



Critical Analysis of Existing Statutory Provisions of Mohammedan Law in Bangladesh: Recommendation of Probable Gender-Friendly Reformation

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Article History

Received: 01.09.2024

Accepted: 17.09.2024

Published: 28.09.2024

Abstract: Bangladesh is the last country on the Indian Subcontinent to which Islam was reached. There are so many misconstrued Islamic thoughts throughout the world. But for manipulating societal thought, Islam had been highly misconstrued in the Indian sub-continent and Bangladesh is no exception to that. Islamic society of Bangladesh relies on so many myths and misleading Islamic rules, which don't have any actual link to the *Shariah* and are merely invented by manipulative minds who invented such provisions only for their advantage. These inventions mostly impacted the women of the Islamic society of Bangladesh. Even though some had also affected the men also. This article will try to find out some of those misconstrued Islamic myths and how the society had accepted such and will also focus on relevant statutory provisions. This study will suggest some pro-women and gender-friendly provisions, which will be in conformity with *Shariah* and which may be incorporated in the statutory act.

Keywords: Mohammedan Law, Law in Bangladesh, Pro-men Law, Recommendation of Pro-women Law, Recommendation of Gender Friendly Law.

Cite this article:

Chowdhury, N. I., (2024). Critical Analysis of Existing Statutory Provisions of Mohammedan Law in Bangladesh: Recommendation of Probable Gender-Friendly Reformation. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(9), 96-101.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh doesn't have any consolidated statute related to Muslim Family Law. Bangladesh has multiple statutory laws relating to Muslim Family law, i.e. The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937[1], The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939[2], The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961[3], The Muslim Marriages and Divorces (Registration) Act, 1974[4], Child Marriage Restrain Act, 2017[5], The Family Courts Act, 2023[6]. Among these statutes, there are many misconstrued and gender-discriminatory provisions. In this article, the provisions of these statutes which are discriminatory as well as inconsistent with the *Shariah* are pointed out with probable reformatory recommendation.

2. Method

This article is based on a qualitative approach, which mainly focuses on the harmonious construction of the existing *Shariah* law and statutory law of Bangladesh. In this article, the provisions in the statutory law, which are inconsistent with the *Shariah* have been put forward with actual ruling of the *Shariah*. There are so many *Shariah* provisions relating to personal law of Muslims which are not applied in Bangladesh or which are applied in a misconstrued manner. This article approaches to address the major issues on which there are specific rules in *Shariah*, but such rules

are not applied accordingly by the statutory law and judicial functions.

3. Existing Problematic Provisions and Suggested Gender-Friendly Provisions in Conformity with *Shariah*

3.1 The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937

Section 3 of this statute provides that a person can declare that adoption shall be part of section 2 of this statute which includes intestate succession, special property of females, including personal property inherited or obtained under contract or gift or any other provision of Personal Law, marriage, dissolution of marriage, including *talaq*, *ila*, *zihar*, *lian*, *khula* and *mubaraat*, maintenance, dower, guardianship, gifts, trusts and trust properties, and waqfs, implying that his adopted children shall be part of succession as his own children. Even though it has been clearly stated in the Qur'an that Allah doesn't consider adopted children as a person's real children [7]. Hence this provision of declaration shall be repealed as it may curtail rights of other successor, which is not approved by the *Shariah*.

In practice it is observed that, Muslims in Bangladesh often execute a preferential gift to give some extra property to one of his or her children which is prohibited by the *Shariah*. As there is no specific law regarding gifts of Muslims, it totally relies on *Shariah*

provision and the patriarchal society of Bangladesh introduced the *Shariah* provisions of gift in a misconstrued manner. There shall be specific provisions restricting preferential gifts in like manner:

“Any gift of preferential nature shall be void and such gift deed shall not be registered by the concerned Sub-Registrar. Any person executing any such gift shall be penalised with a fine which may extend to twenty thousand taka.”

