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Recent Measures of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Developing Women's Status

Mahya Saffarinia Ph.D. 

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Abstract

Improving the status and position of women, and identifying effective pathways to address the associated challenges, has for decades been a key priority across diverse societies, engaging numerous international and non-governmental organizations. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as the only comprehensive intergovernmental body committed to Islamic teachings at the international level, has actively contributed to ongoing global efforts in this domain. This study examines first-hand OIC documents up to 2024, with a focus on activities during the last decade, to explore whether these initiatives have evolved into a particularist and transregional model in normative and institutional terms, or remain limited compared to global standards. The findings suggest that while OIC activities in the field of women have shown increased quantitative and qualitative momentum, they largely operate within a soft-law framework lacking binding conventions and effective enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, internal divergences across OIC institutions and member states, coupled with external pressures, have so far prevented the emergence of a coherent or influential model for women's rights promotion. As such, the OIC has yet to establish a significant normative or operational presence either within its member states or on the broader transregional stage.

Keywords

Organization of Islamic Cooperation; Women; Human Rights; Women Development Organization; Islamic Beliefs.

* Law Faculty, Imam Sadiq University. / Corresponding Author/ Email: saffarinia@isu.ac.ir

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Introduction

Over recent decades, significant legal, political, cultural, and economic transformations concerning women's rights have occurred across various societies. Many communities that once denied women the right to vote, own property, or hold public office have since shifted toward recognition of such rights. As women's roles in development gained broader acknowledgment, societies criminalized violence against women, implemented protective mechanisms, and witnessed social movements advocating for equality—though at times marked by extremities.

Islamic societies have not remained distant from these changes. Rooted in authentic Islamic sources, many fundamental rights for women—including dignity, equality with men, education, property ownership, and self-determination—were always present but became distorted over time, necessitating reform. These reforms have emerged through two primary channels: internal national initiatives shaped by societal contexts and external influences from international norms and organizations.

In this dynamic context, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)—a coalition of 57 Muslim-majority countries established in 1969—has served as a key intergovernmental platform working beyond national levels to influence women-related policy trends in the Muslim world. As such, several questions arise: When and how did the OIC engage with women's issues? What interpretations and regulations has it developed? Is there coherence among its affiliated bodies, or do we see divergent approaches? What mechanisms has it employed to advance women's status, and how has it interacted with international instruments such as those adopted by the United Nations?

This article seeks to answer these questions and, more centrally, it addresses the key question of whether the OIC's efforts have culminated in a particularist and transregional model in normative and institutional terms, or remain peripheral relative to global standards and mechanisms. By relying on a descriptive-analytical approach and first-hand OIC documents up to 2024, with particular emphasis on the last decade, the article aims to provide a

comprehensive understanding of the OIC's trajectory in promoting women's status. Structurally, it examines the organization's early initiatives, institutional capacity-building, and recent developments, followed by an evaluative conclusion.

1. Literature Review

Various previous studies have addressed aspects of the relationship between women's rights and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), but their scope and currency remain limited. Some works have explored the OIC's general engagement with human rights, making only brief references to women's issues (Petersen, Kayaoglu, 2019). Others have examined the organization's approach to equality and non-discrimination, assessing the extent to which the positions of Islamic countries align with what is considered universal, and arguing in favor of dialogue and engagement with the Islamic world (Blitt, 2017, 2018). In a different approach, some researchers have analyzed women-related developments in Islamic countries using various development indicators while referencing the OIC's broader role (Bozorgmehri, 2021).

Additionally, a number of thematic studies have focused on specific instruments and initiatives of the OIC, such as the OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (OPAAW) and the Women Development Organization (WDO), assessing their institutional capacity and policy relevance. These works often emphasize the gap between declarative commitments and practical implementation across member states.

Other studies have investigated the role of religious discourse and jurisprudence within OIC-affiliated bodies, such as the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, in shaping normative positions on gender equality. These analyses highlight tensions between traditional interpretations and evolving expectations within both domestic and international arenas.

A growing body of literature has also explored the OIC's interaction with global human rights mechanisms, particularly the United Nations, revealing patterns of selective engagement, cultural reservation, or legal pluralism. This

includes critical comparisons between OIC documents and global frameworks like CEDAW, underlining both synergies and structural contradictions.

The present author has also previously investigated aspects of women's and family rights in Islamic contexts in earlier works (Saffarinia, 2015, 2019). However, all these studies were published several years ago and therefore do not reflect more recent institutional changes within the OIC.

More importantly, the specific perspective adopted in this article—focusing on whether the OIC has developed a coherent and distinctive model in normative and institutional terms for women's rights—has not been addressed in previous literature. The current study thus seeks to fill this scholarly gap by providing a more comprehensive, updated, and analytical review of the OIC's engagement with women's rights, using primary organizational documents and institutional developments up to 2024.

2. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

The status of women in the contemporary world has overcome some of the important challenges of the past in such a way that today most cultures and civilizations have a consensus on principles of women's dignity and rights. It is rare to find a society that insists on discrimination and treating women as the second gender or without an independent identity, as in the past centuries. The current achievements are the result of many major factors, including the exhausting and costly efforts of women themselves and women's defending movements, the overall improvement of the level of growth and development of societies, the development of human rights, the expansion of regulations and monitoring mechanisms related to the protection of women's rights at national levels of countries and the global arena, strengthening theoretical studies and practical programs related to various areas affecting women's rights. Certainly, many other factors are also significant.

