Human rights are mutual obligations: The perceptions of Pakistani Muslim women about rights and freedom

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Recommended Citation
Qureshi, R. (2011). Human rights are mutual obligations: The perceptions of Pakistani Muslim women about rights and freedom. In A. Pandian, S. A. M. M. Ismail, & T. C. Hiang (Eds.), Forging unity amidst diversity: From the classroom and beyond (pp. 248-258). Malaysia: School of languages, Literacies and Translation, USM.
23 Human Rights are Mutual Obligations: The Perceptions of Pakistani Muslim Women about Rights and Freedom

RASHIDA QURESHI

Introduction
A little more than fifteen years have passed but I can still hear the words and the whole context becomes alive. I was a 2nd year doctoral student at one of the state universities in the US and was attending an annual conference of the Population Association of America. There I met a large group of Western scholars who were discussing the ‘plight’ of Muslim women. When they learned that I too was Muslim, a blue-eyed and grey-haired American woman from the group turned to me and asked; “How come you are here, a Muslim woman pursuing a professional degree? You gals are not allowed even to step out of your houses let alone attend university classes!” (January 1993). Throughout their discussion the group kept referring to Muslim women as ‘poor women who have no rights, they are oppressed, their men subjugate them, and they are not even treated like human beings’ and on and on they went. As I reflected upon their conversations I noticed sets of equations that this group had constructed with reference to Muslim women; veile, for instance, was equated with oppression and segregation. Segregation was synonymous with discrimination. Low school enrolments and labor force participation rates among Muslim women were seen as signs of their subjugation and subservience. But the most disappointing part of this whole conversation was the assumption that Muslim women were socially disadvantaged as they were deprived of their rights and humanity. Being a Muslim woman I was deeply disturbed by this negative portrayal of Muslim women but as a researcher I was appalled at these judgments being passed by a group of scholars. One may doubt whether this group represents the large and diverse populations residing in the West but the stereotypes about Muslims were representative of how Muslims are portrayed in the Western media and literature.

Since that conversation in 1993 I have often pondered whether it is fair to use western definitions and western standards to label Muslim women as ‘deprived and disadvantaged’ without understanding the underpinnings of their social values. Is it not worth knowing their views about their own social position? How do Muslim women see themselves? Although a lot has been written on Muslim women I incline to agree with Siddiqi and Zuberi’s (1993) observation that there is “an acute need to undertake more comprehensive, adequately differentiated and in depth micro level studies of the changing situation of Muslim women in diverse socio-economic, regional and cultural contexts” (p.1). As my context is Pakistan, I chose to listen to Pakistani Muslim women as they built a picture of themselves. I turned an informal conversation that took place in the West into a systematic long term engagement with the topic in the East. The present paper is based on a field research which started as a personal journey and turned into a research of proportions I had not foreseen. For more than a decade I have been regularly interacting with select informants besides conducting semi-structured interviews with small groups of women from various parts of the North West Frontier Province which is considered to be one of the most conservative areas of Pakistan.

I have also held focused group discussions with fairly large number of women through various teaching sessions in parts of Punjab and Sindh. These women came from various socio-economic and educational backgrounds. They included homemakers and women working in professional
fields including medicine. Their education levels also varied from no formal schooling to professional degrees like MBBS and MBA. All these 'voices' have been incorporated in the discussion. In the paper, I first present the context of my research which is followed by theoretical orientations that guided my research and the purpose, sample and findings. The paper concludes with implications of the findings for the discussion of human rights in a Muslim context.

Research context: Pakistan
The Islamic Republic of Pakistan, located in South Asia is home to the second largest Muslim population in the world and 95% of her citizens are Muslims. The population of Pakistan is distributed into four provinces, i.e., Baluchistan, North West Frontier Province, Punjab and Sindh. Amin, Willetts and Farrow (1994) have described Pakistan as land of many contrasts not only because of the variations in physical characteristics that range from high mountains, rich pastures, and fertile lands to arid deserts and a long coastline but also because like its landscape, Pakistan's people are as diverse and as colorful. Within this diversity they are bonded together by their common faith -Islam- which was first brought to the subcontinent in the eighth century. Pakistani society generally displays a high regard for traditional Islamic values particularly in the northwestern regions of NWFP and Baluchistan which border Afghanistan and are highly conservative. These areas are also dominated by centuries-old tribal customs which may not be directly linked to Islam or Islamic principles.

