

Muslim Women in Peace building: Conflict between Texts and Interpretations

- Shahista Rasool & Showkat Hussain

Abstract

The Qur'an clearly designates men and women as awliyā' (protectors/guardians of each other) responsible for promoting justice and social well-being. Peace in Islam is conceived not merely as the absence of conflict but encompasses justice ('adl), security, dignity, human development, and social harmony. Historical precedents from the Prophetic era illustrate that women were recognized as active contributors to reconciliation, social stability, and peace building. However, over time, interpretive traditions influenced by patriarchal contexts frequently narrowed down women's visibility in public and communal spheres, creating a contradiction between textual goals and actual experiences. Modern Muslim women encounter a dual challenge: secular narratives depict their independence as a rejection of Islamic tradition, while internal patriarchal interpretations continue to limit their involvement in peace building initiatives.

This study uses a textual-hermeneutical methodology, looking at Qur'anic verses, prophetic traditions, and exegetical and legal texts. In order to place the discussion within larger discourses of justice, peace building, and conflict resolution, it also makes use of recent research in gender studies and Islamic thought. The study concludes that reinstating Qur'anic principles of justice ('adl), mercy (rahmah), and mutual accountability is vital for restoring women's rightful role as agents of peace and for constructing more reliable, comprehensive frameworks of reconciliation in Muslim societies today. This study examines the role of Muslim women in peace building through a critical analysis of Qur'anic and Prophetic texts against subsequent patriarchal interpretations that have limited women's activity.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Peacebuilding, Qur'anic Hermeneutics, Gender Justice, Patriarchal Interpretations, Reconciliation in Islam.

1. Introduction

Throughout ages, peace constitutes a fundamental objective of every community. Globally, academics and professionals have focused on strategies to terminate conflicts, diminish violence, and establish stable societies. In these discussions, religion is often seen in two ways: sometimes as a cause for conflict, while at times as an effective resource for peace. In Islam is believed to be the religion of peace as the word 'Islam' itself means peace. Peace means living in safety, avoiding harm, promoting goodness, and creating stability and comfort. It also includes protecting oneself from harmful things and ensuring the well-being of others.

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Islam encourages its followers to live by the path of peace and wishes peace not only for Muslims but for all humanity.¹ However, global media and certain political discourses have portrayed Islam as violent and oppressive, especially with respect to women. An analysis of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad reveals a profound commitment to peace, justice, and social cohesion. The issue lies in the fact that, over the centuries, interpretations of these writings have occasionally restricted women's visibility and involvement in public life. This has generated a conflict between the principles of Islam's sacred texts and the actual experiences of Muslim women.

This paper aims to investigate the misconception by examining the conflict between texts and interpretations in relation to Muslim women's role in peace building. The Qur'an describes men and women as *awliyā'* (protectors/guardians and allies of one another) and consistently calls for justice (*ʿadl*), mercy (*rahmah*), and reconciliation (*ṣulḥ*).² The Prophet's own life also provides clear examples of how women contributed to peace, both in the household and in the wider community. His first wife Khadījah gave him financial and emotional support at the very beginning of his mission, and Umm Salama offered decisive political advice during the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah that helped avoid conflict.³ These examples show that women were not only passive supporters but also active participants in the processes of reconciliation and community stability.

However, as Islamic civilization developed, interpretations of these texts were often produced by male scholars operating in patriarchal contexts. This shaped how the role of women was understood. While the Qur'an and hadith (Prophetic traditions) promoted principles of equality and dignity, the interpretations that dominated in many societies often emphasized hierarchy and male authority.⁴ As a result, women were confined to the private sphere, and their contributions to peacebuilding were marginalized. The conflict between texts and interpretations therefore continues to influence Muslim societies today.

At the same time, contemporary Muslim women face challenges both from within and outside their communities. From within, patriarchal interpretations limit their roles in religious, political, and intellectual institutions. From outside, secular and Western narratives often assume that Muslim women are voiceless victims who need to be "saved" from their culture and religion.⁵ This double burden makes it difficult for Muslim women to be

¹Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding: From a Religious Perspective* (Addis Ababa: Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, 2021), 12.

²The Holy Qur'an, 9:71, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1989), This study relies on Abdullah Yusuf Alis Translation; see also Amr Abdalla and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, *Peace Education: Islamic Perspectives Curriculum/Teaching Module* (Asia and the Pacific Programme, University for Peace, 2009), 5.

³NurSaadahHamisan, Siti Fatimah Mohd Tawil, and Norhasnira Ibrahim, "Women and Peace from the Hadith Perspective," *UMRAN, International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies* 10, no. 3 (2023): 58–62.

⁴Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17–21.

⁵Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall, eds., *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding: Illuminating the Unseen*

recognized as agents of peace, despite the strong evidence from Islamic sources that supports their active role.