Although international organizations are an important field for multilateralism and forming various international developments, they are largely affected by environmental variables and internal and external developments. The

Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as one of the well-known institutions consisting of 57 Islamic countries, has gone through a process in each of the aspects affecting the current situation of women, which, although in some cases it is a valuable and unique experience, still in many cases, compared to other organizations, especially the United Nations or some other regional organizations, could not reach the expected levels.

This situation can be measured in the light of two types of evaluation and analytical methods. One is that the situation of Islamic countries should be compared with the aforementioned variables affecting the conditions of women in the current world, for example, to what extent women and women's defending movements have been active in Islamic countries and to what extent have these activities been able to show their results in the Organization of Islamic Countries? At what level is the general state of growth and development of Islamic societies so that its results can be calculated in the field of women's status? To what extent have human rights debates in Islamic countries been developed to leave an impact on women's field as well? At what level are the regulations and monitoring mechanisms related to women's rights at the national level of Islamic countries and how efficient are they? What kind of exposure do Islamic countries have to international standards and mechanisms regarding women's rights; to what extent do they comply with these standards and, how much do they use these standards and mechanisms to improve the status of women? At what level are the theoretical discussions and practical programs related to various areas affecting women's rights in Islamic countries, and how have the results of the current situation been shown in the activities of OIC?

The second type of analytical method and measuring of the performance of OIC in the field of women's status and comparing its activities with other international organizations, including the United Nations, is a review of the data and documentation of the activities and outputs of the organization and the steps taken during the period of activity of this organization from 1969 to 2024. In this study, the second type of assessment was conducted to understand the functions of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation regarding the status of women. If a

more accurate understanding of the level of successes or failures of OIC in the field of improving the status of women is to be obtained, it is definitely necessary to take into account the factors and variables that were mentioned in the first type of evaluation to conduct a deep analysis of each area. For example, when the level of growth and development of Islamic countries has not yet passed the high stages, it cannot be expected that a different situation will prevail in the field of women. When women's defending movements in Islamic countries are not at a prominent level compared to many other countries, naturally, one cannot expect them to leave an outstanding impact in OIC. Or, when human rights standards have not been seriously developed in Islamic countries, it naturally leaves its impact in the field of women as well, and its result can also be seen in the activities of the Organization of Islamic Countries.

3. Preliminary Steps

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation in its initial steps has sought to present its understanding of women's rights under Islamic Shari'ah, and international custom and conventions within the framework of the organization's charter and Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam.

Three years after the initial formation of the Organization of Islamic Conference, the Charter of the Organization was adopted in 1972. The Charter makes no explicit reference to family, women or children. The preamble generally reaffirms the commitment to the UN Charter and fundamental human rights and acknowledges the principle of non-discrimination. The preamble also expresses resolve to preserve Islamic spiritual, ethical, social and economic values (Blitt 2017, 761). The organization's reform program, which began in 2005, eventually led to the revision of the Charter in 2008. Although legitimacy of human rights is recognized in the first OIC, the new Charter gives a greater normative and institutional role for human rights in the OIC. This Charter expresses the OIC's determination to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms, good governance, rule of law, democracy and accountability, and safeguard and promote the rights of women and their participation in all spheres

of life in member states in accordance with their legislation. (Adam, 2014: 6)

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, twenty years after its founding, adopted the Declaration of Human Rights in Islam at the Conference of Foreign Ministers in Cairo in 1990. Some critics of the OIC charged that the Cairo Declaration was an attempt to undermine the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Others, however, perceived it as an attempt to reconcile the concept of human rights and Islam. The OIC itself described the Cairo Declaration as “complement[ing] the Universal Declaration as it addresses [the] religious and cultural specificity of the Muslim countries (Kayaoglu 2013, 9). It is worth noting that the Cairo Declaration is not a binding instrument, but rather a statement that presents the position taken by the OIC member states on human rights in Islam and in fact explains the human rights policy of Islamic countries. While the 1990 Cairo Declaration is not legally binding, it has symbolic value in terms of human rights policy in Islam (Council of Europe 2016, para 37).

Article 6(a) of the Declaration deals with the issue of women and states: “Woman is equal to man in human dignity, and has rights to enjoy as well as duties to perform; she has her own civil entity and financial independence, and the right to retain her name and lineage. The Article has declared men and women equal in dignity but has not spoken of the equality of rights between men and women. It has generally recognized rights for women as well as having duties. Although this article clearly outlines some of the civil and human rights that are still challenged in some systems, the position of the Declaration on the rights of women in civil, political, criminal, and other aspects within the family and society remained unclear (Mehrpour 2010) that should naturally be clarified in other organization’s instruments. The critics of the Declaration, including UN human rights rapporteurs, some academics, and civil society activists have criticized the Cairo Declaration according to international standards on women's rights.¹ Differences between the two attitudes of equalization of rights between

¹. To read more about the viewpoints of the critics of the declaration, refer to “Chase, Anthony Tirado, 2015, The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation: A Case study of International Organization’s Impact on Human Rights, The Danish Institute for Human Rights” and to see the opinions of some of the defenders (Next Page)

women and men as enshrined in international instruments and the provision of legal equity and justice between women and men emphasized in the Islamic approach are among the reasons for the divergence between the Cairo Declaration and the relevant international instruments towards women's rights.