Similar scenarios can be observed in the matter of custody and guardianship of wards. The *Shariah* had provided rules that, if the mother leads an immoral life, then custody and guardianship of the children shall be transferred to the father, and if the father isn't alive, then to any other male member of the paternal family, namely the grandfather, adult elder brother, paternal uncle. But if the father leads an immoral and infamous life then custody and guardianship of the children, as per *Shariah* provisions, can't be taken away from the father. This is a provision against women and also illogical. The provision shall be laid down considering the well-being of the children in the following manner:

“Guardianship and custody of the children may be given to any persons other than father or mother if for the well-being of the children requires such measures.”

3.2 The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939

This act provides provisions and grounds for divorce claimable by the wife through judicial review[8], which is also known as *faskh*. Though this statute has provided multiple grounds for judicial divorce, some of those grounds are against women or the wife. Section 2 (i) states that, if the husband's whereabouts are unknown for 4 years, then the wife may apply to court for having the marriage dissolved. But the wife's economic and social condition of these 4 years had not been considered. How the wife will maintain herself and the children, if any, during this 4 years' time, that isn't specified. In the current world of connectivity, everyone's location is known to everyone, unless such a person wants to hide himself intentionally. In such a context waiting for such a long time without any surety of return of the husband can lead the wife to have an inhumane life along with her children. Moreover, a wife's right to conjugal life would also be violated. To protect the rights of the wife the provision shall be incorporated in the alike manner:

“Where the wife considers that the husband had absconded had there is no possibility of his returning to family life, the wife may file an application before the court for dissolution of the marriage.

Provided that, the wife has to substantiate that, the husband had not made any contact or she was unable to make any contact with the husband in the last six months.”

A similar issue can be seen in section 2 (ii) where it has been stated that, if the husband fails to provide maintenance for 2 years, then the wife may file an application for dissolution of marriage. What would be the economic and social condition of the wife during these two years of time, that hasn't been considered. In vice-versa, the right of the husband has also been violated in this provision. In cases where the wife had claimed an unreasonable amount of maintenance and afterward, if she files an application for dissolution of marriage claiming that, she hasn't been paid adequate maintenance. Before filing any application for dissolution of marriage due to non-payment of maintenance, a suit for

maintenance shall be instituted and in the consequence of non-payment of maintenance fixed by the court in the maintenance suit, the wife may file an application for dissolution of marriage. The provision shall be of alike manner:

“Where the wife has a decree for payment of a fixed amount as maintenance, and the husband fails to pay such amount for consecutive six months, the wife may file an application for dissolution of the marriage due to the default of the husband in payment of maintenance.”

Then the most controversial issue of this statute is section 2 (vii) which enumerates the principle of ‘Option of Puberty’. The *Shariah* principle of option of puberty is that, when a minor girl is given in marriage, before attaining majority or puberty, by her father she may annul the marriage after attainment of her puberty. Provided that such marriage shall not be consummated.

In section 2 (vii) of the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, 1939 it has been incorporated that, a minor girl given in marriage by her father can annul her marriage, by applying to the court, after she becomes the age of 18 and such application must be lodged before she becomes the age of 19. Provided that, after the age of 18, marriage shall not be consummated.

Here the first problem is regarding age. Girls attain puberty around thirteen or fourteen years of age. But the scope for annulling her marriage is given to her after becoming 18 years of age. Consummation prior to 18 years of age has been overlooked. Moreover, for any child born prior to 18 years of age, what will be the consequence of this in such a situation that has not been considered in this provision. In the context of the current world, primarily marriage of minors should have been forbidden. Though it is punishable to solemnize the marriage of a minor, under the Child Marriage Restrain Act, 2017, but no effect of such provision has been incorporated in the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, 1939.