This study uses a textual-hermeneutical approach to revisit the Qur'an, hadith, and classical interpretations in order to uncover the gender-inclusive vision of peace building that is already present in Islam. It also draws on modern scholarship in Islamic studies, gender studies, and peace research to place these discussions in the broader global conversation about justice and reconciliation. By doing so, the paper aims to show that Muslim women are not marginal to the Islamic vision of peace but central to it. Further, the paper argues that peace building in Islam cannot be separated from justice, dignity, and inclusion. Muslim women have always been part of this vision, even if interpretations and social practices have sometimes hidden their roles. Reconnecting to the original principles of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet can therefore help build a more reliable and gender-inclusive framework for peace in Muslim societies today.

Qur'anic and Prophetic Foundations of Peace

Peace (*salām*) is at the heart of Islam's message. It is not coincidence that one of the ninety-nine names of God in the Qur'an is *al-Salām* (The Source of Peace).⁶ The Qur'an presents peace not merely as the absence of conflict but as a positive and holistic condition that includes justice (*'adl*), security, dignity, and the well-being of all creation.⁷ Peace is described as harmony within oneself, with God, with other human beings, and with the environment.⁸ This layered understanding of peace is important because it shapes how Muslims are expected to approach conflict and reconciliation. It also provides the foundation for thinking about women's roles in peacebuilding, since both men and women are called to uphold these values.

Peace building is a comprehensive and continuous effort to establish lasting peace in conflict-affected societies. It transcends the end of violence by addressing the root causes of conflicts, therefore averting future hostilities. It depends on the existing strengths, traditions, and practices inside communities and necessitates the involvement of several stakeholders, including governments, civil society, faith-based organizations, traditional leaders, and local populations.⁹

The Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia discusses John Galtung's concept of negative peace, defined as the lack of explicit conflict, and positive peace, which relies on justice, equality, and the respect for human rights. Although negative peace may prevent violence, it often allows underlying issues to remain unresolved. Positive peace, on the other hand, establishes

(Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2015), 3–7.

⁶Al-Qur'an 59:23.

⁷Abdalla and Ahmed, *Peace Education: Islamic Perspectives*, 5.

⁸AyseKadayifci-Orellana, "Muslim Women's Peacebuilding," in *Crescent and Dove: Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam*, ed. Qamar-ul Huda (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 80.

⁹Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding*, p.14.

frameworks that foster equity, gender justice, and democratic rights, while protecting communities against the resurgence of violence.

In this context, peace building aims to transform relationships, build trust, and establish resilient communities. It includes communication, reconciliation, justice, policy improvements, and support for victims. The Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia emphasizes that peacebuilding should be an inclusive and continuous effort, tailored to the specific demands of each environment, with the primary objective of achieving harmony, justice, and enduring stability for all.¹⁰

Qur'anic Principles of Peace

Peace addresses issues of social justice based on religious values.¹¹ The Qur'an offers many teachings that directly link peace to justice and moral conduct. In one verse, God describes the ultimate goal of human life as the "abode of peace" (*dār al-salām*) to which He calls humankind.¹² Another verse describes God Himself as *al-Salām*, highlighting that peace is not just a social condition but a divine attribute.¹³ Peace is also tied to the fulfillment of covenants and the honoring of agreements. The Qur'an commands believers: "Fulfil the covenant of Allah when you have entered into it, and do not break oaths after confirming them".¹⁴ This verse makes peace agreements binding, which is a principle that still informs Islamic approaches to treaties and diplomacy.¹⁵

Several Qur'anic verses also emphasize reconciliation and forgiveness. In Surah al-Ḥujurāt, believers are told, "*If two groups of believers fight, make peace between them. If one of them oppresses the other, then fight against the one that oppresses until it complies with the command of Allah. But if it complies, then make peace between them with justice and be fair. Surely Allah loves those who act justly.*"¹⁶ This verse outlines both the obligation to stop injustice and the duty to restore peace once the wrongdoer returns to fairness.¹⁷ Similarly, another verse calls believers to respond to hostility with goodness: "*Nor can goodness and evil be equal. Repel [evil] with what is better; then the one between whom and you there was enmity will become as if a close friend.*"¹⁸ These verses together show that peace in the Qur'an is proactive: it requires reconciliation, justice, and the transformation of enmity into friendship.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pettman, Ralph. "Human Security as Global Security: Reconceptualising Strategic Studies." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2005): 137–50.

¹² Al-Qur'an 10:25.

¹³ Al-Qur'an 59:23.

¹⁴ Al-Qur'an 16:91.

¹⁵ HoudaAbadi, "Seeking an Islamic Framework towards Peacebuilding and Women's Inclusion," International Norms Project (London: LSE, 2021), 5.

¹⁶ Al-Qur'an 49:9.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Al-Qur'an 41:34.

The Qur'an also insists on the equality and dignity of all people. Surah al-Ḥujurāt declares, "O humankind, indeed We created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Truly, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you."¹⁹ This verse is central for peacebuilding because it recognizes diversity not as a source of division but as a sign of God's wisdom and an opportunity for mutual recognition. Further, the Qur'an clearly designates men and women as *awliyā'* (protectors/guardians of each other) responsible for promoting justice and social well-being.²⁰ Religious peace building is effective only when it is inclusive. Inclusivity requires the involvement of all segments of the faith community and ensures that every member has the opportunity to participate in the peace building process.²¹ Importantly, the Quran places men and women on equal footing, both being created from the same essence, and bases superiority only on piety and righteousness.