4. Capacity Development

Organization of Islamic Cooperation in line with the reforms it has undertaken since 2005, has sought to strengthen its international engagement while pursuing a human rights agenda that combines commitments of member states within the framework of international human rights instruments and within the Islamic law. This is particularly reflected in the OIC Ten Year Programme of Action to meet the challenges facing the Muslim ummah in the 21st century (2005), OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (2008) and within the resolutions and decisions of the Ministerial Conferences.

4.1. OIC Programme and Plan of Actions

OIC launched a Ten-Year Programme of Action in 2005, aimed at reviewing the most prominent challenges facing the Muslim world as well as ways and means to address them objectively and realistically to serve as a practicable and workable programme for all OIC member states. The preamble of this Programme emphasizes the necessity of focusing on the rights of women, children, and families in the social field, and, subsequently, part 6 of the Programme is allocated to the rights of women, youth, children, and the family in the Muslim world. It emphasizes Strengthening laws aimed at enhancing the advancement of women, protecting women from all forms of violence and discrimination, and adhering to the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, albeit, with the assertion that all this must be under the Islamic values of justice and equality.

While adhering to the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of all

(Befor Page) of the declaration, refer to:" Taskhiri, Mohammad Ali, Review of Universal and Islamic Declarations of Human Rights, Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, Iran, 1997.

Forms of Discrimination against Women is advised, developing the Covenant on the Rights of Women in Islam is promoted. The Covenant on the Rights of Women in Islam, which the program calls for, has not yet been formulated. If drafted, it would appear to have no fate beyond the Covenant on the Rights of the Child, as the divergence of Islamic countries' perceptions of Shari'ah about women's rights precludes consensus on the wording of a particular document on women.

Following the adoption of the first Programme of Action in 2005 and in line with the organization's new vision in the 21st century, OIC attempted to devote its next coherent endeavor to women's issues. Therefore, the OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women was adopted by the second Ministerial Conference on Women's role in the Development of OIC member states in 2008. Addressing a range of difficulties faced by women and taking steps towards eliminating all acts of discrimination against women to reduce inequalities are pointed out as the state's commitments at the introduction of OPPAW (OPAAW 2008, para 5).

The OPAAW's objectives are outlined around four items including achieving gender equality and empowerment of women; raising women's participation in decision-making mechanism; providing equal opportunities for women; and elimination of all forms of discrimination. Subsequently, the Mechanism for the Implementation of the OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women was adopted at the Third Ministerial Conference on Women's Role in the Development of OIC Member States in 2010 in which 20 actions at the level of the Member States and the OIC, 3 actions at the level of the Civil Society and 5 actions at the level of Media were considered. While the OPAAW does recognize the challenge discriminatory customs and traditions may pose in achieving women's equality, the plan's very definition of equality is contingent on undefined norms (Blitt 2017: 797).

4.2 Ministers in Charge of Women

The Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers at its thirty-second session in Sanaa adopted a resolution entitled "Muslim Women and Their Role in the

Development of Islamic Society" (resolution NO. 3/32-C(b) calling for a ministerial-level conference to generate more opportunities for women. The Sanaa resolution also called on the Ministerial Conference to draft a plan of action to enhance the role of women in the development of Muslim societies (OIC /1-WCOD /2006/REP. FINAL). Five Ministerial Conferences on Women's Role in the Development of OIC Member States were convened from 2006 to 2014.¹ the First Ministerial Conference² in 2006 addressed the national policies and strategies for increasing women's employment; women's participation in decision-making mechanisms; and elimination of all forms of violence against women(OIC /1- WCOD/ 2006/REP.FINAL). The Second Ministerial Conference³ adopted the "OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (OPAAW) and welcomed the proposal to establish a new organ under the OIC concerned with women's affairs to be based in Cairo (OIC/2-WCOD/2008/REP.FINAL). At the Third Ministerial Conference entitled "Women, Family and Economy"⁴ in Iran, the women's issues and challenges they are facing in member states, particularly as regards the issue of women, family, and economy were discussed (OIC/3-WCOD/2010/REP-RECOM/FINAL) and prevention of violence against women in all its physical and mental dimensions through adopting special legislation and encouraging women's participation in the process of decision-making in the field of political and social progress were also emphasized. (OIC/3-WCOD/2010/DEC).

Jakarta Declaration in the Fourth Conference⁵ (OIC/4-WCOD, 2012: REP/FINAL) while recognizing the importance of family in the process of the

¹. To read more about the Ministerial Conferences refer to: Saffarinia, Mahya. 2019. "The Approach of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation toward Women's Rights". *Comparative Studies on Islamic and Western Law*, Volume 6, Issue 2 - Serial Number 20, September 2019, Pages 25-54

². The First Ministerial Conference On Women's Role In The Development Of Oic Member States was held in Istanbul, Republic of Turkey in 2006.

³. The Second Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in the Development of OIC Member States was held in Cairo, Egypt in 2008.