3.3 The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961

Muslim Family Laws Ordinance is the most controversial statute regarding Muslim personal law, till now. It contains many provisions which have created remarkable confusion among Islamic societies of Bangladesh. The very first one is section 3 which gives the overriding effect of the provision of this ordinance over any other law, custom or usage, implying that provisions of this statute may override rules of *Shariah*. Any rule which derives not being in conformity with *Shariah* is considered as *Bidat* rendering such a new rule as invalid. Hence this provision shall be amended in this manner:

“Notwithstanding anything contained in any other laws, rule, custom or usage, if inconsistent with *Shariah*, any such rule, law, custom or usage shall be invalid and provision of *Shariah* shall prevail.”

If such an overriding provision is incorporated in a Muslim Personal Law Code which was adopted by keeping consistency with the provision of *Shariah*, the absolute overriding effect could be given. i.e.

“Notwithstanding anything contained in other laws, for Muslim Family matters, for the time being in force in Bangladesh, provisions of this Act shall prevail.”

The next controversial provision of MFLO is section 4, which enumerates a new principle, known as the 'Principle of Representation', which is also a new rule invented without being in conformity with the *Shariah*. Son's son is Category-1 Asaba or residuary which is also known as *Asaba-e-Nafsi*[9], which means he will eventually get the property. Son's daughter is also Asaba known as *Asaba-e-Ghair*, who will inherit property if there is a son's son of the same grade[10]. Hence there won't be the necessity of any such statutory provision for representation. But here daughter's son or daughter's daughter will not be eligible to get any property through inheritance, which is discriminatory. Though in the period of establishment of Islamic rules, male members were liable to take care and maintain all female members of their family, hence some rules were provided for offering more property to male heirs. But in the current context and regime of 'Constitutional Equality' daughter's son or daughter should not be excluded from inheritance, as neither *Shariah* provides any rule for offering property to them nor provides any rule for excluding them. Hence a pro-women and gender friendly provision can be incorporated in Muslim Personal Law Code in the following manner:

"Daughter's son and daughter's daughter shall inherit property as of the capacity of an *Asaba-e-Ghair* and shall receive half the property of a same grade son's son."

Another provision of the MFLO which needs attention is section 7 which is titled as '*Talaq*'. This section only provides rules for divorce by husband and later in section 8 states that in case of dissolution of marriage other by method specified in section 7, procedure of section 7 shall be applied *mutatis mutandis* and so far as applicable, which is ambiguous and misleading. Here in section 7 *Shariah* method or time of *talaq* was not prescribed. But Allah's Apostle commanded his companion not to divorce a menstruating wife and only to divorce one's wife when she is pure (not menstruating)[11]. As per section 7 of MFLO, divorce can be given by the husband at any time, which is in violation of the wife's right and is not in conformity with the *Shariah*. The provision should lie down in text the following manner"

"If a man wishes to divorce his wife, he shall do so while the wife is in an unconsummated purity. Any pronouncement of divorce by the husband during menstruation or pregnancy of the wife shall be rendered as invalid."

Another issue with this section is rules or method of *Talaq-e-Tawfeez* or divorce by wife wasn't specified in this statute. But incorporation of such rules is a must for present day context. Wife capacity to give divorce is conditional and secondary, meaning the wife can give divorce if the power of giving divorce is delegated to her by husband based on preset condition. As during menstruation, women go through mental and physical pressure, statutory provision shall specify that divorce by wife shall also be given in purity. That way the provision will be a gender friendly one, equalising both male and female. The provision may be incorporated in the following manner:

- a. "Woman may divorce her husband, if she had been delegated with the power of divorce by her husband, during solemnization of the marriage. Such delegated power may be exercised conditionally or unconditionally.
- b. If a woman wishes to divorce her husband, she shall do so while she is in an unconsummated purity. Any pronouncement of

divorce by the wife during menstruation or pregnancy of the wife shall be rendered as invalid."

Regarding the rule of service of notice shall be same for both the husband and wife, meaning both shall serve notice to Chairman, within the meaning of MFLO, and the party giving divorce shall be responsible for registration of the same.