The Prophetic Model of Peace

The Prophet Muḥammad's life provides the clearest demonstration of how these Qur'anic principles were put into practice. One of the clearest is the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah. In 628 CE, when tensions between the Muslims of Medina and the Quraysh of Mecca threatened to erupt into war, the Prophet chose to enter into a peace agreement, even though the terms appeared to disadvantage the Muslims.²² His decision, guided by a vision of long-term reconciliation, helped avoid immediate bloodshed and opened the door for many Meccans to later embrace Islam. Scholars often describe this as a case where compromise secured a greater good, and it remains a model of political diplomacy rooted in patience and foresight.

The Prophet also consistently taught his followers to spread peace in daily life. One hadith in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim reports him saying, "*You will not enter Paradise until you believe, and you will not believe until you love each other. Shall I show you something that, if you do, you will love each other? Spread peace among yourselves.*"²³ This shows that peace is not only a matter of treaties and politics but also of everyday relationships and social trust. Another hadith defines a true Muslim as "*the one from whose tongue and hand people are safe.*"²⁴ Such traditions establish peace as both a spiritual principle and a practical standard of conduct.

The Prophet also relied on women as partners in peace building. Women engaged in peace building through religious values focus not only on external challenges but also on

¹⁹Al-Qur'an 49:13

²⁰Al-Qur'an 9:71: The believing men and believing women are helpers (*awliyā'*) of one another in obedience to God. They command right and forbid wrong, establish prayer, and give zakāt.

²¹Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding* p.31.

²²Josef Troger, *The Reconciliation of Hearts* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 1990), 17.

²³Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Edited by MuḥammadFu'ād'Abd al-Bāqī. 5 vols. Cairo: DārIḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, 1955. Kitāb al-Īmān, 54 (ḥadīth no. 54).

²⁴al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Edited by MuṣṭafāDīb al-Bughā. 9 vols. Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1987. Kitāb al-Īmān, 10 (ḥadīth no. 10); Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Īmān, 65.

psychological and spiritual concerns.²⁵ His wives, companions, and female supporters often played key roles in moments of crisis. Khadījah, his first wife, supported him not only emotionally but also materially. She was not only a wealthy businesswoman but also his supporter during the earliest years of his mission. She used her resources to help the poor, provided dowries for young women, and supported the Muslim community when it faced social boycotts in Mecca.²⁶ Later, during the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah, Umm Salama gave the Prophet critical advice when his companions hesitated to follow his instructions. She suggested that he perform his own sacrificial rites first, which encouraged the others to follow, thereby breaking a dangerous deadlock.²⁷ This incident highlights her political wisdom and shows that women's voices were valued in moments of high tension.

‘Ā’isha, another of the Prophet's wives, became one of the most important transmitters of hadith after his death. Her knowledge was so extensive that senior male companions often consulted her before issuing religious rulings.²⁸ Beyond transmitting religious knowledge, she also played an active role in political events, including the debates that shook the Muslim community after the Prophet's death. Her involvement is undeniable proof that women were engaged in public affairs. These examples show that the Prophet's model of peace was inclusive, relational, and participatory, where women were not only protected but also empowered as advisers, transmitters of knowledge, and actors in conflict resolution.

Peace as a Collective Responsibility

Together, the Qur'an and the Sunnah establish peace as a collective responsibility of the entire *ummah*. Both men and women are included in this mandate. The Qur'an's description of men and women as *awliyā'* (allies and protectors of each other) is especially important: *"The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, they establish prayer and give zakāt, and they obey Allah and His Messenger."*²⁹ This verse links spiritual practice with social responsibility and places men and women side by side in building a just society.³⁰

The Prophet's treatment of women also reinforced this vision. He is reported to have consulted his wives on political matters, accepted women's pledges of allegiance,³¹ and forbidden the killing of women in warfare.³² Women were not excluded from communal responsibilities. Some, like Nusaybah bint Ka'b, even defended the Prophet physically in

²⁵Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding* p.31

²⁶Ibn Hishām, ‘Abd al-Malik. *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*. Edited by Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et al. 4 vols. Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1955. Vol. 1, 203–205; Yasmina Blackburn, "Remarkable Things About Khadija, Wife of Prophet Muhammad," *Huffington Post*, April 2015.

²⁷Hamisan, Tawil, and Ibrahim, "Women and Peace," 59–60.

²⁸Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 24–27.

²⁹Al-Qur'an 9:71.

³⁰Al-Qur'an 9:71.

³¹Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Kitāb al-Imārah* (Book of Governance), ḥadīth no. 1866.

³²Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Jihādwa-al-Siyar (Book of Jihad and Expedition), ḥadīth no. 1744.

battle, while others, like Shifā' bint 'Abdullāh, held administrative posts, such as supervising the marketplace in Medina under the caliph 'Umar.³³ These examples contradict later assumptions that women's roles were only private or domestic.

The Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings provide a strong foundation for peace that is inclusive of both men and women. Peace is framed as a divine attribute, a moral duty, and a social practice rooted in justice, mercy, and reconciliation. Early Muslim women clearly contributed to this vision in multiple ways: economically, politically, intellectually, and even militarily when necessary. The tension arises not in the texts themselves but in the interpretations that followed, which often narrowed women's roles due to patriarchal contexts. Recognizing the original Qur'anic and Prophetic foundations of peace is therefore essential for reclaiming women's rightful place in peacebuilding today.

Principles of Islamic Peacebuilding

The Qur'an and the Sunnah not only establish peace as a central value but also provide concrete principles and mechanisms for achieving it. These principles are both ethical and practical, combining inner moral discipline with outward social engagement. They remain highly relevant today for building inclusive and just societies, and they frame peace as a collective duty in which both men and women are equally responsible.

Justice as the Basis of Peace

At the centre of Islamic peacebuilding lies the principle of justice (*'adl*). The Qur'an commands: *"O you who believe, be steadfast witnesses for Allah in justice, and do not let hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to piety"*³⁴ Justice is not optional but a divine obligation, one of the main purposes for which prophets were sent: *"We sent Our messengers with clear signs and revealed with them the Book and the Balance so that people may establish justice."*³⁵ This makes peace inseparable from justice: reconciliation cannot be achieved by ignoring inequality or oppression.

Islamic scholars have long stressed that injustice is one of the main causes of social breakdown. As M. Umer Chapra explains, the Qur'an repeatedly warns that injustice leads ultimately to destruction, both of individuals and societies.³⁶ Thus, establishing justice is not only a moral requirement but also a practical necessity for sustaining peace.

Beneficence, Dignity, and Mercy

Beyond justice, the Qur'an emphasizes values such as beneficence (*iḥsān*), dignity (*karāmah*), and mercy (*raḥmah*). These values shape the way Muslims are expected to relate

³³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 67–7

³⁴ Al-Qur'an 5:8.

³⁵ Al-Qur'an 57:25.

³⁶ M. Umer Chapra, *The Islamic Vision of Development in the Light of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (Jeddah: Islamic Research and Training Institute, 2008), 48.

to one another and to society at large. For example, the Qur'an states, "*Indeed, We have honored the children of Adam*", affirming the inherent dignity of every human being regardless of gender, race, or class.³⁷ Similarly, the Qur'an commands believers to act with forgiveness and reconciliation: "*Those who avoid major sins and acts of indecency, and when they are angry, they forgive.*"³⁸

The Prophet Muhammad embodied these values in his interactions. He described himself as "sent only as a mercy to the worlds" and consistently emphasized forgiveness, patience, and compassion.³⁹ These values not only define personal piety but also form the ethical foundation for conflict resolution.

Dialogue, Mediation, and Reconciliation

The Islamic tradition provides several mechanisms for dealing with conflict in peaceful ways. Among them are:

- **Mediation (*waṣāṭa*):** Encouraging impartial third parties to help disputants reach agreement.
- **Reconciliation (*ṣulḥ*):** Formal settlement between individuals or groups, strongly encouraged in both Qur'an and hadith.
- **Dialogue (*ḥiwār*):** Open discussion to foster understanding and reduce hostility.
- **Consultation (*shūrā*):** Collective decision-making that ensures participation and inclusivity.⁴⁰

The Qur'an highlights consultation as a hallmark of the believing community: "*And those who have responded to their Lord and established prayer, and whose affairs are conducted by mutual consultation among themselves.*"⁴¹ Another verse commands the Prophet: "*Pardon them, seek forgiveness for them, and consult them in affairs. Then, when you have decided, put your trust in Allah.*"⁴² These verses make consultation not merely an option but a principle of governance and conflict resolution.

The hadith literature also affirms reconciliation. The Prophet is reported to have said, "*Shall I not tell you of a deed more excellent in degree than fasting, prayer, and charity?*" His companions said, "*Yes.*" He said, "*It is making peace between people; for indeed, spoiling relations is the shaver [that destroys religion].*"⁴³ This elevates peace-making above even some core acts of worship, highlighting its centrality to the Islamic ethos.

³⁷Al-Qur'an 17:70.

³⁸Al-Qur'an 42:37.

³⁹Al-Qur'an 21:107.

⁴⁰Abadi, "Seeking an Islamic Framework," 5.

⁴¹Al-Qur'an 42:38.

⁴²Al-Qur'an 3:159.

⁴³Muhammad b. 'Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' at-Tirmidhi (English Translation)*, trans. Abu Khaliyl, 6 vols. (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), no. 2509.

Pluralism and the Charter of Medina

Another principle of Islamic peacebuilding is pluralism. The Qur'an acknowledges human diversity as part of God's plan: "*If your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ.*"⁴⁴ Rather than attempting to erase difference, Islam teaches that diversity should be managed through justice and mutual recognition.

A practical historical example is the Charter of Medina (622 CE) drafted under the Prophet's leadership, this agreement brought together Muslims, Jews, and other groups in Medina into a single political community. It recognized their distinct religious identities while binding them to mutual defence and the pursuit of justice.⁴⁵ Many scholars consider this the first written constitution in history, and it remains a model of how pluralism and shared responsibility can be institutionalized.