⁴. The third Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in the Development of OIC Member States entitled "Women, Family, Economy" was held in Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran in 2010.

⁵. The Fourth Conference entitled "Strengthening Women's Participation and Roles in Economic Development in the OIC Member States" was held in Jakarta, Indonesia in 2012.

political, economic, and social development of Islamic societies, declared the commitment to implement gender mainstreaming as a key strategy for achieving gender equality, gender justice, and empowerment of women in all areas and to promote harmony between women's work and family responsibilities (OIC/4-WCOD/2012/DEC/FINAL). The Fifth Ministerial Conference¹ was focused on women's empowerment, achievement of gender equality and elimination of all forms of discrimination including combating violence against women.

5. New Measures

At the global level, when it comes to human rights protection and promotion processes, they are a combination of the formation and quality of the norms and institutions that are used to consolidate the various aspects of human rights. Although, the OIC's resolutions have no power to bind the member states strongly and are not usually followed by action, they point towards member states' red lines that they cannot cross, say experts. (Ikehta 2019; Aljazeera 2019).

5.1 The Cairo Declaration of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Human Rights

As part of the OIC's reforms, a revision of the Cairo Declaration in accordance with international human rights standards was also on the agenda and the Council of Foreign Ministers approved the new version at their 47th session in Niger (Resolution No.63/47-POL, 2020). The Cairo Declaration of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Human Rights, in comparison with the text approved in 1990, is innovative in terms of literature as well as in terms of content. The new text is almost an adaptation of the International Covenants on Human Rights, using some terms derived from Islam so that it does not conflict with religious norms.

The rights and obligations of women are verified within two separate domains of inside the family and outside the family framework in articles 5 and 6 of the

¹. The Fifth Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in the Development of OIC Member States was held in Baku, Azerbaijan in 2014 on the theme of "The Role of Women in Sustainable Development".

revised declaration. Article 5 of the Declaration focuses on the rights and obligations of women within the family and it states that “The laws in force guarantee the rights and duties of the man and woman as to marriage, during marriage and after its dissolution”. The drafters of this article appear to have sought to act cautiously in light of the prevailing perception of women's rights and obligations within the family in the member states, which is based more on theory of justice and equity than on procedural equality and harmonization. International instruments address the need for equality of women and men in all aspects of civil, political, social, economic, and cultural affairs. However, the Islamic approach considers men and women as complementary to each other, and in the doctrine of Islamic human rights, the goal of the legal system is to achieve justice, and equality is seen as a means to justice, not that justice is a means to equality. Therefore, in the event of a conflict between the two concepts, the means should be discarded in favor of the goal (Mozaffari 2009, 127).

Women’s right is addressed specifically in Article 6 of the new Declaration by identifying three principles: first, men and women are considered equal in dignity, rights, and responsibilities; Second, protection and empowerment have been recognized in favor of women; and third, it has been emphasized that the two important former principles must be implemented within the framework of applicable laws. Although Article 6 explicitly speaks for the equality of rights and responsibilities between men and women, it seems, that to prevent governments' objection that existing international interpretations may not conform to Islamic principles, it has been argued that this equality must be enforced through the domestic legal systems. Of course, from another point of view, this article can be considered in line with international standards, as it is stipulated in international human rights law that states’ human rights commitments must be observed and enforced through domestic laws and mechanisms.

It is worth noting that the term "by applicable laws" as stated in the new Declaration does not mean protecting existing laws that may violate women's rights. It is a misconception that governments base laws that include inequality

and violation of human dignity under the pretext of this part of the article. Rather, they must use the capacity of domestic laws to provide for two important propositions mentioned at the top of the article. Considering that in some OIC member states the laws and regulations are governed by the state's perception of shari'ah and in some other member states the process of secularization is being pursued, it seems that the drafters have sought to resolve this conflict by insisting on applicable laws, attempting to seek consensus between the two groups to join the new Declaration.

5.2. Programme and Plan of Actions

5.2.1. OIC-2025: Programme of Action

As the second phase of the OIC Ten Year Programme of Action (TYPOA) that was initiated in 2005, the OIC-2025: Programme of Action was developed at the 13th Islamic Summit in 2016 based on the vision and principles as enshrined in the revised OIC Charter. It contains 18 priority areas and 107 strategic goals (OIC 2025-Programme of Action 2016). The Implementation Plan 2016-2025 was also adopted at the 44th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers in 2017 specifically intended for putting the priorities and goals of the programme of action into activities. The Council of Foreign Ministers, subsequently, called on the OIC Secretary-General to report periodically on progress made.

Of the 18 priority areas, the 13th priority is dedicated to "advancement and empowerment of women, family welfare and social security." In this priority area, despite improvement in the status of women in all socio-economic, political and cultural fields is recognized, gaps and challenges are deemed to be addressed among which the good health condition of women is considered critical for both the overall health of the family as well as the future generations. (OIC/SUM-13/2016/POA-Final, 2016: para 42-43)

In contrast to the individualistic approach embodied in international human rights instruments, this principle focuses solely on the function and role of women in the family. Discrimination is another issue in this priority area that is considered only concerning education and the labour market. It seems that the authors tend to focus more on the social aspects of women's rights rather than

the individual aspects. Specified goals for this priority area peculiar for women are to promote gender equality and family empowerment; develop appropriate legislative and administrative measures to fight against violence against women; and improve policy framework to address the social and emotional needs of women and children.; develop effective and reliable social services for women; provision of quality education, entrepreneurship and vocational skills development. Drafting and ratifying the Covenant on the Rights of Women in Islam as promised in the previous programme of Action in 2005 and in various OIC documents, has been completely neglected in the OIC-2025 Programme of Action.