"After giving divorce, a notice shall be served to the Chairman by the spouse who gave divorce and a copy to be delivered to the other spouse. The spouse who gave divorce shall be responsible for registration of the divorce within the specified time."

Some may argue that divorce shall be done through judicial intervention. But in a country like Bangladesh, which hosts a huge population and high crime rate for which courts need to adjudicate a lot of criminal cases, divorce through judicial intervention is not feasible. Eventually this sort of provision may be incorporated later when Bangladesh will have better infrastructure for judicial processes.

Next issue of this Statute which needs to be addressed is maintenance. Section 9 of the MFLO specifies that maintaining or giving maintenance to the wife is the sole responsibility of the husband. The provision provides that, wife or wives can apply to the Chairman for fixation of an amount which shall be paid as maintenance to her or them by the husband as maintenance.

Here two issues are problematic. The first one is the binding responsibility of the husband to maintain the wife. Though maintenance has extended meaning in Bangladesh legislation, which states that maintenance includes food, clothes, medical treatment, residence and to provide companionship[12]; but in the context of family and husband-wife relationship maintenance include those provisions or monetary substitution to those provisions which shall be given by husband. In current world economic growth and constitutional equality, maintenance of the family should not be the sole liability of the husband, as in majority cases wife is also working and earning and in some cases wife is earning more than husband.

The second problem of section 9 of MFLO is that the Chairman had been authorised for fixation of a periodical amount, on the application of the wife or wives, which amount shall be given as maintenance by husband to such wife and wives. But the standard or procedure or element, basing upon which such amount can be fixed, isn't provided in this provision. Chairman may fix an amount which could be an over-burden for the husband and he might not be able to pay it.

So to introduce a gender friendly provision in the personal law of muslims, the rule shall be of as such:

"Maintenance and ensuring the well-being of the family and children shall be the responsibility of both husband and wife as far as consistent with their economic capability. Provided that such responsibility shall not be overburdened to any of them."

The provisions of dower of MFLO is also ambiguous which doesn't provide any rules for dower. In the social context of Bangladesh, dower is always fixed by guardians or elders of the bridegroom and bride, upon which most of the time the bridegroom and bride doesn't have any opinion. But the *Shariah* way of fixing dower is to be a mutual agreement of bridegroom and bride as it is

stated in the Qur'an, it is permissible to be mutually gracious regarding the set dower[13].

While fixing the amount of dower, there is always an undue influence from the bride of an excessive amount, which is a monetary pressure upon the bridegroom. So there shall be a incorporated statutory provision of the alike:

“Dower shall be fixed by mutual consent and agreement of both bridegroom and bride by themselves. Provided that, such dower shall be consistent with economic condition and income of the bridegroom, and social status and condition of the bride and her family.”

Moreover MFLO doesn't provide any specific guidelines about the payment mode of dower which violates rights of both men and women as multiple myths about mode of payment of dower go through Bangladesh. Provisions of Qur'an can directly incorporated in statutory law as Qur'an has provided specific and clear ruling about payment of dower, likely:

“Dower may be paid any time after consummation of the marriage. If divorce takes place after consummation of the marriage, the full fixed amount of dower shall be paid to the wife on demand or if the husband wishes to take a second wife or if divorce takes place. In the case of divorce of unconsummated marriage, half Dower of the fixed dower shall be paid by the husband. If the wife wishes to waive it full no dower need not be paid and if the husband wishes to pay it full he may do so[15]. If divorce takes place in an unconsummated marriage where no dower was not fixed, a suitable compensation shall be paid to the wife by the husband[15].”