Tawhīd, Fitrah, and Khilāfah

Underlying all these principles are three foundational concepts:

- **Tawhīd (Oneness of God):** This principle affirms the unity of all creation under God. It implies that humanity, despite differences, is interconnected and bound to live in harmony.⁴⁶
- **Fitrah (Innate nature):** The Qur'an teaches that all humans are born pure and innocent⁴⁷, capable of goodness and responsible for their choices. This contradicts views of inherent sinfulness and emphasizes human dignity.
- **Khilāfah (Vicegerency):** Humans are described as God's vicegerents on earth.⁴⁸ This grants them responsibility to maintain balance, justice, and peace in society and the environment.⁴⁹

Together, these concepts form a moral framework for peacebuilding. They remind Muslims that peace is not merely external but also spiritual and ecological.

The Binding Nature of Peace Agreements

Finally, Islam treats peace agreements as sacred obligations. The Qur'an warns believers not to break their covenants once they have confirmed them and instructs: "If they incline towards peace, then incline to it also and rely upon Allah."⁵⁰ This principle is crucial in international relations, where treaties and truces form the basis for ending conflicts. The

⁴⁴Al-Qur'an 11:118.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Hamidullah, *The First Written Constitution in the World* (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif, 1981), 13–16.

⁴⁶Kadayifci-Orellana, "Muslim Women's Peacebuilding" 80.

⁴⁷Al-Qur'an 30:30.

⁴⁸Al-Qur'an 2:30.

⁴⁹ William C. Chittick, "The Theological Roots of Peace and War According to Islam," *The Islamic Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1990): 156.

⁵⁰Al-Qur'an 8:61.

Prophet himself honored treaties even when the other side broke them, using patience and strategic wisdom to maintain the moral high ground.⁵¹

The principles of Islamic peace building are wide-ranging: justice, dignity, mercy, forgiveness, consultation, pluralism, and stewardship. They provide both values and mechanisms for resolving conflict without violence and for sustaining harmony in diverse communities. Importantly, none of these principles are gender-specific. The Qur'an and Sunnah call on both men and women to uphold them as allies in building just and peaceful societies. This sets the stage for examining how women, especially in the formative period of Islam, actively participated in peacebuilding and how their roles later came to be restricted by patriarchal interpretations.

Women in Early Islamic Peace building

When examining the early history of Islam, it becomes clear that women were not confined to the private sphere but actively participated in building and sustaining peace within the community. They were involved in economic support, political counsel, scholarship, mediation, healthcare, and even battlefield protection. These roles, recorded in both Qur'anic references and the hadith literature, demonstrate that women were integral to the Prophet's vision of a just and harmonious society.

- **Khadijah bint Khuwaylid: Economic and Moral Support**

Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, is perhaps the most prominent example of a woman shaping the early Muslim community through peacebuilding. A successful merchant before her marriage, she used her wealth and influence to support the Prophet during the most vulnerable years of his mission. She offered her resources to care for the poor, the orphans, and the marginalized in Mecca.⁵² She also paid dowries for impoverished young women, allowing them to marry and gain social security.⁵³ This was not merely charity but a form of social peacebuilding: reducing inequality and strengthening communal bonds.

When the Prophet first received revelation, Khadijah was the first to believe in him, calming his fears and reassuring him of his moral integrity.⁵⁴ In this way, she provided psychological peace and stability at a critical moment. Scholars often describe her role as foundational, since without her material and emotional support the nascent Muslim community may not have survived. Her example affirms that peacebuilding includes economic justice, moral support, and social welfare, roles in which women were central.

⁵¹Troger, *The Reconciliation of Hearts*, 17.

⁵²Yasmina Blackburn, "7 Remarkable Things About Khadija, Wife of Prophet Muhammad," *Huffington Post*, April 2015.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 41–44.

- **Umm Salama: Political Counsel at Ḥudaybiyyah**

Another striking example is Umm Salama (Hind bint AbīUmayya), one of the Prophet's wives. During the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah in 628 CE, many companions were upset with the seemingly unfavourable terms of the agreement with the Quraysh. The Prophet instructed them to perform their sacrificial rites and shave their heads as a sign of acceptance, but they hesitated. Umm Salama then advised the Prophet to go ahead and perform the rites himself, setting an example that the others would follow.⁵⁵

The Prophet accepted her advice, and the crisis was resolved peacefully. This event illustrates not only her wisdom but also the Prophet's openness to female counsel in political matters. Far from being excluded, Umm Salama played a decisive role in preventing disunity within the Muslim ranks and securing a diplomatic solution. Her intervention demonstrates that women's voices were recognized and effective in conflict resolution.