The annual Economic Surveys of Pakistan constantly indicate lowest ranks on female literacy and female labor force participation for these areas (Baluchistan has the lowest amongst the four provinces). Besides regional variations, there are rural/urban differentials in social indicators associated with a modern way of life that cut across provinces. For instance literacy rates for Pakistan in year 2007-8 are 56% with 48% and 72% for rural and urban areas respectively. Female literacy rates are the lowest - 44% compared to 68% for males, 33% compared to 62% for males and 65% compared to 80% for males for Pakistan, rural and urban areas respectively (Government of Pakistan, 2009). Statistics also show an increase in the number of urban families that live in nuclear family structures compared to greater numbers of extended families in rural areas as well as in the proportion of employed women in non-traditional sectors in urban areas.

Research sample
My field research was conducted in a context that provides rich variations of experiences which shape the views of its inhabitants. My sample includes three areas from NWFP province, i.e., Peshawar, Swat and Abbottabad and two areas, Rawalpindi and Karachi from Punjab and Sindh provinces respectively. NWFP, as I said earlier, is one of the most conservative provinces in Pakistan and the three selected locations represent degrees of conservative attitudes and practices. Peshawar is the largest city and the capital of NWFP province. Being the seat of provincial government it is the hub of political, social and cultural activities. It is a cantonment area with the Headquarters of the Pakistan Air Force. Peshawar is a multilingual city that houses many educational institutions including the first Islamia College for boys in the region (is now a university), which was founded in 1913 with the objective of imparting knowledge of modern sciences, alongside the principles of Islam. Peshawar is the Province's largest business center for traders from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. It is both a modern and traditional city with a large number of ancient monuments, bazaars and modern skyscrapers and shopping malls. Swat is located in the north of Peshawar and is extremely traditional and predominantly rural. With high mountains, beautiful lakes and lush green valleys Swat is a tourist paradise but the living conditions for ordinary people are hard as a large majority has to survive on subsistence agriculture. The area contains large number of nomadic groups who live off of their domestic animals. As opportunities for off-farm employment are limited, male out-migration to other areas of Pakistan especially to Peshawar and Karachi and to Gulf States is very common. Women
usually observe strict purdah (mostly stay indoors and cover themselves with a large cotton sheet while going out). In extremely poor households, women work in their own fields as family labor or on others’ fields for wages. People almost exclusively speak Pushto, which is one of the languages spoken in Peshawar and its surrounding villages as well as in large parts of Afghanistan. In Swat, illiteracy is high among both men and women.

The third area from NWFP, included in my sample is Abbottabad situated on the famous Karakurum Highway which is the reincarnation of the old Silk Road that connects Pakistan with China and Central Asian states. It is a peaceful, quiet place that attracts tourists because of its green hills and valleys. Abbottabad is part of the area that was hit by the devastating earthquake in October 2005.

Abbottabad is located between Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan and Muzzaffarabad which is the capital of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. It is a cantonment city that houses the Pakistan Military Training Academy. Being a cantonment, Abbottabad is home to people from all over Pakistan. Also being closer to the capital Islamabad, Abbottabad shows more affinity with the urban culture of Punjab both in language and daily customs. The predominant language spoken in Abbottabad and its surroundings is Hindko which is similar to Punjabi. In comparison to Swat one can consider Abbottabad more modern as there is less hostility toward female mobility. Females’ school enrollment is much higher and one can see large numbers of women working in government and non-government offices.

The other two areas included in my research are Rawalpindi and Karachi which are among the largest cities of Pakistan. Rawalpindi is one of the twin cities (the other being Islamabad) where urbanization with all its good and bad aspects is visible. It is home to many schools, factories and other modern institutions where both men and women are employed. Urban sprawl is especially noticeable in modern housing units which are built mostly for nuclear families. With a rural belt around this big city Rawalpindi, like Peshawar, is a big business district where rural/urban buyers and sellers from both genders come into contact with each other and create a hybrid of rural/urban culture.

Karachi is the capital of Sindh province and can be considered a megalopolis in Pakistan as it is expanding at such a phenomenal rate that very soon it will run into Hyderabad (the neighboring city) and become interconnected to become one big urban area. Karachi is a cosmopolitan city as being a port city it has attracted people not only from almost all other parts of Pakistan but also from other countries of the world. Amidst the multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural population of the city, the University of Karachi is perhaps the only university in Pakistan where girls outnumber boys and where large numbers of women are employed in formal and informal sectors of the economy.