3.4 The Muslim Marriages and Divorces (Registration) Act, 1974

This statute is the first statute of the independent Bangladesh regarding Muslim personal matters. Though this act didn't provide any substantive matter, it's only provided with procedural rules for registration of marriage and divorce. Even though it has incorporated the process of registration of Muslim marriage, but it has also created a big dispute regarding women's capacity to take initiative for registration of the marriage. Provisions this act provides that, where a marriage is solemnised by a person other than the *Nikah* Registrar, the bridegroom of the marriage shall report it to the concerned *Nikah* Registrar within thirty days from the date of such solemnization[16]. Where solemnization of a marriage is reported to a *Nikah* Registrar by the bridegroom, he shall register the marriage at once[17]. According to this provision, the *Nikah* Registrar can't register a marriage without being informed by the bridegroom. If the bride informs the *Nikah* Registrar about solemnization of the marriage, he won't be under any obligation to register the marriage, which in fact curtails the right of the bride of being capacitated to take initiative for registration of her marriage.

Again this statute provided provision for punishment of the bridegroom if doesn't take initiative for registration of the marriage within the specified time[18]. This provision is also discriminatory as it is making only the bridegroom liable. A gender friendly provision may be incorporated as of the following:

- a) “All Muslim marriages solemnised in Bangladesh shall be registered within thirty days of the solemnization by the concerned *Nikah* Registrar.
- b) Either the bridegroom or bride may take initiative to register the marriage and shall inform it to the nearest *Nikah* Registrar.
- c) After receiving information of a solemnised marriage in like manner, *Nikah* Registrar shall register the marriage at once.
- d) Failure to take initiative to register within the specified period, both bridegroom and bride shall be equally liable and shall be punished with a fine which may extend ten thousand taka.”

The second controversial document of this statute is 'Form 'D' which is the Registration Certificate of Marriage. First issue of this form is clause 5, which requires information regarding the bride's civil status of marital relationship. This clause is kind of detractionary towards honour of a woman. This clause should be removed from the marriage registration certificate as there isn't any *Shariah* requirement for any such declaration.

The next clause having a problem is clause 10 which requires information of two witnesses for marriage. The *Shariah* rule regarding witnesses of marriage is minimum of either two adult Muslim men or one adult Muslim man and two adult Muslim women. Clause 10 has provided an option of only 2 persons, by which it is assumed that the legislative body had presumed that witnesses of Muslim marriage will only be the men, which is discrimination against women. Space for another witness shall be inserted in clause 10.

Another controversial clause of this form is clause 18 which is the husband's option of delegating power of divorce to the wife. This clause made this delegating power conditional meaning husband has to delegate this power with conditions. Here this clause must be substituted in such a manner, which will authorise the husband to delegate the power of giving divorce, to the wife unconditionally.

3.5 The Family Court Act, 2023

The Family Court Act, 2023 is a statute, by which the Court has been authorised to adjudicate disputes regarding five crucial elements of muslim family, which are divorce, restitution of conjugal rights, dower, maintenance and guardianship and custody of children[19]. This statute is mainly a procedural law for resolving the above mentioned disputes, of which it has jurisdiction. Even though there are provision in the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937, that in the cases of marriage, divorce, maintenance, guardianship and custody of children, rules of *Sharia* law must be applied, the courts while adjudicating applications filed under the Family Court Act, 2003 give priority to the precedent set the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and formerly, Supreme Court of Pakistan, High Court of Calcutta and British Privy Council.

A provision can be incorporated in the Family Code of Bangladesh affirming the provision of the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937, as the following:

“All personal matters of Muslim Family shall be adjudicated by following the provision of *Shariah*, namely sources from Holy Quran, Authenticate Hadith and comments and directions of renowned Islamic Scholar.”