- **Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr: Knowledge and Leadership**

Ā'isha, the Prophet's youngest wife, became one of the most important transmitters of hadith and a key figure in Islamic jurisprudence. She narrated over two thousand hadiths, many of which dealt with matters of family, ethics, and social relations.⁵⁶ Senior companions, including Abu Hurayrah and Ibn 'Abbās, would consult her before issuing legal opinions.⁵⁷

Her authority extended beyond scholarship. After the Prophet's death, she became involved in political debates during the first civil war (*fitnah*). While her participation in the Battle of the Camel is controversial, it proves that women were not absent from the public sphere or political life. Her religious commentary has greatly contributed to the peace of the community. As Amina Wadud notes, 'Ā'isha's role as both transmitter of knowledge and political actor shows that women were historically part of the processes that shaped Islamic law and communal reconciliation.⁵⁸ Beyond these famous figures, many other women contributed to peace and stability in the early Muslim community:

- **Nusaybah bint Ka'b (Umm 'Umārah)** fought in the Battle of Uhud, defending the Prophet with her sword and shield when many men had fled.⁵⁹ While her role was military, it was also about protecting the community's survival and morale.
- **Rufaydah bint Sa'ad** is remembered as the first Muslim nurse. She cared for the wounded during battles and organized medical support, an act of humanitarian peacebuilding that relieved suffering and strengthened social solidarity.⁶⁰

⁵⁵Hamisan, Tawil, and Ibrahim, "Women and Peace from the Hadith Perspective," 59–60.

⁵⁶Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 24–27.

⁵⁷ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Reading,

MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991), 57

⁵⁸Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 29.

⁵⁹Kadayifci-Orellana, "Muslim Women's Peacebuilding," 186.

- **Shifā' bint 'Abdullāh** was known for her literacy and administrative skills. Caliph 'Umar appointed her as inspector of the markets in Medina, a role that involved ensuring fairness and preventing disputes.⁶¹ This is a clear case of a woman holding an official public office that directly contributed to social order and justice.
- **Umm Sulaym** supported the Prophet during military campaigns by providing food, water, and medical aid, embodying a humanitarian spirit of care.⁶²

These examples highlight the diversity of women's contributions: economic, political, intellectual, humanitarian, and even military when needed. They disrupt the stereotype of Muslim women as confined solely to domestic duties and instead present them as integral actors in building a just society. The Qur'an itself provides a positive portrayal of a female political leader: the Queen of Sheba (Bilqīs). She is depicted as wise and diplomatic. When faced with a message from Prophet Sulaymān, she consults her people, evaluates the situation, and eventually chooses peace over war.⁶³ Her decision to embrace reconciliation rather than conflict serves as a Qur'anic endorsement of women's capacity for political leadership and peacebuilding.

From Khadijah's economic support to Umm Salama's political counsel, from 'Ā'isha's intellectual leadership to the humanitarian contributions of Rufaydah and Shifā', early Muslim women played vital roles in peacebuilding. These examples show that the Qur'anic vision of men and women as *awliyā'* was not theoretical but realized in practice. Women were recognized as contributors to social stability, reconciliation, and justice. The marginalization of women's roles in later periods, therefore, represents a departure from the spirit of the Qur'an and the Prophetic model, not a fulfillment of it.

Conflict between Texts and Interpretations

The Qur'an and the Sunnah present a clear ethical framework in which men and women are partners in faith, mutual supporters, and equally responsible for upholding justice and peace. The verse, "*The believing men and believing women are allies (awliyā') of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong*"⁶⁴, is an explicit declaration of this partnership. Yet across history, the lived reality of Muslim women has often diverged from this Qur'anic vision.

Interpretive traditions in Islam developed within specific historical and cultural contexts. In many cases, these were patriarchal societies in which male scholars held authority over Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and legal reasoning (*fiqh*). While their efforts preserved and transmitted valuable knowledge, their interpretations also reflected the cultural norms of their

⁶⁰ Ibid., 187.

⁶¹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 67–70.

⁶² Hamisan et al., "Women and Peace," 61.

⁶³ Al-Qur'an 27:22–44.

⁶⁴ Al-Qur'an 9:71.

time.⁶⁵ Like, classical exegetes interpret the verse⁶⁶ that describes believing men and women as *awliyā'* (allies/protectors of one another) as establishing mutual religious obligation; however, they varied in their interpretations of how this relationship will be manifested in societal duties. Al-Ṭabarī emphasizes the collective obligation of *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar*, which applies to both men and women; therefore, he recognizes women's participation in moral and social responsibilities; however, his accounts also reflect traditions that restricted much of this duty to private and moral domains rather than public leadership. Ibn Kathīr likewise emphasizes the obligation of mutual assistance while explaining the societal implications in manners that usually favor male leadership in public matters. These exegetical approaches indicate that although the Qur'ān linguistically and theologically includes women among the *awliyā'*, classical interpretations did not consistently translate that inclusion into equivalent public agency.⁶⁷

Barbara FreyerStowasser has shown how early exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) often transmitted reports of Biblical or pre-Islamic origin in their Qur'anic commentaries.⁶⁸ While Ṭabarī sometimes recorded these adages with skepticism, later scholars incorporated them uncritically, treating them as part of the authoritative body of knowledge.⁶⁹ Many of these narratives framed women as inherently devious, unchaste, or dangerous to social order, ideas that did not come from the Qur'an itself but from external traditions and patriarchal assumptions. Stowasser concludes that medieval Islamic society was "patriarchal to a far higher degree than had been the early Islamic community in Mecca and Medina, first recipient of the Qur'ān's revelations."⁷⁰ Zainab al-Alwani highlights that this phenomenon reveals the gap between the ethical principles of revelation and the way those principles were applied in practice.⁷¹ The challenge, therefore, is not with the Qur'an or Sunnah, but with interpretive frameworks that often privilege male authority in law, governance, and family life.

