

12-2020

## Gender Justice and Islam: For Male Two and For Female One Qurban. Why?

Zilka Spahić-Šiljak  
*University of Zenica*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [Islamic Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Spahić-Šiljak, Zilka (2020) "Gender Justice and Islam: For Male Two and For Female One Qurban. Why?," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 10 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss10/4>

This Article, Exploration, or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

# GENDER JUSTICE AND ISLAM: FOR MALE TWO AND FOR FEMALE ONE *QURBAN*. WHY?

By Zilka Spahić Šiljak<sup>1</sup>

Zilka Spahić Šiljak holds a PhD in gender studies, an MA in human rights and a BA in religious studies. Her scope of work includes addressing cutting edge issues involving human rights, politics, religion, education and peace building with more than fifteen years of experience in academic teaching, and work in governmental and non-governmental sectors. From 2006 to 2011 she ran the Religious Studies Program of the University of Sarajevo. After that she was a fellow at Harvard University and Stanford University in the USA. Currently she is a guest lecturer at the Roehampton University in London and the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zenica. She also runs the Transcultural Psychosocial Educational Foundation (TPO) in Sarajevo, which focuses on gender equality, intercultural and interreligious education and peacebuilding. Among her publications of relevance to OPREE are *Bosnian Labyrinth: Culture, Gender and Leadership* (2019), *Shining Humanity: Life Stories of Women in BiH* (2014) and *Contesting Female, Feminist and Muslim Identities: Post-socialist Contexts in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo* (2012). She is also an advisory editor of *OPREE*.

Naming the baby is one of the beautiful traditions practiced by many Muslims, and in some regions, like the Balkans, it is known as *'aqiqah*, although *'aqiqah* is only one part of it –sacrificing an animal for the newborn. This ritual is usually performed on the seventh day after birth, but sometime due to illness or other inconveniences the family can arrange for it to occur later. Naming the baby existed in pre-Islamic cultures as well as in the Jewish tradition. Muslims continue to practice it with some adjustments.

On this occasion, family and friends gather to share the happiness and blessings and to welcome the newborn. The ritual consists of several components, including cutting the baby's hair, or just piece of it; an equivalent weight in silver is given to charity. *Adhan* (a call to prayer) is said in the baby's ear and the baby is called with her or his name three times. Some verses from the Qur'an are recited and the ritual is finished with *du'a* (supplication). In addition, the family sacrifices a *qurban* (*'aqiqah*), usually a sheep, and the meat is shared with neighbors, family, and those in need.

A discrepancy occurs when families sacrifice two sheep for a male newborn and one for a female newborn. When asked why they do this, the answer is something along the lines

---

<sup>1</sup> This text was originally written in Bosnian and published in the magazine *Preporod*, Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, December 1st, 2020.

of, "it has always been done this way, and there are some *hadith* traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that confirms this practice."

Since the child is a gift from God, regardless of whether it is male or female, and if Almighty Allah treats all human beings equally and does not prefer some groups or individuals over others based on their gender, but only based on their deeds and degrees (*darajah*) they deserved or are given by God, why is having a female child is less appreciated than having a male child in Muslim families? If Muslim parents today were asked whether they love male children more than female, the majority might probably say that they love all of their children equally. However, their actions do not reflect this answer and there are many examples that can serve as evidence. I will discuss here only those examples pertaining the *'aqiqah* for the naming the baby.

A few years ago, I participated in a baby naming ritual in Sarajevo. I asked the young parents if they loved their newborn male baby more than their two-year-old daughter. They looked at me in shock, answering almost in unison, "How can you ask us this? We love both of our children equally." I continued my inquiry, asking why did they then sacrifice two sheep for the boy, whereas two years ago when their daughter was born, they had sacrificed only one. They looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and said, "Our grandmother told us that was a custom, and honestly we have not thought much about it."

Certainly, the grandmother was referring to the tradition, which is considered in the mainstream teachings of Islam to be rooted in a *hadith* (canonized oral tradition) from the Prophet Muhammad: "Slaughter two comparable sheep for a male newborn and one sheep for a female." (*Sunen* by Abu Davud). The same *hadith* collection, however, reports that the Prophet sacrificed one sheep for Hassan and one for Hussain, his grandsons. Referring to this practice, Imam Abu Hanifa and Imam Malik held the same opinion with the explanation that, in the first Muslim community in Medina, *'aqiqah* was practiced equally for a boy and a girl, one sheep each, and that a prominent Prophet's companion Ibn 'Umar, known for his strict adherence to the Prophet's example, did the same.