Theoretical orientation

The topic of Muslim women’s rights and freedom in Pakistan is complex because Pakistan as a context presents sites that are underpinned by different theoretical concerns. The first and foremost is the colonial past. Pakistan was a former British colony. At the heart of the freedom movement which resulted in the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was the issue of Muslim identity not only politically but socially and culturally as well. Hence, the majority of state policies and laws that govern the daily lives of her citizens including women are derived from Islamic codes.

Pakistan also falls within the "patriarchal belt" (Caldwell, 1982) where one can see different degrees and forms of patriarchy co-existing. For instance, the "private patriarchy" of the "pre-modern family and social order which is based upon household production, with a patriarch controlling women individually and directly in the relatively private sphere of the home" (Wallerby, 1990:178), exists side-by-side with the "public patriarchy" of the "state and labor market which is based on structures other than the household, ... institutions conventionally regarded as part of the public domain are central in the maintenance of patriarchy" (Wallerby,
which is characteristic of industrial societies. Similarly the “agrarian patriarchy” and “patriarchal capitalism” of Lie (1998), which is based on gendered division of labor is also visible and so is Kandiotty’s (1988), “classic patriarchy” which is based on kinship systems. At the same time Pakistan also displays the characteristics of a “neo-patriarchal society” (Sharabi 1988) where traditions meet modernity in the wake of globalization.

The implications of the above contextual realities for analyzing the discourse of human rights for Pakistani women are that the parameters of the discourse need to be set within the multiple boundaries of self identity marked by gender in the background of development. As citizens of a Muslim republic, Pakistani Muslim women are to be granted the rights decreed by the Divine source- the Qura’an, supplemented by Sunnah (practices) and Hadith (sayings), of the Prophet Muhammad who lived according to the Qura’anic injunctions. In such a context the discourse of human rights will be directly informed by religious sources which are considered eternal, unchanging and timeless. I call this the discourse of Faith which may be static but not archaic. On the other hand there is also what I call the discourse of Force which is dynamic and is defined by religious code—Sharia—that embodies the legalistic, social and political aspects of Islamic faith. This aspect of Islamic culture is susceptible to modern pressures as this is the site where traditional structures of a society reject, resist, accept or modify modern institutions. That is why I call it the discourse of Force recognizing that “Ethnically and religiously diverse social orders now exist in most Muslim countries and the post-colonial period has stimulated great political and ideological debate regarding the questions of Islamic law, democracy, secularism and human rights. (Ahmed2, 1994:39). The result is a strain on the existing value systems. However, it is also important to note that I have coined these two distinctions for analytical purposes only because in theory Islam “does not recognize the validity and legitimacy of separating the religious and secular spheres of life” (Ibid: 35).

For my research I have adopted the neo-patriarchal society’ stance promoted by Sharabi (1988), which provides boundaries as well as space for the discourse of force to unfold as Pakistan with her rich history of ancient cultures and civilizations is emerging as a modern and moderate Muslim state. For Muslim women I build upon the notion of ‘patriarchal bargain’ which is advanced by Kandiotty (1988), Cockburn (2004) and Sa’ar (2005), keeping in view the “positive side of patriarchy” (Qureshi and Rariyya, 2007:xix) which “does not have to leave women choice-less and helpless” (ibid).

**Purpose and Method**

I wanted to hear the voices of those who are presented in the western literature and media as ‘oppressed, discriminated, subjugated and dependent’ individuals and note their perceptions about their own social reality. My interest was to find out how do Muslim women define the realities of their own existence? Do these women see themselves as deprived and disadvantaged as western scholars lead us to believe? As a Muslim researcher I agree with Litho (2006), that producing knowledge on women “… would be better done by those who understand their values better; i.e. themselves.” I wanted to present Muslim women’s side of the story objectively and through their own voice; therefore, the thematic discussions with these women were imperative. For this purpose, two rounds of focused group discussions7 were conducted. Included in the first round were six groups of women –three urban and three rural, all from NWFP. The objective of this round was to thrash out the research topic or generate hypotheses (Krueger, 1994). The question for the round was; what does it mean to be a Muslim woman in general and in the North West

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7 The use of focus groups for the explicit purposes of generating hypotheses/ new ideas for further research is not an uncommon technique. See Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002, for the use of focus groups for different purposes.
Frontier Province of Pakistan in particular? The technique used was brainstorming and the language used was Pushto (one of the regional languages), for Swat and rural parts of Peshawar, Urdu (national language), sometimes mixed with English, for urban areas of Abbottabad and Peshawar and Hindko (a regional language) for the rural parts of Abbottabad. The group size was deliberately kept between 5 and 7 for management purposes yet allowing for diversity of ideas. The exercise resulted in tremendous amount of information. This information was examined in conjunction with field observations and informal conversations. The result was five major themes including, self, freedom, rights, education and employment. These themes defined various dimensions of women’s social reality as they saw it. Therefore, as a researcher I considered them important for a meaningful exploration of their social reality.

