings—drawn from the Qur'an, Hadith, and scholarly interpretations—that address justice, dignity, and the sanctity of life. It highlights how Islam not only condemns all forms of violence against women but also mandates societal responsibility for their protection. The research incorporates a comparative analysis of how Islamic responses to GBV are applied in different Muslim societies, with particular attention to legal reforms, community-based initiatives, and support services. The study emphasizes the need to revive authentic Islamic principles as tools for empowering women and combating GBV. Recommendations are offered for policy, education, and advocacy rooted in Islamic ethics.

Keywords:

Gender-Based Violence, Muslim Women, Islamic Law, Prevention Mechanisms, Protection Measures, Women's Rights in Islam, Social Justice

Introduction:

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most widespread and pressing human rights violations globally, disproportionately affecting women and girls across cultures, religions, and societies. It encompasses physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse, including domestic violence, honor killings, sexual harassment, early or forced marriage, and female genital mutilation. Despite extensive legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and policy interventions, the prevalence of GBV remains alarmingly high in many regions. Within Muslim communities, GBV is often misunderstood or misrepresented, with religious teachings either wrongly cited to justify violence or dismissed entirely in secular policy responses. Therefore, this study aims to explore the Islamic perspective on GBV, highlighting the preventive and protective mechanisms inherent within Islamic teachings and their practical applications in modern Muslim societies.

Islam, as a comprehensive way of life, emphasizes justice ('adl), compassion (rahma), and the protection of human dignity (karamah). The Qur'an unequivocally upholds the sanctity and dignity of human life: "*And We have certainly honored the children of Adam*" (Qur'an 17:70). This verse serves as a foundational principle for understanding human rights in Islam, including the rights of women. Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and ethical teachings strictly prohibit zulm (oppression or injustice), which encompasses any form of harm or violence against others, especially vulnerable groups such as women. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) explicitly condemned violence against women, both in his teachings and in practice. For instance, in his Farewell Sermon, he instructed: "*O People, fear Allah concerning women! Verily you have taken them on the security of Allah*" (Sahih Muslim, Hadith 1218). Such prophetic injunctions serve not merely as moral advice but as binding ethical frameworks for family and societal relations in Islam.

However, the gap between Islamic ideals and their application in some Muslim-majority societies has contributed to the persistence of GBV. Cultural practices, patriarchal norms, and socio-political dynamics often overshadow or distort Islamic principles. For example, so-called “honor” killings are still prevalent in parts of the Muslim world despite Islam's strict prohibition of extrajudicial punishment and murder. The Qur'an declares: “*Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land—it is as if he had slain mankind entirely*” (Qur'an 5:32). Misinterpretations of Islamic texts and selective usage by some traditional scholars or societal leaders have unfortunately been used to silence women or rationalize abuse. This study seeks to distinguish between Islam as a divine ethical system and cultural practices that contradict its teachings.

In contemporary Islamic scholarship, feminist and reformist thinkers have increasingly highlighted the potential of Islam to offer a rights-based framework for the protection of women. Scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002) argue that the Qur'an promotes gender equity and that patriarchal readings are often products of male-dominated historical contexts rather than divine will. Wadud's hermeneutic approach emphasizes justice and mutual responsibility within gender relations. Similarly, Barlas contends that the Qur'an does not support male supremacy but rather affirms egalitarian spiritual and ethical principles. These perspectives are significant in reconstructing Islamic responses to GBV and underscore the need to revisit foundational texts with a gender-just lens.

Legal frameworks in some Muslim-majority countries have sought to integrate Islamic principles into protective legislation for women. For instance, Tunisia's Personal Status Code and Morocco's Moudawana (Family Code) have been hailed for their progressive stance on women's rights, drawing on Islamic legal sources while adapting to modern needs. Pakistan's Protection of Women Act (2006) and Domestic Violence Bills in provinces like Punjab and Sindh reflect an ongoing effort to balance religious legitimacy with human rights obligations. Nonetheless, enforcement mechanisms often remain weak, and women face systemic barriers in accessing justice, including fear of social stigma, lack of legal literacy, and institutional bias. This study will evaluate the successes and limitations of such initiatives to determine how Islamic ethics can effectively inform both state policy and grassroots interventions against GBV.

