



Ibn Rushd on the Role of Women in Islam

The twelfth century philosopher, *Ibn Rushd* (*Averroes*), remains a towering figure in Islam. While he is ignored by the *Salafis* for his liberal interpretation of Islamic thoughts, he is considered by other Muslims and Westerners as the foremost Islamic philosopher. In a well reasoned treatise, Saudi cultural and literary expert, *Moajeb Alzahrani*,¹ explores *Ibn Rushd*'s views on the role of women in Islam.

During the time of *Ibn Rushd*, leadership positions in the Islamic world, both in government and the judiciary, were all occupied by men, as was the case in Greece. In reviewing Aristotle's "Politics,"² *Ibn Rushd* denounced the practice of excluding women from leadership positions as based upon a flawed ideology rather than logic and justice. *Alzahrani* acknowledges that *Ibn Rushd* never directly addressed the role of women except briefly in his summarization of Aristotle's work. Nevertheless, the author claims that *Ibn Rushd* clearly demonstrated compelling originality and depth of thought in deconstructing the traditional tribal masculine bias against women.

Alzahrani argues that progress and development in Arab and Muslim society cannot be achieved without resolving the role of women in the manner of *Ibn Rushd*, with reason, justice and the common good playing the major role. Comparing the *Salafists*' approach to that of *Ibn Rushd*, *Alzahrani* considers the former to be "preferential and hierarchical," relegating women to a lower status. In contrast, *Ibn Rushd* took a "horizontally integrated" view of both genders based on an amalgamation of logic, wisdom and theology.

The basic principle enunciated by *Ibn Rushd* is that men and women constitute a single, complementary design of human nature. *Alzahrani* explains that *Ibn Rushd* saw the different characteristics of each gender as complementary because both are essential for reproduction and recognized that perfection is attained through those complementary roles. That simple observation, the author contends, logically and philosophically supports equality between the sexes and led *Ibn Rushd* to reject assigning men a preferential position in society, regardless of any superior physical characteristics they might possess. According to *Alzahrani*, while the philosopher recognized that child-bearing could temporarily affect the ability of women to perform certain physical tasks, he did not see such limitations as a weakness. The writer notes, in fact, that *Ibn Rushd* argued that women can occupy positions of "leadership or wisdom," and specifically mentioned that women could hold positions related to the "war complex" with all that may require in terms of physical as well as leadership abilities, thereby dismissing any attempt to attribute physical or intellectual weakness to women.

Alzahrani's study of *Ibn Rushd* also addresses what fundamentalists assume to be a contradiction between the philosopher's views and passages in the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* which they contend establish the inferiority of women, a view that Aristotle had similarly espoused. In response, *Alzahrani* points out that *Ibn Rushd* did not single out the Islamic *Shari'a* in particular, but rather observed that while certain legal systems permit the practice of excluding women, others reject it; seemingly a reference to Plato's position on women versus Aristotle's. Also, drawing on other references by *Ibn Rushd*, *Alzahrani* agrees that the philosopher recognized the existence of contrary views and countered it by emphasizing that such beliefs are subject to individual

¹ *Moajeb AlZahrani* is a Saudi Arabian professor of Arabic literature at the University of King Sa'ud in Riyadh. He obtained his PhD from the Sorbonne in Paris in 1989 with a thesis on "*L'Image de l'Occident dans le roman Arabe Contemporain*". He is a member of the Association of Arts in Culture in Saudi Arabia and has been responsible for publication of the Cultural section of the Saudi Literary encyclopedia.

² No Arabic translation was available then to *Ibn Rushd* for Aristotle's writings. He relied upon Plato's "Republic" to read Aristotle's work. Plato's "Republic" is often erroneously referred to in Arab writings as "Politics"

interpretations (*Ijtihad*). As a result, *Ibn Rushd* was able to contradict other Muslim clerics by pointing to other verses in the *Quran* which do not seem to distinguish between the sexes.

Alzahrani states that *Ibn Rushd's* critique more than eight centuries ago still applies to the Muslim culture today and he warns that cultural poverty leads to societal poverty. He argues that women have been reduced to a status of dependency on men and, like *Ibn Rushd*, states that the cultural bias against women leads to economic losses for the Muslim community by under-utilizing the potential of women. Such an ideology, he states, grows out of the tribal male culture and has been perpetrated from one generation to the next. *Ibn Rushd*, he argues, is a model for the Muslim thinker who understands that building public awareness through logic and reason is essential to improve the conditions of life and work within the structure of the family and the state.

Alzahrani sees his analysis of *Ibn Rushd's* views on women as part of an effort to change the present image of women in the Muslim world. He recognizes that this is a slow process of confrontation with those who cling to an ignorant historical past and rely on false theological premises to maintain their dominant status as long as possible. [PI Online](#) has provided this brief account of what is a long treatise by *Alzahrani*. The treatise is significant because it may re-establish the value of *Ibn Rushd's* writings to the Arab world as counterbalance to the rigid and discriminatory views toward women espoused by the theoreticians relied upon by Islamists, and demonstrates the courage of this Saudi author in challenging the established norm in Saudi Arabia and most of the Muslim world.

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