The second round of discussion was for the purposes of testing hypotheses (Krueger 1994) and was not limited to NWFP only as women from Rawalpindi (Punjab province) and Karachi (Sindh province) were also included. The language used during these discussions was mostly Urdu with some English as well. Nine groups of women—3 urban and 6 rural—took part in the second round of discussions. The group sizes ranged between 10 and 15 per group. The data generated in this round helped me in further refining the social dimensions of the topic. The views that I present in this paper are the ‘voices’ of Pakistani Muslim women who are part of a significantly larger group spread over the face of the earth but may not present the stereotyped images of Muslim women of a homogeneous variety (Siddiqi and Zuberi, 1993). These Pakistani women speak from their own lived experiences; therefore, the words they utter carry meanings for and about their life. These meanings reflect social values that are shaped by their religious beliefs. These religious beliefs are translated into shared norms that guide their daily existence.

**Muslim Pakistani women speak**

The research question that I explore for the present paper is how do Pakistani Muslim women see and socially place themselves? The three relevant themes for the present discussion that emerged from my field data are presented in Figure 1.
Identity: Self

Women in my sample defined ‘womanhood’ or self as a locus of moral responsibilities. The latter were defined with reference to familial roles and relations with men. Each role and relation had a set of expectations manifested in certain attributes. The attributes, however, were not tied to a single relation only. “We are good mothers, obedient wives and respectful daughters-in-law. When we were not married, we served our parents and took care of our siblings. Good Muslim women are supposed to be obedient daughters and sisters” (Participants from Swat, NWFP). The women especially emphasized their reproductive role and the moral choices attached to it. Motherhood was seen by all women as a blessing which was bestowed upon women by Allah (God Almighty). “Men are superior because they are heads of the households. We women are superior because we are mothers. Even men recognize that paradise is under the feet of mothers” (Participants from Rawalpindi, Punjab). Different groups of women from Peshawar described mothers as the reflection of Allah’s beauty, love and kindness which lifts women in status. It also increases their responsibilities which was pointed out by participants from Abbottabad; “as young wives, and especially before bearing children, we were more restricted and less mobile. Now we have more responsibilities because our social activities have increased and we are more mobile compared to other women who are unmarried or are not yet mothers.” Since child bearing for Muslim women can only occur within marriage (according to Islamic laws), therefore, women’s role as a wife is equally important. “We are good wives. We look

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8 The interviews and discussions were conducted in local languages. The quotations, given in italics, are translated into English almost literally. The original quotes are omitted for the reasons of space.
after our husbands, respect them and take care of them. We take the primary responsibility for raising children, as a good wife should do” (Urban participants from Peshawar, Rawalpindi and Karachi). Those women who were not wives or mothers emphasized other familial relations, e.g., daughter and sister, for defining self with the adjective of ‘good.’ When I asked for an example of a ‘bad’ woman, it was also couched in kinship terms of bad mother being a disgrace to all Muslim mothers, or a bad daughter who ruins her family. I did not find any noticeable difference between the perceptions of rural and urban women as they built their pictures of self but the words they chose to paint those pictures were different; women from rural areas used more phrases like obedience to husband, service to husband or service to family whereas urban women spoke of taking care of husbands, being kind, giving respect and looking after family or husband. But the perceptions of rural women with respect to freedom were different from that of urban women.

Freedom
Freedom was seen by rural women as a dichotomous concept—Freedom for Din (religion), and Freedom for Dunya. Freedom for Din is to excel in piety where more is desirable. Both women and men are free to excel in piety and goodness. They can spend as much time as they want in performing activities related to Din which is service to Allah. “As Muslims our freedom is in obedience that is obedience to Allah, to our elders and as women to our husbands.” (Participants from Swat and Abbottabad, NWFP).

Freedom for Dunya, on the other hand, is to work for the worldly gains within appropriate limits set by Islam. And this is where most of the differences between the viewpoints of urban and rural women emerged. A large majority of urban women did not agree with freedom for Din and Dunya being separate; they did, however, agree on the use of Din to better their Dunya and vice-versa; “I cook, I wash, I maintain our home. I do it for my family; apparently all these are mundane chores, for Dunya but my Din requires me to be a good mother and a good wife. So I am combining the two; I better my Dunya and excel in my Din too. (an urban participant from Karachi).