Certain verses and *Aḥadith* were given disproportionate weight in shaping Muslim views of women. For example, Qur'an 4:34, which describes men as *qawwāmūn* (maintainers) of women, was frequently interpreted as conferring male superiority.⁷² Yet other verses, such as Quran 9:71 and Quran 33:35, emphasize mutual responsibility, moral accountability, and

⁶⁵ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 67–70.

⁶⁶ Al-Qur'an 9:71

⁶⁷ Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Shākir, 24 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1954), 14:312; Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, trans. abridged (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000), 4:375.

⁶⁸ Barbara FreyerStowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 23–25.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁷¹ Zainab Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars: A Historical Survey and Contemporary Outlook," *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2010): 156–57.

⁷² Al-Qur'an 4:34; see Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 70–73

equality before God. Thus, the Qur'an repeatedly frames men and women as equal in their spiritual obligations and equal in their potential for righteousness. Although, the exegetical tradition interprets Quran 33:35, which mentions both men and women as recipients of rewards for faith and righteous actions, as a clear textual declaration of spiritual equality. Commentators like al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr emphasize that the passage guarantees forgiveness and reward to all genders equally, asserting that the moral and spiritual duties in the Qur'ān pertain to women as much as to males. Al-Qurṭubī interprets the verse as evidence of women's participation in religious obligations and their equal status before God. In practice, numerous *tafsīr* discourses highlight gendered social roles in conjunction with spiritual equality, a dual interpretation that subsequent jurists have employed to justify different social expectations.⁷³

Similarly, the hadith record contains examples of women like Khadījah, Umm Salama, 'Ā'isha, and Shifā' bint 'Abdullāh who advised leaders, managed trade, transmitted knowledge, and participated in reconciliation. Yet these reports were rarely given a central place in interpretive traditions.⁷⁴ Instead, narrations highlighting women's obedience or seclusion were foregrounded, creating a selective picture of women's roles. The result was not a neutral reading but one shaped by social priorities of male authority.

These interpretive tendencies led to narrowing women's participation in public, political, and religious life. Access to institutions of knowledge and decision-making was restricted, despite early Islamic precedents of women serving as scholars, judges, advisors, and even military participants.⁷⁵ The sidelining of women's contributions not only undermined their God-given potential but also weakened the community's collective ability to pursue justice and reconciliation. Contemporary peacebuilding research reinforces this point: societies that exclude women from negotiation and decision-making often produce less durable and less inclusive peace agreements.⁷⁶ For Muslim societies, the failure to recognize women as full participants in peace processes represents both a theological and practical shortcoming.

Therefore, the gap between Qur'anic principles and restrictive interpretations calls for a revival of *ijtihād*, careful, contextual, and principled reasoning within the framework of *Sharī'ah*. The purpose of *ijtihād* is not to import foreign ideas into Islam but to reconnect the lived experiences of Muslims with the enduring principles of revelation: justice (*'adl*), mercy (*raḥmah*), dignity (*karāmah*), and consultation (*shūrā*). Mohammad Hashim Kamali insists that *ijtihād* must be used to address contemporary realities while remaining faithful to the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law).⁷⁷ These objectives, like the

⁷³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 20:267; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, 6:483; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 14 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1964), 14:179.

⁷⁴ Kadayifci-Orellana, "Muslim Women's Peacebuilding, 186.

⁷⁵ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 27–28.

⁷⁶ Hayward and Marshall, *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding*, 15–17.

⁷⁷ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 3rd rev. ed. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 373–76

preservation of life, intellect, dignity, and social harmony, are directly tied to peace building. When interpreted through this lens, Qur'anic texts support women's inclusion in reconciliation, governance, and social justice initiatives.

This is not a call to abandon tradition but to distinguish between divine revelation and historical interpretation. As Asma Barlas emphasizes, the Qur'an itself is not patriarchal; it is human readings that have frequently been patriarchal.⁷⁸ Re-examining these readings in light of Qur'anic ethics and lived realities enables Muslim communities to reclaim the vision of men and women as *awliyā*, mutual protectors and co-agents of peace.

Such a method of principled *ijtihād* avoids two extremes:

- On one side, secular narratives that present women's empowerment only as a rejection of Islam.
- On the other, rigid interpretations that confine women to narrowly prescribed roles.

Instead, *ijtihād* offers a balanced framework that is faithful to revelation while also responsive to modern contexts, enabling Muslim women to fulfill their rightful roles in peacebuilding.

Muslim Women in Contemporary Peacebuilding

The discussion on Muslim women and peacebuilding cannot end with classical interpretations alone. While the Qur'an and Sunnah provide a framework of justice, mercy, and dignity, the way these principles are applied today remains uneven. Across the Muslim world, women continue to face barriers to full participation in peace processes, yet they also demonstrate extraordinary agency when given the opportunity. Studies have shown that women's involvement in peacebuilding has a positive impact. In many regions affected by conflict, negotiations were held to restore peace. When women took part as negotiators, mediators, or observers, the results were often more effective. Their participation has been linked to the successful restoration of peace and has proven important for achieving lasting and sustainable solutions.⁷⁹ Their contributions show that peacebuilding grounded in Islamic values is not only possible but also necessary for lasting reconciliation. It is tied to justice (*'adl*), mercy (*rahmah*), and human dignity (*karāmah*).⁸⁰ Dr. Houda Abadi emphasizes that Islamic approaches to conflict resolution focus on restoring relationships rather than simply ending disputes.⁸¹ Practices such as *ṣulḥ* (reconciliation), *ḥiwār* (dialogue), and *shūrā*

⁷⁸ Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 181–83.