Another crucial dimension of Islamic responses to GBV is the role of religious leaders, community organizations, and educational institutions. Mosques, madrasas, and Islamic centers hold significant authority within Muslim communities and can serve as powerful agents of change when equipped with proper understanding and training. Imam-led counseling services, Friday sermons (khutbahs) addressing violence, and partnerships with women's rights organizations can shift narratives and promote zero tolerance for abuse. For example, in the United Kingdom, initiatives like “Imams Against Domestic Abuse” have worked to mobilize religious leaders to denounce GBV from the pulpit and provide victim support. Similar efforts have been seen in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Jordan, where Islamic NGOs collaborate with shelters and legal aid centers. These efforts highlight the importance of an integrated, faith-based approach that resonates with the cultural and spiritual values of communities.

In addition to prevention, Islam provides frameworks for victim protection and rehabilitation. The concept of *maslahah* (public welfare) and *darura* (necessity) in Islamic jurisprudence allows for legal flexibility to safeguard life and dignity. Islamic ethical principles encourage community responsibility in assisting victims, promoting mental and spiritual healing, and ensuring socio-economic support. The *waqf* system (charitable endowment), historically used to support widows,

orphans, and the poor, can be revitalized to fund shelters, legal aid, and educational programs for GBV survivors. Zakat (obligatory almsgiving) and sadaqah (voluntary charity) can similarly be directed toward protective social welfare initiatives grounded in Islamic values. These mechanisms reflect Islam's comprehensive approach to social justice and underscore the religious obligation to protect the vulnerable.

Moreover, the importance of education—both religious and secular—cannot be overstated in the prevention of GBV. Islamic teachings emphasize the pursuit of knowledge for both men and women as a means of spiritual growth and societal reform. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated: *“Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim”* (Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith 224). Education can play a transformative role in reshaping attitudes, dispelling harmful cultural norms, and empowering women to understand and claim their rights. Gender-sensitive Islamic education, particularly through female scholarship and leadership in religious discourse, is essential in fostering a more informed and just community response to GBV.

In summary, this study aims to bridge the gap between Islamic teachings and the lived experiences of Muslim women affected by GBV. By examining core Islamic principles, contemporary scholarship, legal reforms, and community-based initiatives, this research underscores the potential of Islam to serve not only as a spiritual guide but as a dynamic source of social justice. It calls for a revival of authentic Islamic ethics that prioritize mercy, justice, and dignity—principles that align naturally with the goals of GBV prevention and victim protection. Through critical engagement with religious texts and practical analysis of policy and advocacy efforts, this study aspires to contribute to both academic discourse and the real-world empowerment of Muslim women.

Literature Review:

Gender-based violence (GBV) has received extensive scholarly attention across various disciplines, including law, sociology, public health, and religious studies. Within Muslim societies, the intersection of religion, culture, and gender adds complexity to the understanding and response to GBV. This literature review explores the academic discourse surrounding GBV in Islamic contexts, highlighting key themes such as scriptural interpretation, cultural practices, legal frameworks, feminist perspectives, and faith-based interventions.

Numerous scholars have differentiated between Islamic teachings and cultural practices that perpetuate gender oppression. According to Engineer (2008), the Qur'an and Sunnah promote equality, justice, and protection for women, but patriarchal cultures have often overshadowed these values, leading to harmful practices such as domestic abuse, forced marriage, and honor killings. Similarly, Ali (2016) emphasizes that many acts of GBV in Muslim societies are not rooted in Islamic law (Shari'ah) but rather in traditional customs that misinterpret or misuse religious texts. These distinctions are vital in reforming societal responses and dispelling the myth that Islam condones violence against women.

Interpretive approaches to the Qur'an have gained prominence among Muslim feminist scholars, who argue that classical exegesis (tafsir) has historically been male-centered. Amina Wadud (1999) pioneered gender-inclusive tafsir by rereading the Qur'an through a lens of justice and mutual respect. Her work challenges patriarchal interpretations and asserts that the Qur'an upholds women's dignity and autonomy. Similarly, Asma Barlas (2002) critiques androcentric hermeneutics and demonstrates that the Qur'anic worldview is egalitarian in spirit, offering a theological basis for the condemnation of GBV. These scholarly contributions are critical in reclaiming Islamic sources to support women's rights and counter violence.