In the matter of divorce, there are so many rules of *Shariah* which are neither incorporated in the statutory laws nor applied in the

Court by following the rules of the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937. For instance, there is a rule in the Quran, that if a woman is found guilty of adultery and if her husband wishes to divorce her, then her husband might retain a part of the dower as a ransom for divorce [20]. But according to the statutory law of Bangladesh, no woman can be charged with adultery. So any male who has *de facto* knowledge that his wife is involved in adultery and if he wishes to divorce his wife for such immoral livelihood, then he must pay all the dower, both prompt and deferred. If the total dower is paid as prompt, then such husband doesn't have any capacity to retain any of such dower. For non-application of this *Shariah* provision, Muslim males are deprived of a right established by the Holy Quran.

A provision of for application of this rule can included in the Family Code of Bangladesh as the following:

- a. Any husband wishes to divorce his wife for her being involved in adultery or any other immoral activities, he may retain an amount from the dower of such marriage;
- b. The amount of dower to be retained by the husband in a divorce mentioned in clause (a) shall be determined by the Family Court in a suit for divorce before the Family Court.
- c. Provided that, before filling of such suit under clause (a), the husband must acquire a judgement against the wife, for being involved in adultery or any other immoral activities"

Another misapplication of *Shariah* provision relevant to divorce is the provision of divorce and payment of dower in case of unconsummated marriage. In the current context, in a situation where a dowry has been fixed and then before the marriage gets consummated for whatsoever reason such marriage ends in divorce then husband has to pay the whole of the dower money. But it has been ordained by the Noble Quran, that if a marriage ends in divorce before consummation of the marriage, then husband will pay half amount of the fixed dower [21]. For non-application of this provision, Quranic rights of Muslim males are also violated on another level, as recently it has been observed in Bangladesh, that some women are making money out of marriage as if it is a business. Women of immoral character get married to men and then before consummation of the marriage they divorce their husband and later on they file suit in court claiming the full amount of dower. As there is specific rule regarding such cases, and as because of misconstrued application of the *Shariah*, rights of Muslim males are violated, a statutory provision can be added in the Family Code of Bangladesh as the following:

- a. In case of any claim of dower in any judicial proceedings, the court shall determine whether such marriage was consummated or not.
- b. The court may take assistance from the medical team for inquiry regarding consummation of such marriage.
- c. If the marriage was not consummated, then the court shall award the claimant woman half the amount of the fixed dower of the marriage,
- d. If the marriage was consummated, then the court shall award full the amount of the fixed dower, subject to the other provisions of the Code relating to retainment of dower partly, by the husband.
- e. Cases in which there is a child or children of the separated couple, then the court may proceed the case without any medical examination.

- f. Cases in which the husband acknowledges that the marriage was consummated, then the court may proceed the case without any medical examination."

Another problematic provision of the Family Court Act, 2023 is that, by this Act court has been authorised to make order for restitution of conjugal life. This jurisdiction of court is not permissible according to the rules of *Shariah*. It is the rule of *Shariah* that after being married, husband and wife will love each other and will maintain regular conjugal relationships. It has been stated that, if a husband invites his wife to bed and if she does not comply with such invitation the angels will curse her throughout the whole night [22]. It is also directed towards Muslim males, that they should stay away from their wives for more than six months and such males shall meet their wives at least once in every four months. Otherwise their wives can seek divorce [23]. Husband and wife shall maintain regular conjugal relations which is a primary objective and reason of marriage. If either of them is unwilling to recognize this right of the other, then he or she will be considered as a person who breached the rules and limits set by the Almighty, and Muslims shall not transgress the Limits of the Almighty [24]. Hence the jurisdiction of the court for ordering restitution of conjugal rights shall be abolished, and such situations shall be handled with provision of divorce.

4. Conclusion

Statutes related to Muslim personal matters are ambiguous and analogous and some of those are contravention of *Shariah* provisions, which also violates rights of women and men in different cases. Muslim personal laws of Bangladesh need thorough revision and also codification, codifying all the matters of the Muslim civil society for better implementation and application of the rules set by the religion of the Muslims. Unless such codification is enacted and enforced in Bangladesh, misapplication of personal law will continue in the country, instead being contradictory to the religion.

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