The implementation plan 2016-2025 has accordingly considered some activities to achieve the goals set out for this priority area including supporting professional women with training to meet the criteria and demands of the global market economy; establishing chairs of research specialized in women in OIC institutions and universities; combating the negative and abusive traditions and cultural perception and practices against women; developing and improving legislation and policies on violence against women early and forced marriage, HIV and trafficking. (OIC-2025: Implementation Plan 2017, 35)

The Council of Foreign Ministers in a resolution took note of the Implementation Plan of the OIC-2025 in each priority area and called upon the member states, the OIC organs and institutions, the United Nations and its specialized agencies as well as other stakeholders to undertake all necessary measures for its effective implementation and requested the OIC's Secretary General to prepare a progress report on the implementation of the OIC-2025 (Progress Report, 2016-2017: 5-6). Accordingly, 3 progress Reports have been prepared so far which contain the implementation status of programmes and activities being carried out in terms of 107 goals listed under 18 priority areas of the OIC-2025. Since the first Progress Report in the year 2016-17, the number of activities rose from 435 to 630 in 2017- 18 and has further risen to 839 during 2018- 19 which shows the growth in the number of activities undertaken by the OIC institutions and organs. (Progress Report, 2018-2019: 2). Although the

Council of Foreign Ministers (Resolution, 1/46-POA) invited the member states to encourage national authorities to indicate their interest in specific programmes and projects they wish to undertake independently or collectively in pursuit of the goals, programmes and activities of the OIC-2025 (Progress Report 2018-2019,5), the progress reports presented, so far, are mainly focused on the actions of the OIC organs, and the participation of member states on the implementation of priority 13 is very limited. It seems that the member states have not taken the organization's adopted programme of action very seriously and at least do not regard themselves as implementing paragraph 13 of the program.

5.2.2. OIC Plan of Action for The Advancement of Women

The OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (OPAAW) and its Mechanism for Implementation were revised in 2016 and the new versions were adopted by the sixth session of the Ministerial Conference on the role of women in the development of OIC Member States. The OPAAW's new objectives are centered around 9 concerns including decision-making participation; education; health; economic empowerment; social protection; protection of women from violence; women in crisis situations; women in disasters; and women in armed conflict (OPAAW, 2016). Although drafting the covenant on the rights of women in Islam has been considered a vision for women in the OIC member states in the text of the OPAAW in 2008, it was totally ignored in the OPAAW revised version in 2016.

The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC) as a subsidiary organ of OIC, administered the OPAAW implementation Survey in OIC countries in seven distinct domains including women's participation in decision-making, the status of women's education, women's health, economic empowerment, social protection, protection of women from violence, and women in crises (SESRIC, 2021).¹ The analysis demonstrates that the level of progress was highest in the area of

¹. Between October 2019 and June 2020, SESRIC administered the OPAAW implementation survey to OIC countries. The survey was conducted in abidance of Resolution No. 7/7-W of the 7th Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in the Development of OIC Member States, held in 2018.

women's health, followed by education, participation in decision-making, social protection, protection from violence, women's economic empowerment, and lastly, the status of women in crises. Programs and policies that facilitated this progress included generic strategies and laws, concentrated initiatives for reforming and strengthening institutions, and efforts to develop human capacities. (SESRIC, 2021: 3)

5.3. Ministerial Conferences

The biennial OIC Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in Development is dedicated to reducing gender disparities and empowering women in OIC member countries in line with Pillar 13 of the OIC-2025 Programme of Action on the empowerment of women and the OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (SESRIC, 2021: 5)

The Sixth Session of the Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in the Development of OIC Member States on the theme "Status of Women in OIC Member States in Light of Current Challenges" was held in Istanbul, Republic of Turkey in 2016. The conference adopted the Istanbul Declaration and a resolution on the establishment of the Women Advisory Council which act as an advisory mechanism and propose policy recommendations on issues relating to the empowerment and advancement of women in the framework of the Conference. The resolution invites member states to nominate eminent women individuals as candidates for membership of the Council and decides that each three geographical groups designate, based on consultations among themselves, from among the nominees three members (total 9 members) to take part in the Council. In addition, one nominee from the chair of the Conference directly takes part in the Council as a member. The term of the members of the Council is limited to 2 years renewable once, totaling a maximum of four years. The General Secretariat and the Women Development Organization act as ex-officio members of the Council. (Resolution, NO. 4/6-W). The conference also adopted the amended OIC Plan of Action on the Advancement of Women (OPAAW) and its mechanism for implementation (Resolution NO. 3/6-W).