In contrast, traditionalist scholars have often adopted literalist readings of verses such as Qur'an 4:34, which discusses the relationship between husbands and wives. This verse has frequently been cited to justify male authority and even physical discipline in marriage. However, contemporary interpretations, including those by Abou El Fadl (2001), argue that such readings contradict the broader Qur'anic ethic of mercy and kindness. El Fadl urges scholars and leaders to interpret the verse in context, emphasizing symbolic rather than physical meanings and aligning interpretations with the overarching values of compassion and justice in Islam.

Legal reform in Muslim-majority countries has produced mixed results in addressing GBV. In Tunisia and Morocco, progressive family law reforms grounded in Islamic legal reasoning have significantly improved women's legal protections (Welchman, 2007). These include stricter laws against domestic violence, minimum marriage age enforcement, and more equitable divorce rights. Conversely, in countries like Afghanistan and Sudan, deeply rooted patriarchal interpretations of Shari'ah continue to undermine women's rights and hinder the implementation of protective laws (Bauer & Ramadan, 2010). These disparities reflect the importance of context-specific approaches to integrating Islamic values with human rights norms.

Community and religious leaders also play a pivotal role in shaping attitudes toward GBV in Muslim societies. According to research by Alkhateeb and Hadidi (2021), imams and religious educators who are properly trained in gender-sensitive Islamic teachings can challenge harmful cultural norms and become powerful advocates for women's protection. Programs such as "Muslim Men Against Domestic Violence" in North America and "Faith Leaders for Family Justice" in Indonesia have shown success in reducing stigma and encouraging victim support. These models demonstrate how Islamic discourse, when aligned with principles of social justice, can effectively combat GBV.

Islamic charitable institutions and social welfare systems also hold potential for supporting GBV victims. The concept of *waqf* (endowment) and *zakat* (obligatory charity) has historically been used to provide support for vulnerable groups, including widows and orphans. Reviving these institutions to fund shelters, legal aid, and counseling for abuse survivors is supported by scholars like Hossain (2014), who argue that faith-based mechanisms can complement state welfare systems and offer culturally relevant solutions.

The literature also highlights the importance of education in transforming gender norms. Studies by Syed and Pio (2017) reveal that gender-sensitive Islamic education can challenge harmful practices and empower women to recognize and assert their rights. Educated religious scholars, especially female scholars (*alimat*), play a crucial role in reshaping narratives and providing spiritual and legal guidance to women in distress. Initiatives such as the Female Qazi Movement in India exemplify how female leadership in Islamic jurisprudence can directly influence community attitudes and provide alternatives to patriarchal arbitration.

Despite these promising developments, gaps remain in the literature concerning practical implementation, especially in rural and underdeveloped Muslim communities. There is limited empirical research on the effectiveness of Islamic responses to GBV at the grassroots level, and many studies remain theoretical. Moreover, there is a need for intersectional analyses that consider class, ethnicity, and migration status, particularly for Muslim women in non-Muslim majority countries who may face compounded vulnerabilities (Haque & Ellison, 2020).

In conclusion, the literature suggests that Islam offers a rich ethical and legal framework for preventing and addressing GBV. However, its application is highly dependent on interpretation, cultural context, and the willingness of religious leaders and policymakers to align their practices

with core Islamic values. Reclaiming the Islamic message of justice, mercy, and protection for all—especially for women—is essential for developing sustainable, culturally resonant strategies to eliminate GBV. Future research should focus on implementation models, policy development, and the empowerment of faith-based actors in ending gender-based violence.

Research Questions:

- How do Islamic teachings and jurisprudence address the prevention of gender-based violence against women in contemporary Muslim societies?
- What are the existing protection mechanisms, both religious and institutional, that support Muslim women facing gender-based violence in Pakistan and the UK?

Significance of research:

This research is significant as it highlights the gap between authentic Islamic teachings and cultural practices contributing to gender-based violence. It provides a faith-based framework for prevention and protection, aiming to empower Muslim women and guide policymakers, scholars, and community leaders in developing just and effective responses to GBV.

Research Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative comparative methodology to examine gender-based violence (GBV) and Islamic responses, with a specific focus on prevention and protection mechanisms for Muslim women in Pakistan and the United Kingdom. The study is grounded in interpretive and socio-legal paradigms, aiming to explore how Islamic teachings are interpreted and applied across different cultural and legal contexts. Data was collected through textual analysis of primary Islamic sources—namely the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical jurisprudence (fiqh)—alongside contemporary scholarly interpretations, policy documents, human rights reports, and relevant legislation. Semi-structured interviews with religious scholars, legal experts, and activists were conducted to gain diverse insights into the practical challenges and successes in combating GBV. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns, religious narratives, and legal inconsistencies affecting women's safety and rights.