Another bifurcation made by the majority of rural women groups was ‘their idea of freedom’ (meaning urban/educated people in general and the West in particular), and ‘appropriate freedom’ (from a Muslim perspective). Freedom as defined by the West was considered a threat to two main values that is obedience to elders including husband, and fidelity; “Freedom to do what? To develop new relationships with other men? It is not freedom; it is moral degradation if you consider our opinion”. (Participants from Swat and Peshawar, NWFP). That was similar to the accounts of Basit (1997) of the British Muslim girls who wanted freedom but not ‘too much’ of it. Participants from Abbottabad, NWFP also had something negative to say about freedom; “if it [freedom] means walking in bazaars with your head uncovered, we do not want it.”

The urban women, however, saw freedom as an ability to choose. Although they did not put it as dichotomies in terms of ‘for and of’ Din and Dunya, they did agree that freedom for Muslim women was guided by moral codes which were separate for men and women because of their different societal roles. Therefore, women and men have separate domains, i.e., public and

9 Marriage in Pakistan, by implication in a Muslim society, is almost universal. The distinction of being married/unmarried is important for Pakistani women as their notions of status, freedom, rights etc are tied to it.

10 Here the distinction between Din and Dunya refers to the spiritual world of Faith and the practical world on earth respectively. Din refers to religious rituals like prayers, fasting etc. The focus of these activities is on the life hereafter. Dunya, on the other hand, refers to daily life in this world. It involves mundane activities necessary for earthly existence.

11 For females covering their head in public places is required by Islam. Therefore, walking in markets without headscarf is equated with a total disregard for Islamic teachings.
private/family domains. The former is for men because under Islamic law they are required to provide for the family; “At home, we are free to wear whatever we want. We can do as we please but out in the public we have to be properly dressed and walk and talk in a way that is appropriate for a woman. (Participants from Peshawar and Rawalpindi).

All groups agreed that both women and men make their choices within certain limits prescribed by Allah in the Qura’an and elaborated by Sunnah and Hadith. Since Islam encourages women to be homemakers, therefore, women have the freedom to choose whether to stay at home or not. Men, on the other hand, do not have this freedom because they are the breadwinners. Women also pointed out that as women have the choice to stay at home; therefore, their freedom to enter the public sphere is limited and they have to follow certain codes of conduct to enter into public (men’s) domain. The private or domestic domain, on the other hand, could very well be considered women’s world because they have the upper hand; “our homes are our states, we are leaders here because we decide the politics and economics, we control food, energy and whatever our kings and princes need, they cannot function without us.” (participants from Swat and Peshawar). It is very similar to what Wilson (1991) says about a “husband as the head of the household protects and supports his wife, yet defers to her in domestic affairs.”

Freedom for the majority of rural Pakistani women (some urban too), was associated with age and position in the family. Mature women from Peshawar, Swat and Abbottabad said; “we are past our child bearing age. Most of us are grandmothers now. Now we enjoy more freedom of movement because we are more involved in making decisions about the household than we used to when we were younger.”

Rights

All women agreed that discussion on the rights of one gender would not make sense as the rights of women were duties for men and vice versa and also the rights were inseparable from responsibilities (duties). A group of participants from Abbottabad was of the opinion that talking about one without the other was absurd because they went hand in hand. For example, it was the duty of women to be good wives and it was their right to be provided for by their husbands so it was a woman’s right to stay at home “it is the right thing to do as our religion gives us this right” (participants from Swat, Abbottabad and Rawalpindi). Denying the right of women to be homemakers was also seen as a sign of men failing to provide for the family by rural women but not by urban women who, by a large majority, saw employment as a service to the family because “you are part of the family. Your job is for the ultimate benefit of your family. A job though an act for Dunya would also uplift you in Din especially if the decision is made in consultation with your elders including husband. (Urban Participants from Peshawar, Abbottabad, Rawalpindi and Karachi). Here again the distinction between rights from the western point of view and ‘our’ point of view existed because against the western idea of labor force participation as women empowerment, the majority of the rural women considered holding a paid job by women “is a sign of rebellion against our religion and culture.”