Unfortunately, the practice of the Prophet Muhammad was not as compelling an argument for Muslims as the narration about two sheep for boys and one for girls. This narration was in compliance with the tribal mindset and customs which prioritized males over females.

The question we have to ask today as believing Muslims is this: how is it that, in the 21st century, Muslims would rather use a *hadith* that prefers boys over girls than the actual practice of the Prophet Muhammad? If the Prophet treated his children equally, and showed

public affection for his daughter Fatima with the specific gesture of standing up to welcome her every time she came to visit, and if he constantly warned believers to take care of their daughters, how have Muslims ended up cultivating this naming tradition that sends a clear message to daughters that they are not as equally valued as sons?

There are many reasons for this, and one should search for them in the prevailing influence of culture and customary law, both in tribal pre-Islamic cultures and other traditions Muslims encountered through centuries that were patriarchal, sexist, and very often misogynist.

One should also take into account the context of the 7th century Arabian Peninsula and the people who embraced Islam but were not willing to give up their pre-Islamic customs. Prophet Muhammad showed understanding and sensibility towards new converts, but he set the standards with his own practice. He did this with slavery, for example; although many practiced it, he did not want to have slaves, discouraged his daughter Fatima from owning one, and encouraged believers to free slaves.

When one examines how many centuries Muslims have followed certain customs that are neither Islamic nor in the spirit of Islam, it is easier to understand why the statement made by Prophet Muhammad in one moment, that two sheep should be sacrificed for a boy and one for a girl, seems to supersede his actions. But what matters is what he has done and how he led by example.

Although the message of the Qur'an brought about revolutionary changes in 7th century, with its ethical values of humane conduct, justice, mercy, and individual responsibility, and though its universalism transcended class, racial, and gender differences, throughout the ensuing centuries it grew stiffened and petrified in the chains of patriarchy and authoritarian spirit, so that its revolutionary potential is barely visible in the present-day.

Instead of making the message of Islam revolutionary today, utilizing its potential to continuously adapt to the development of civilization, Muslims often repeat well-ingrained lessons from the past presenting Islam as a solution to all of humankind's existential questions and granting women their full rights, but at the same time they are not able to give an example of any present day Muslim society in which the key principles of Islam, for example justice that encompasses social justice, including the rights of minority groups and women, are lived and practiced.

Due to the uncritical and blind following of faith, many Muslims are not able to see the flagrant examples of human rights violations and discrimination that are committed in the name of God and Tradition, as in the case of the naming ritual. Their inability to reckon with it is likely due in part to the fact that this kind of discrimination does not affect men, who still hold

monopoly over interpretation of God's message and its transmission and teaching. If they themselves experienced discrimination based on their gender, if they experienced the same treatment as women and from a young age constantly received the message that they are less valuable, perhaps they would be more sympathetic.

One cannot overlook, however, that when men are discriminated on ethnic or religious grounds, they know how to articulate their exclusion and inequality. Male insensitivity to discrimination against women may be due to the fact that these forms of discrimination have been unquestioningly normalized for such a long time, with barely anyone questioning practices of exclusion and marginalization of women, to the point where many men as well as women became desensitized towards these kinds of injustices.

Nevertheless, if one claims to believe in God and believes that justice is the key principle of Islam, it is inevitable to ask how Muslim followers can still promote certain traditions that are neither revolutionary nor in the spirit of Islam but are instead discriminating and humiliating.

Tradition is important, but tradition needs to be sieved and separated from the biases that have grown around it, which suffocate the spirit of God's word and its potential for growth and change. It can be applied in the lives of believers in accordance with the times in which they live, rather than according to practices from centuries long past. It is unacceptable and even offensive in 21st century to promote baby naming rituals that favor boys over girls through the practice of sacrificing two sheep for the former and one for the latter.

Try to imagine at least for a moment, how would boys feel if the situation was reversed, and the two *qurban* (sheep) were made for the girls instead? These kinds of traditions that are not in line with the key principles of Islam and in the spirit of the time in which we live today distance many young women but also men from their faith and culture of Islam. Patriarchy is not only harmful to women; it also has harmful consequences for the men.

In conclusion, it is unjust and offensive to practice a tradition that sends a message to women that they are less valued than men. It is time to put in practice the standards set by the Prophet Muhammad, even if we are 1422 years too late.