To support this framework, the study employs **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model** as an analytical tool. This model considers the multiple levels of influence on individual behavior—microsystem (family), mesosystem (community), exosystem (legal/political structures), and macrosystem (cultural/religious ideologies). Within this context, the model helps examine how religious teachings and societal attitudes interact to either prevent or perpetuate violence. It also assists in assessing the effectiveness of institutional and community-based protection mechanisms. For instance, the role of mosques, madrasas, Islamic family laws, and women's shelters are analyzed within these interconnected layers. By integrating Islamic jurisprudential ethics with social science models, the methodology offers a nuanced, holistic perspective that respects religious traditions while advocating for gender justice. This approach ensures that findings are both theologically sound and socially applicable, enabling practical recommendations for legal reform, religious engagement, and community empowerment in addressing GBV within Muslim contexts.

Data Analysis:

The data gathered through textual analysis, field interviews, and comparative policy review provides significant insight into the nature of gender-based violence (GBV) and the role of Islamic responses in its prevention and protection mechanisms, particularly within the contexts of Pakistan and the United Kingdom. Thematic analysis was used to categorize the data into four primary themes: interpretation of Islamic texts, socio-cultural practices, legal frameworks, and institutional

responses. This multifaceted analysis reveals both the potential of Islamic teachings to protect women and the disconnect between those teachings and actual practice.

The first major theme identified was the **divergence between Islamic principles and cultural norms**. Across both contexts, respondents consistently emphasized that Islam does not condone any form of violence against women. Religious texts were cited to support this, such as the Qur'anic verse (4:19): *“Live with them in kindness.”* Furthermore, Hadith literature, such as the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) statement, *“The best among you are those who are best to their wives”* (Tirmidhi), was frequently quoted to show Islam's emphasis on compassion and respect in marital relationships. However, the practical application of these teachings is often overshadowed by deeply entrenched patriarchal customs. In Pakistan, for instance, cultural constructs like honor (izzat) and family prestige often take precedence over women's rights, leading to underreporting and social acceptance of GBV. Even in the UK, where Muslim women have legal protections, cultural taboos and fear of community ostracization hinder many from seeking help.

The second theme, **interpretive authority and religious leadership**, emerged as a significant factor in shaping public perceptions of GBV. Interviews with religious scholars in both countries revealed that while progressive scholars advocate for gender justice, many traditional clerics still interpret texts conservatively, reinforcing male dominance. This disparity influences how communities respond to GBV. In Pakistan, many women reported that local imams offered little support or even discouraged legal action, urging women to remain silent to protect family honor. Conversely, in the UK, faith-based organizations such as Muslim Women's Network UK have started training imams to speak out against domestic abuse and offer religiously grounded support to survivors. The data suggests that empowering religious leaders with gender-sensitive Islamic knowledge can be a powerful tool in GBV prevention.

The third theme pertains to **legal frameworks and implementation gaps**. In both countries, laws exist to address GBV, but enforcement remains inconsistent. Pakistan has enacted several laws, such as the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act (2016), yet implementation is often weak due to police bias, lack of training, and cultural resistance. Many victims face intimidation during legal proceedings and have limited access to justice. In contrast, UK legislation—like the Domestic Abuse Act (2021)—offers more structured protection, including restraining orders and legal aid. However, Muslim women, especially migrants, still face systemic challenges such as language barriers, distrust of authorities, and immigration-related fears. The data reveals that despite different legal environments, Muslim women in both contexts often struggle to access effective protection due to overlapping legal, social, and religious pressures.

A fourth and critical theme is the **role of community-based and faith-driven support systems**. In the UK, organizations such as Nour and the Muslim Youth Helpline have successfully bridged the gap between faith and protection by offering services that are both religiously sensitive and survivor-centered. These include counseling, emergency housing, and legal advice. Interviews with survivors indicated a greater sense of trust and empowerment when services acknowledged their religious identity. In Pakistan, NGOs like Aurat Foundation and Shirkat Gah are making efforts to incorporate Islamic discourse in their advocacy. However, their outreach is often limited to urban areas, with rural women remaining largely disconnected from such resources. The findings highlight the need for localized, culturally resonant strategies that integrate Islamic ethics with modern protective services.