Women groups from urban areas considered employment and education as their rights to chose and participate. For them it meant ‘empowerment’ because consistent with Al-Dajani’s definition it was “a continuous, ongoing process entailing enhanced abilities to control choices, decisions and actions” (2007: 20). It was not a stigma for the working women from urban areas but was seen so by a large majority of rural women. At the same time I also heard a young surgeon from Rawalpindi make the following comment; “you know we [working women] are neither here [traditional, Eastern] nor there [modern, Western]. If my husband asks me to stay at home because he can provide for me I would recoil labeling him a male chauvinist and patriarch. On the other hand if he encourages me to be a career woman I would feel abandoned because as a
husband I expect him to take care of me.” This dilemma was also echoed by groups of working women from Karachi and Peshawar.

Discussion
The three most important concepts that emerge from the field data are motherhood, homemaker and family which are social in nature especially family which has been considered as the central institution of a Muslim society. (Ahmed¹, 1994). In women’s definition of self, freedom and rights family occupies the fundamental position. For instance, in women’s perceptions of self family as a reference point proves its centrality as they define their gender roles within family; they discuss their moral choices for the family; they describe responsibilities of the family; they provide service to the family and they opt for means of welfare for the family. Most importantly, women consider themselves as the lynchpin of a family unit and their role as mothers is of utmost importance for Muslim households. It is not surprising then that the concepts of motherhood and homemakers crisscross with other dimensions of Pakistani women’s social existence including rights and freedom.

For the majority of Muslim Pakistani women it is the discourse of faith that defines their social existence. However, within the discourse of faith the discourse of force can be accommodated as was indicated by urban, educated and working women. These women while responding to the call of modernity also look to their faith for guidance in a society where an intricate web of cultural realities exists as a result of the converging and diverging discourses of Islamic faith and force. Unlike the western concept of selfhood which is individualistic and liberal or social liberal (O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver, 1999), Pakistani Muslim women define themselves in social terms which are communitarian. They see ‘woman’ (or self), as a locus of moral choices and responsibilities including freedom and rights which are attached to different roles. Self is social as it emerges in relation to others including men and is shaped within the social milieu of religion. A good woman is a giver as she provides care and service to family. Obedience to elders/husbands and fidelity are the warp and weft of the social fabric and in order to protect it freedom needs to be reigned in by moral codes. Similarly, rights are mutual obligations; women have rights over men and men have rights over women and rights without responsibilities connotes ‘taker’ which is a negative attribute for any gender.

The implications of these findings for the human rights debates is that the individualistic language of western human rights discourse may not be able to capture the complexities of the collective identity of Muslim women because “The Western liberal notion of the independent and free individual...is quite foreign to that mentality.” (Hodgson, 2003:222). Islam as a religion is social (Grupper, 2000) and provides a complete context for living it. In Islam, Huqooq-un-Nisa (Arabic for the rights of women) and Huqooq-ul-ibad (Arabic for the rights of people), involve both men and women and apply to various forms of interactions covering their daily existence. If mothers’ rights are mentioned in Huqooq-un-Nisa, so are the rights of parents in Huqooq-ul-ibad. Mothers (and parents) have a right to be respected by their children and their duty is to look after their children who in turn have a right to be nurtured by their mothers (parents) and the children’s duty is to provide for their parents in their old age.

As a Muslim and researcher I recognize that in a country like Pakistan with a rich history of ancient cultures and civilizations all those influences that are attributed to religion may not necessarily be informed by Islamic ideology but the socio-politico culture is still predominantly Muslim. And Pakistani Muslim women get their notions of freedom and rights mostly from Muslim sources. It is beyond the purview of this paper to go into lengthy debate about the differences of the human rights discourses under different theoretical orientations in relation to Muslim contexts like Pakistan; suffice is to say that the moral and religious footings on which Pakistani women acquire their freedom and rights are different than the moral and political philosophies embodied in the ‘universal’ human rights discourse which dominates western literature (see Ahmed², 1994 for detailed comparative discussion). As a researcher I feel that
transferability of the so-called ‘universal’ human rights vocabulary to Muslim contexts would be problematic unless critically analyzed from Muslim perspective (see Barlas, 2002 for Qura’anic interpretation of patriarchy; Hirshmann, 1998 and Killian, 2003 on veiling; Alidou, 2005 and Gerami & Lehnerer, 2001 on Muslim women agency; Qureshi, 2006 and Faust & Nagar, 2001 on education, and Qureshi, 2008 on Child rights). It would also be unfair to use jargons like ‘deprived’ and ‘disadvantaged’ for describing the ‘plight’ of Muslim women without further research to explore the social existence of Muslim contexts.

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