The Seventh Ministerial Conference¹ adopted the Ouagadougou Declaration in which it was noted that some women and girls in the OIC member states are still confronted with inequality, exclusion, marginalization, violence in all its forms, and socio-economic difficulties. To make the member states more accountable to their commitments under OPAAW, a resolution has been adopted in this session on Guidelines for Preparing, Drafting, and Submitting Progress Reports on Implementing OPAAW (Resolution, No.7/7-W). This resolution encourages the OIC member states to ensure better implementation of OPAAW and calls on the member states to submit their reports at least three months ahead of the ministerial conference on women.

The Eighth Ministerial Conference on Women with the title of “Preserving the Achievements of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond” was held in Cairo in 2021 with the outcome of 14 resolutions and a declaration. Equality and empowerment are two keywords that are mentioned repeatedly in these resolutions. Gender equality (Resolution No. 3/8-W) and equality between women and men, in rights and obligations (Resolution No.8/8-W), employment (Resolution No.2/8-W), labor market (Resolution, No. 7/8-W), wages and opportunities (Resolution No.2/8-W), education and training programs (Resolution, No. 4/8-W) COVID-19 Strategies and Policies (Resolution, No. 5/8-W), all activities, programs, policies, and documents of the OIC system (Resolution, No. 9/8-W), maintenance of international peace and security (Resolution, No. 3/8-W), and within families, communities and the wider Muslim Ummah (Resolution, No. 4/8-W) are emphasized in these resolutions. The declaration, also, recognizing that the divine teachings and values of Islam ensure the promotion and protection of all the political, cultural, and economic rights of women, stresses that the promotion of the role of women in society, and their active participation in decision-making is a must to achieve sustainable development and peace.

¹. The Seventh Ministerial Conference on the Role of Women in the Development of the OIC Member States was held in Ouagadougou, Republic of Burkina Faso in 2018 on the theme "Women Empowerment in the OIC Member States: Challenges and Prospects".

(OIC/WMC-8, 2021: DECLARATION)

Despite the norm-setting in the aforementioned instruments, many social, economic, and political challenges to women's empowerment persist in OIC member countries. For example, in 2019, 58% of women did not participate in the labor force and the unemployment rate among women was 11.1% in OIC member countries, as compared to 5.6% in the world. Women also remained underrepresented in decision-making processes and policy areas. The average proportion of seats held by women in parliaments of OIC countries merely stood at 18.4% in 2019 (SESRIC, 2021: iv).

The review of the process and documents of the Ministerial Conferences on the Role of Women in the Development of OIC Member States indicates that member states rather than ratifying binding instruments on the rights of women have preferred simply, to adopt a series of declaratory and program-oriented instruments. The organization has refrained from establishing strong governance structures and relies mostly on declarative resolutions; the weak enforceability of these resolutions means that states tend not to object to them (Kayaoglu, 2019: 70). In the outcome documents of the above-mentioned conferences, the State parties just portray a deficient vision of women's rights, concerns, and challenges. They have withheld from serious and detailed entry to women's rights and avoided providing practical solutions for the challenges and problems. While neglecting any observatory organ for monitoring the implementation of the declared rights and states' commitments toward the advancement of women's rights, OIC just keeps encouraging its member states for better implementation of programmes and plans. In general, it can be said that first of all, the OIC member states have tried to strengthen their commonalities through the adoption of soft legal instruments. Second, because they did not want to base their existing practice solely on international experiences, they have slowly come to their own modeling.

5.4. Women Development Organization

Similar to the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has numerous specialized agencies working in their respective fields. These agencies

were established in response to the needs and demands of the contemporary world in order to make the OIC a more effective and powerful international organization for Muslims around the globe (Ali & Sultan, 2023: 2). As the OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women called for the establishment of an OIC organ to address the role of women in the development of OIC member states societies (OPAWW, 2008: VI(6)), the Women's Development Organization (WDO), based in the Arab Republic of Egypt, was established as a specialized institution in 2009 and its statute was adopted in 2010 pursuant to the Resolutions of the Council of Foreign Ministers¹. Despite repeated OIC requests, the Statute of WDO has not been adopted by the Islamic countries, for one decade, to make it operational. Finally, the statute entered into force in 2020 following the ratification by the Republic of Cameroon, the fifteenth (15th) State to ratify the Statute.

WDO is supposed to develop and promote the role of women in the OIC Member States, with capacity, skills and competence building through training, education and rehabilitation, in line with the principles of the Islamic values and shall implement the OIC's resolutions and recommendations (OIC/37-CFM/2010/ORG/SG.REP.2). However, it seems that Organizational objectives and mandate outlined in the Statute do not allow OIC Women Development Organization to engage directly in a women's rights discourse within the OIC member countries. Instead, its objective appears to be facilitating women's participation in development and countering the negative stereotypes of women in Muslim societies (Bozorgmehri, 2017: 77).

It currently has 19 member states² and is composed of the Ministerial Council

¹. It is worth noting that the Organization for Women Development in the OIC Member States was established by resolution No. 4/36-ORG adopted by the 36th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) held in Damascus in 2009 as an OIC international specialized organization based in Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt. The Statute of the organization was adopted by resolution No. 4/37-ORG adopted by the 37th CFM in Dushanbe, Republic of Tajikistan, in 2010.