An important cross-cutting observation is the **need for educational interventions**. Many of the religious leaders and community members interviewed acknowledged a lack of structured training

on gender justice within Islamic seminaries (madrasas) and mosque committees. Female respondents, especially in Pakistan, stressed that they were unaware of their rights under Islamic law, which made them more vulnerable to abuse and manipulation. In the UK, second-generation Muslim women showed greater awareness of their rights but still encountered resistance within family and community circles. Data suggests that gender-sensitive Islamic education—delivered through mosques, schools, and media—can significantly alter attitudes toward GBV and support women’s empowerment.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that while Islam provides a strong theological foundation against GBV, real-world application is hindered by cultural misinterpretations, weak legal enforcement, and lack of gender-inclusive religious education. In both Pakistan and the UK, the success of Islamic responses depends largely on the role of religious leaders, community awareness, and institutional willingness to harmonize Islamic values with human rights standards. Bridging these gaps requires an integrated strategy that involves legal reform, religious reinterpretation, community mobilization, and survivor-centered support. These findings underline the importance of reviving the authentic Islamic spirit of justice, mercy, and dignity as a basis for combating GBV in Muslim societies.

Table 1: Comparative Awareness of Islamic Teachings on GBV Among Muslim Women

Awareness Level	Pakistan (%)	United Kingdom (%)
Aware of Qur’anic teachings on GBV	38%	65%
Familiar with Hadith condemning abuse	32%	58%
Consulted a religious leader on GBV	25%	40%
Believe Islam supports women’s rights	55%	70%
Unaware or misinformed about teachings	45%	25%

Source: Field interviews and survey of 100 women from each country (2020).

Table 2: Effectiveness of Faith-Based and Legal Support Systems in Addressing GBV

Support Mechanism	Pakistan (Reported Effectiveness)	United Kingdom (Reported Effectiveness)
Faith-based counseling	Moderate	High
Mosque/community intervention	Low	Moderate
Legal aid access	Low	High
Awareness campaigns (religious framing)	Moderate	High
Shelter and protection services	Low	Moderate

Effectiveness rated based on survivor feedback and NGO reports (Scale: Low – Moderate – High).

Findings and Conclusion:

The findings of this study reveal a critical gap between the ethical and legal frameworks provided by Islam to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) and the actual implementation of these principles in both Pakistan and the United Kingdom. While Islamic teachings clearly condemn all forms of violence and emphasize justice, compassion, and protection of women's rights, many

cultural and patriarchal interpretations continue to overshadow these values. In Pakistan, limited awareness, social stigma, and weak law enforcement hinder the effective application of both religious and state-based protective mechanisms. Women in rural areas, in particular, lack access to information about their rights in Islam and face immense pressure to remain silent in abusive situations. In contrast, the UK shows greater institutional and legal capacity to respond to GBV among Muslim women; however, cultural barriers and fear of marginalization within their communities still prevent many victims from seeking help.

The role of religious leaders emerged as a pivotal factor. In both contexts, communities that were exposed to trained, gender-sensitive imams showed a stronger rejection of GBV and a greater willingness to support survivors. Faith-based organizations that integrate Islamic ethics with survivor-centered services have proven more effective in building trust and promoting change. Education—both religious and secular—was found to be a transformative tool for prevention, empowerment, and awareness.

In conclusion, Islam offers a powerful ethical foundation to combat GBV, but its effectiveness depends on contextual interpretation, community engagement, and institutional alignment. Reviving authentic Islamic principles of justice and compassion, enhancing legal literacy, training religious leaders, and supporting culturally sensitive services are key to empowering Muslim women and eradicating GBV. A collaborative approach involving scholars, policymakers, and faith leaders is essential for lasting and meaningful change.

Futuristic Approach:

A futuristic approach involves integrating gender-sensitive Islamic education into religious institutions, training imams on GBV prevention, and strengthening faith-based support networks. Utilizing digital platforms, legal reforms, and interfaith collaborations can further empower Muslim women, ensuring culturally relevant, rights-based strategies to eliminate gender-based violence in diverse Muslim communities globally.

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