

A Theological Reflection on the Meaning of Women's Development and Flourishing

Zaynab Tajik^{1✉}  and Fatimah Qasempur² 

1. *Corresponding Author*, Department of Theoretical Foundations of Gender, Women and Family Research Institute, Tehran, Iran. Email: tajik.i.z11@gmail.com

2. Department of Social Sciences, Women and Family Research Institute, Tehran, Iran. Email: fateme.ghasempour@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study, adopting a theological approach, re-examines the concept of “women's development and flourishing” within the framework of Islamic anthropology. It seeks to answer: How can a comprehensive theological definition of female development be offered that goes beyond the prevailing statistical and managerial approaches in macro-level policy documents? The central problem is that in strategic documents such as the Seventh Development Plan, the concept is often presented without a clear theoretical foundation and with a predominance of statistical perspectives, whereas in Islamic theology, female development is connected to divine attributes such as justice (‘adl) and wisdom (ḥikmah) as well as to the question of the ultimate purpose (ghāyat) of creation. Consequently, the flourishing of female potentials is a manifestation of divine justice and wisdom in the human realm. In this article, first, the Qur’ānic concept of development (rushd) and its philosophical analysis based on the theory of potentiality and actuality (quwwah wa fi’l) are examined; then, its relationship with gender (jinsīyat) within the system of Islamic theology is explained. The findings show that while men and women share a common human essence, their paths of development, in light of existential differences, are diverse and complementary. This analysis, while critiquing the two extremes of “gender-neutrality” and “gender-fixation” in Western theories, emphasizes that female development is meaningful only within the context of authentic female identity. The research method is qualitative, based on content analysis of theological texts, philosophical works, and contemporary writings in the field of gender theology. The conclusion is that a theological explication of female development not only provides the necessary theoretical foundation for enriching scholarly discussions but also has direct application in social and cultural policy-making, and can, by offering alternative criteria, serve as a guide in reforming the approach of the Seventh Development Plan and in designing an indigenous model of gender justice and women's flourishing.

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1. Introduction

Human development and flourishing (*rushd wa shukūfā'ī*) rank among the most fundamental concepts within the epistemological systems of religions and theological-philosophical schools, having always been understood in connection with the ultimate purpose (*ghāyat*) of human existence and the perfection (*kamāl*) of one's being. In Islamic thought, development is not merely external progress or the expansion of social functions; rather, it refers to the actualization (*fi'liyat yāftan*) of human innate dispositions (*isti'dād-hā-yi fitrī*) through divine guidance (*hidāyat-i ilāhī*) and conscious movement toward the purpose of creation. The Noble Qur'ān, through its frequent use of the term *rushd* and its cognates, employs this concept in opposition to *ghayy* (error), *ḍalālah* (misguidance), and *fasād* (corruption), presenting it as an indicator for discerning the correct path of individual and social life.

Despite the central position of the concept of development in Islamic sources, a review of the research literature reveals that the analysis of this concept has largely been conducted in a general and non-gendered manner. Most studies have examined development at the level of "generic humanity" (*insān-i naw'ī*) and have not independently and systematically analyzed its relationship with gender, particularly female identity. This is while the existential (*takwīnī*), psychological, and moral differences between men and women are considered, within the logic of Islamic wisdom and theology, as meaningful and wise (*ḥakīmānah*), and one cannot speak of human development without attending to them.

The importance of this issue is compounded in contemporary conditions, particularly at the level of social and cultural policy-making. In Iran's macro-level documents, including the Seventh Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran, emphasis is placed on "removing obstacles to women's development and flourishing," yet these concepts are often employed without precise theoretical elaboration grounded in Islamic anthropology. The absence of a clear theological (*kalāmī*) definition of female development has paved the way for reductionist interpretations or those influenced by Western models. The central problem of this research is to explain the meaning of women's development and flourishing within the framework of Islamic theology and to clarify its relationship with female gender. The present article seeks, by drawing on Islamic anthropology and theological foundations, to explain the possibility and necessity of thinking about "female development" and to offer a theoretical framework for redefining the criteria for evaluating women's development.