². WDO member states are: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Kuwait, Maldives, Mauritania, Niger, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Yemen, Bangladesh, Senegal, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates

comprised of Ministers concerned with women's affairs in Member States, the executive bureau, the Executive director appointed by the council for 4 years, and the executive secretariat. WDO announced 4 thematic areas in its first programmatic cycle, including economic empowerment and financial inclusion, ending all forms of violence against women and girls and harmful practices, strengthening the role of women in preventing and fighting corruption and women's leadership in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies (<https://www.wdo-odf.org/en>).

WDO tries to launch activities, programmes and reports that affect women and girls in the OIC Region. Its first thematic report under the theme "Women and Climate Change" in 2024, recognizes that climate and environmental crisis is not gender neutral and has differentiated impacts on men, women, and children. The report explores the intersection, connectivity, and nexus between climate change and an increase in structural vulnerabilities of women and girls in different aspects such as food security, education, water scarcity, access to health services, migration, abuse, early marriages, exploitation, trafficking, forced labor, gender-based violence and other forms of physical dangers. (Women and Climate Change, 2024:17)

5.5. International Islamic Fiqh Academy

The International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA) as a subsidiary organ of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was established in 1981. Its headquarter is in Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and is entrusted with elucidating the rulings and provisions of Shariah on issues of concern to OIC. To date, it has issued two hundred and fifty five (255) resolutions among which 13 resolutions are related to women issues.

The Council of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy issued a resolution in 2015, on Women and Public Governorships. It is emphasized in this resolution that Islam has granted women their full rights and placed them in the most suitable position. But at the same time it is declared that woman is not to assume supreme governorship (head of state) and since Women's assumption of public positions of powers such as head of the judiciary, ministerial positions and the

likes is a controversial issue among Fiqh scholars of different schools, it is better to be decided at country level.

In another resolution in 2018 the academy tried to reconcile the Young Girls Marriage between the Right of the Guardian, the Girl's Welfare, and the Extent of the Government's Authority. In this resolution determining the age for a young girl's marriage, which requires a judge's permission, is left to the Government in each country and the girl's welfare and her approval is considered a priority with respect to her marriage.

In a resolution titled Implications of the Marriage Contract on Spouses Ownership in 2018, the academy stipulated that each one of the two spouses enjoys an independent financial entity and called for the establishment of governmental and non-governmental institutions for divorced women care and for meeting their needs.

In a resolution in 2023 regarding Islamic Ruling on Religious and Non-Religious Education for Males and Females, the academy while emphasizing the importance of education in Islam, refuted views that deprive women of religious and worldly education and called on states and communities to address the issues and barriers that prevent or limit many girls' participation in lifelong learning in both religious and non-religious education. In another Resolution in 2023 on Shariah Ruling on Abortion Due to Rape, the Council of the Academy decided to postpone adopting a resolution therein pending additional research and studies.

It seems that the said resolutions are not very compatible with international standards in terms of wording and content, which is probably intentional. It is not, also, in harmony with the views contained in the documents approved by the diplomatic departments of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, including the OIC Human Rights Commission.

5.6. Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission

In the first session of OIC's Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) in 2012, women's rights were identified as one of the Commission's priority work areas. Two thematic studies on women's issues have been

conducted by the IPHRC, so far, on inheritance in 2016 and gender equality in 2019.

In the study on Gender equality, Gender equity, and Gender justice, in harmony with international instruments, gender equality is considered a prerequisite for the realization of gender justice. The deterioration of women's status and rights in Islamic societies is deemed to have no connection with their Islamic nature and the phenomenon is widely believed to be due to the predominant patriarchal and traditional societies dominated by male authorities. In this study, the OIC is called to adopt gender-sensitive, rights-based, and inclusive national action plans, laws, and policies that respect, protect, and fulfill the human rights of women and girls in the Member States (OIC-IPHRC, 2019).

The Jurisprudential leaflet on the Divine justice on women and men's inheritance in Islamic sharia tries to clarify that Islamic law did not undermine women's rights in this regard. It is recommended to view the inheritance rules as an interconnected and complementary system in different cases, not as independent pieces. It becomes clear, based on the study of the Qur'anic verses, that the rule of "the male takes twice the share of the female" is not a uniform rule. It refers to many cases where a woman inherits exactly what a man inherits; more than ten cases where a woman inherits more than a man; and cases where a woman inherits while a man does not inherit (OIC-IPHRC, 2016).

A thematic debate on "Impact of Women Empowerment on Sustainable Development of Member States" was also held in 2016 by IPHRC. Recognizing the internationally agreed development goals in international instruments, the outcome document of thematic debate asks for the engagement of religious leaders and scholars in public advocacy and consensus building to challenge social taboos, change mindset, and mobilize support for women-related issues. The commission also recommends the adoption of gender-sensitive, rights-based, and inclusive national action plans, laws, and policies that respect, protect, and fulfill the human rights of women and girls in the Member States. (OIC-IPHRC Journal, 2018: 89-92) .

In addition, on various occasions, the commission has issued messages and announcements. On 'International Women's Day 2023' the commission calls for unified global action to eliminate prevailing digital, scientific and technological divide endured by women and girls in different parts of the world to achieve comprehensive equality and empowerment and on 'International Women's Day 2023' emphatically calls for unified global action to eliminate prevailing digital, scientific and technological divide endured by the women and girls in different parts of the world to achieve comprehensive equality and empowerment.