⁷⁹ Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding*, 36.

⁸⁰ Abadi, *Seeking an Islamic Framework*, 4–5.

⁸¹ Ibid., 5; see also Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "The Elusive Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy, and the West," in *Peace in Islam: An Ecology of the Spirit*, ed. A. Said and N. C. Funk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 17

(consultation) underline that peace is a shared responsibility. These methods point towards inclusivity, which by definition requires the participation of women.

However, despite this ethical grounding, women's contributions often remain undervalued. Abadi notes that many initiatives overlook Islamic principles of equality, creating missed opportunities for more legitimate and sustainable outcomes.⁸² Male-centered interpretations of texts continue to shape attitudes, echoing the problem Zainab Alwani identifies: interpretations reflect patriarchal contexts more than Qur'anic ethics.⁸³ As a result, women are often sidelined from formal negotiations, even though research consistently shows that their involvement leads to stronger and more inclusive peace agreements.⁸⁴

Thus, revisiting Islamic history corrects this imbalance. Women like Khadijah, who supported the Prophet with her resources and influence, and Umm Salama, who advised him during the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, provide examples of female participation in reconciliation and negotiation.⁸⁵ The Qur'an itself highlights the Queen of Sheba as a leader who chose diplomacy over conflict.⁸⁶ These examples serve as reminders that women's leadership in matters of peace is deeply rooted in revelation and history, not external to it. Today, Muslim women continue to engage in peacebuilding despite cultural and political restrictions. Smock and Huda list nonviolence, forgiveness, pluralism, and dialogue as Islamic principles of peace-making that women often embody in practice.⁸⁷ From Southeast Asia, where women's groups have facilitated interfaith dialogue, to the Middle East and Africa, where women mediate disputes and provide humanitarian relief, their contributions mirror the roles played by women in the Prophet's era. These efforts highlight the continuity of women's agency across time and place.

However, for such contributions to gain recognition, reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) becomes essential. Mohammad Hashim Kamali argues that *ijtihad* allows Muslims to respond to modern realities while remaining faithful to the higher objectives of *Shari'ah* (*maqasid al-shari'ah*).⁸⁸ These objectives, like protecting life, intellect, dignity, and social harmony, directly support women's inclusion in peacebuilding. As Asma Barlas stresses, the Qur'an itself is not patriarchal; it is patriarchal readings that have produced inequality.⁸⁹ By re-examining these readings, Muslim societies can affirm women's rightful role as agents of peace without abandoning tradition.

⁸²Abadi, *Seeking an Islamic Framework*, 4.

⁸³Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 160–62

⁸⁴Hayward and Marshall, *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding*, 15.

⁸⁵Kadayifci-Orellana and Sharify-Funk, "Muslim Women Peacemakers," 188.

⁸⁶Al-Qur'an 27:23–44.

⁸⁷David Smock and Qamar-ul Huda, *Islamic Peacemaking Since 9/11* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2009), 9.

⁸⁸Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1991), 375.

⁸⁹Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*, 182.

Therefore, building inclusive frameworks of peace requires distinguishing between divine revelation and historical interpretation. The Qur'an and Sunnah affirm the moral partnership of men and women, while history shows women actively shaping early Muslim society. Restoring this balance today is not about importing foreign models but about reconnecting with Islam's own ethical vision. By grounding women's participation in justice, mercy, and dignity, Muslim societies can ensure that peacebuilding is both authentic to Islamic tradition and effective in addressing contemporary challenges.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the real challenge does not lie in the Qur'an or Sunnah themselves, but in how they have been interpreted over time. The Qur'an presents men and women as partners in faith, equally accountable for justice and peace. Yet as interpretation developed within patriarchal contexts, many of these inclusive principles were overshadowed. Readings that emphasized control and hierarchy were privileged, while those that highlighted women's leadership, knowledge, and contribution to peace were often ignored.

This gap between text and interpretation continues to affect Muslim women today. Where revelation called for mutual responsibility, interpretation often imposed restrictions. The result has been the marginalization of women in areas such as peacebuilding, even though history and contemporary experience both prove their essential role in reconciliation and community well-being. Overcoming this tension requires a conscious effort to separate the divine message from human interpretation. Through *ijtihad* and the higher objectives of Sharī'ah, Muslims have the tools to revisit the sources in a way that honors justice, mercy, and dignity. Doing so allows us to reconnect with the Qur'an's original vision, where women and men stand side by side as agents of peace. Addressing the conflict between texts and interpretations is therefore not only a question of women's rights but also of safeguarding the very spirit of Islam as a religion of justice and harmony.

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