2. Methodology

The present research is qualitative in nature and based on theoretical analysis, conducted with a theological (*kalāmī-īlāhīyātī*) approach. The research method is documentary content analysis (*taḥlīl-i muḥtawā-yi asnādī*), and the data have

been gathered from Qur'ānic, exegetical (tafsīrī), philosophical, and theological sources, both classical and contemporary. The verses of the Noble Qur'ān, as the primary source, have served as the basis for extracting the semantic network of the concept of development, and their anthropological and guidance-related implications have been analyzed using authoritative exegeses.

Alongside transmitted (naqlī) sources, rational ('aqlī) theological foundations, particularly the theory of potentiality and actuality (quwwah wa fi'l), have been employed to explain the process of development and flourishing. Furthermore, theological texts have been examined with a focus on divine attributes such as justice ('adl) and wisdom (ḥikmah) to explain the relationship between female development and the systems of creation (takwīn) and legislation (tashrī'). Conceptual analysis of gender has also been carried out by reference to Islamic logic and thought, and gender has been explained as a "secondary intelligible" (ma'qūl-i thānī-yi mantiqī) and a comprehensive concept that encompasses all physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual dimensions of the human being. This combined rational-transmitted theological approach has made possible the conceptual reconstruction of an indigenous and coherent model of female development.

3. Findings

The research findings indicate that development, in the logic of the Qur'ān and Islamic theology, is a teleological, existential, and guidance-oriented concept that is realized through the actualization of human innate dispositions on the path of servitude to God ('ubūdīyat) and proximity to Him (qurb-i ilāhī). Development is not limited merely to the increase of external capabilities or statistical and quantitative indicators; rather, it concerns the discernment of truth from falsehood (ḥaqq az bāṭil), conscious choice, and steadfastness on the divine path. The conceptual opposition between development and ghayy (error) in Qur'ānic verses shows that development is a sign of a person's rational and moral maturity and his or her capacity to make wise decisions.

With respect to gender, the findings indicate that men and women share a common essence (gawhar) of humanity and the capacity to attain perfection, yet their paths and manifestations of development, in accordance with existential and ontological differences, are diverse and complementary. In this research, gender is not reduced merely to biological differences; rather, it encompasses a set of physical, psychological, emotional, and moral characteristics that play an essential role in the formation of identity and the pattern of development. From this perspective, female development has its own specific exigencies (iqtidā'āt), and it cannot be measured by the criteria of male development or by purely quantitative, gender-neutral models.

Theological analysis demonstrates that the flourishing of female potentials is a manifestation of divine justice and wisdom in the human realm. The two extreme approaches of "gender-neutrality" (jinsīyat-zudā'ī), which ignores

differences between men and women, and "gender-fixation" (*jinsīyat-zagī*), which reduces these differences to discrimination and inequality, both fall short of a balanced understanding of female development. Female development is meaningful only within the context of authentic female identity (*hūwīyat-i aṣīl-i zanānah*) and through harmonious interaction among individual, familial, and social roles. On the basis of this analysis, the article proposes a conceptual framework for offering alternative criteria for female development that can serve as a basis for revising the prevailing indicators in high-level policy documents.

4. Conclusion

The convergence of the research findings demonstrates that the theological explication (*tabīn-i kalāmī*) of women's development and flourishing is a theoretical and practical necessity. This explication, by returning to the anthropological foundations of Islam, makes possible the formulation of a comprehensive definition of female development that is neither based on similarity to male models nor confined within the framework of purely quantitative and managerial indicators. Female development, within this framework, means the actualization of women's God-given potentials in all existential dimensions and on the path toward realizing the purpose of creation.

This approach can serve as a basis for conceptual revision in strategic documents, including development plans, and can offer alternative criteria for measuring women's development and flourishing. Finally, the present article is a step toward establishing an indigenous theory (*nazariyyah-yi būmī*) of female development within the intellectual system of Islam—a theory with the capacity to be utilized in scientific, educational, social, and cultural policy-making domains. This research does not claim to offer an implementation model, but it can be used as a theoretical foundation for revising high-level documents and designing indigenous models of gender justice (*'adālat-i jinsīyatī*) and women's flourishing.

Declarations

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