IPHRC on 'International Day of the Girl Child' calls for empowerment of girl child and fulfillment of their human rights to mitigate challenges in times of crisis and on the occasion of the 'International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, calls upon the international community to galvanize efforts for ending all harmful practices that threaten the physical and psychological health of women and girls in accordance with the international human rights standards. The Commission considers that harmful practices like FGM are mere traditional customs without any proven religious sanction.

IPHRC on 'International Women's Day 2024' emphatically calls for urgent global action to bring an end to the sufferings of Palestinian women in Gaza at the hands of Israeli occupation forces, and appeals for an immediate and permanent ceasefire to halt violence and loss of lives in Gaza Strip. It highlights the plight of more than one million Palestinian women and girls who have been forcibly displaced multiple times inside the Gaza Strip due to indiscriminate Israeli airstrikes. Forced to bear the weight of caregiving responsibilities in shattered communities, they endure the trauma of loss and displacement while grappling with the pervasive fear of insecurity. Limited access to basic necessities such as food, water, and healthcare exacerbates their plight, pushing them to the brink of endurance.

It seems that while IPHRC tries to keep up with the internationally recognized literature on human rights and uses wordings that are universally understood, at the same time tries to address the religious concerns of Muslim societies. Considering the mandate that the charter of OIC has given to IPHRC in

promoting human rights standards¹, it is appropriate to take steps to develop a convention in the field of women's rights, just as it took steps to review the "Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Islam.

Conclusion

In the review of various documents related to the activities of OIC in the field of women's advancement during the past few decades, as explained and evaluated in the present study, several points are prominent, including the following:

1. The present analysis demonstrates that although the trajectory of the OIC's activities in the field of women reflects a degree of particularism—both in its normative outlook and in the processes and mechanisms it employs—this particularism is primarily manifested through soft law frameworks, lacking binding conventions and effective monitoring mechanisms for member states. Nevertheless, given the internal challenges posed by divergent perspectives among various OIC bodies and across its 57 member states, as well as the multiple external challenges confronting the organization, its initiatives have not yet matured into a coherent or influential normative or operational model for promoting women's rights. Consequently, the OIC has yet to establish itself as a significant actor in shaping women's rights, either within national contexts of member states or at the transregional level in competition with other global and regional frameworks.

2. The process of the organization's activities in the realm of women was not very significant in the first steps, but from a certain point onward, especially during the last decade, it has found an outstanding upward trend.

3. In the process of the organization's activities regarding the issue of women, important subtleties and complexities are noticeable. The subtleties and complexities are evident both in the type of activity and literature used by the organization's subsidiary, affiliated and specialized institutions and in the type

¹. Article 15 of the Charter of OIC stipulates that "The Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission shall promote the civil, political, social and economic rights enshrined in the organization's covenants, declarations and in universally agreed human rights instruments, in conformity with Islamic values".

of activity of the organization and its members in relation to other international organizations, especially the United Nations in the field of women's rights. For example, within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the type of attitudes, positions, and literature of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, as the most important institution consisting of religious scholars, is different from other mechanisms consisting of diplomats from Islamic countries or institutions such as the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission or the Women Development Organization. Some analysts may interpret these differences as a kind of duality or incoherence, but in another analysis, this type of exposure to various legal issues that have certain religious and cultural propositions about them indicates a kind of division of responsibilities between influential elements in Islamic societies. Religious scholars reflect their concerns in protecting the resources and cultural heritage of Islamic nations, and Political authorities and diplomats pursue national and common interests of Islamic societies with a kind of pragmatism and use of current literature in international forums. If observers do not understand these subtleties well, they may have important misconceptions. The same situation can be seen in the interaction of Islamic countries with the United Nations and international women's mechanisms. On the one hand, the Islamic countries are trying to show themselves committed to the relevant international standards and to reflect the reports of their activities to the international monitoring mechanisms, and on the other hand, they are trying in many ways to declare and pursue their common religious or cultural concerns or their special national interests through OIC or outside of it.

4. It seems that maintaining a balance between the approach and efficiency of jurisprudential and religious institutions with diplomatic, political, and legal units within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation is very important. For example, how these two approaches have been balanced within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in amending the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam or developing the OIC Convention on the Rights of the Child in Islam or codifying some strategic plans of the organization is worthy of investigation. If views prevail that do not consider the requirements of the time cannot advance

the interests of Islamic countries at the global level and cannot participate in the enrichment of universal values, it will be detrimental to the Islamic world. On the contrary, if OIC authorities and organs ignore the guiding role of religious and Islamic sources and standards in their activities in all fields, including women, nothing will remain of the Islamic approach, and in fact, Islamic countries will also be subject to customary and secular approaches at the global level, which is not in harmony with the demands of Muslim nations.

5. In a strategic assessment, the future prospect of OIC activities in the field of women is dependent on the internal developments of Islamic countries, the type of interactions of Islamic governments with other countries, and the existing views on the issue of women at the global level. Whether the organization will be able to make good use of all the internal capacities of the Islamic world and how it will establish a logical and effective interaction between its cultural and religious orientations and current values at the international level will play a key role in shaping the future situation.

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