

Status of Women in Islam: A Perspective

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Introduction

The status of women in Islam is clear and very unambiguous. The attitude of Islam (as delineated in the basic manuscripts, i.e. The Quran and Hadith bear witness to the fact that women is as important as men least and that she is no inferior to him nor is she one of the lower species. In order to understand what Islam has established for the women, there is no need to deplore her plight in the pre-Islamic era or what is happening with the women in the contemporary so called modern era. As in the contemporary modern world the number of believers is increasing day by day despite the "Islamic bashing" whereby it is condemned that Islam embraces war, terrorism, exploitation of women rights, what and what not. But it seems little bit paradoxical as on the one side the number of believers is increasing and on the other side the bashing on with hue and cry. As statistics vary regarding the overall number of Muslims- one figure placed it at 2038.04 million in 2014 is about 28.26% of total population of the world. With the next five to ten years, Islam can be expected to become the largest religious force in the world, with its believers surpassing the total number of Christians. Being this paradoxical situation and bashing from the west related to a more critical issue of women rights and status or empowerment, there is need to disclose and deliberate on what Islam has established for the women. Is there any place for women rights in Islam? Has Islamic code of conduct made it clear that, woman has a well dignified and reasonable status in individual, social, political and economic issues as well. It is because in the modern era the woman is degraded to such an extent and is now treated not less than a commodity and is traded in open markets even more than that. Even a mouth freshener cannot be sold out by the producer without having a pretty female face on it. Are not we going back to the nomadic stage of life in this supersonic age where there were no clothes for people to dressen up themselves?

As in the contemporary modern era women flock has been left without the basic rights either that may be social, political, or economics. Due to snatching of the rights the women has been degraded from her real standard and is facing these hardships not only in the form of eve teasing, but also in the form domestic violence, education, employment, political participation, decision making, what and what not.

So the main aim of the paper is to argue that women should be given her natural status and also try to make a brief deliberation how Islam has empowered women from all aspects of life.

Current Status of Woman

Woman comprise roughly about half of the world's population and India is not an exceptional. According to the Census 2011, the ratio of females per thousand males is 943. Nearly seventy per cent of the women are living below the poverty line and two thirds of them are illiterate. It is not the end but as per employment, political participation, decision making what and what not woman has been considered a neglected part of the society. It is the one side of the tail on the other side, woman see their equality in terms of equating to men in almost everything, dressing like men, behaving as tough as men. Today woman work as models, undertake measures that are injurious to health. The personality Islam seeks to bestow is one which gives confidence to a woman, security and respect which enables them to work with men as equals but without destroying their gallery. One thing should be clear that rights and responsibilities of the woman are equal to that of men but they are not necessarily identical with them. Equality and sameness are two quite different things. This difference is understandable because man and woman are not identical but they are created equal. Equality is desirable just fair, but uniformity is not. With this distinction in mind there is no room to imagine that woman is inferior. Now a day most horrible challenges for the contemporary modern world is issue of safety of woman. It is hardly any day when we don't come to know the case of sexual assault, eve-teasing, domestic violence's, sexual harassments, what and what not. If however the majority of the cases don't come to be known due to ethical, cultural, social, political even the economic reasons as well. The new research shows that woman has been neglected if however in a new and modern ways. As in India the statistics indicates that from last few years there has been a shift for woman from remunerated and or recognised work to unpaid and largely unrecognised duties. It simply indicates the low and declining status of women in Indian society and reflects a process of relative disempowerment (G. Jatoya, 2014).

Woman are entitled to their individuality and status in the family, society and the nation, denial of these privileges, the denial of basic rights to which every human being is entitled. Human society from the time of immemorial is male dominated so much so that even now freedom of thought, action and belief is refused in many places (Mohammad Alamgeer, 2011). In a bid to accord equal power to woman the constitution of Indian Republic also gives equal status to woman in Indian political, social and economic spheres Article 14. Besides this, many provisions in many other articles(15(1), 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(d), 42, 51(A)(e) of the constitution had

emphasised on the quality and upliftment of backward and marginalised groups in general and woman in particular. This is not the end; the Government of India had taken many initiatives from time to such as, Swashakti (1998) for socio-economic empowerment of women.

Islamic Overview

During pre-Islamic era, a woman was considered a neglected part of society. She was buried alive soon after her birth. She was deprived of the belongings of her parents. Even on her marriage her will was of no interest. She was considered only a burden on her family and society. But with the advent of Islam, new thinking came into being. She was given the right to live. Islam provided her the right of inheritance. Moreover, after her marriage, husband has to pay "Muhr¹" to her. Her will on her marriage was also considered. Thus Islam empowered woman and placed it in its right position. Empowerment may be defined as the process of removing the factors which cause the powerlessness. It is a process whereby woman become able to organise themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent rights to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own sub-ordination. The core of the meaning of woman empowerment lies in the ability of a woman to control her own destiny (M.Haque, et al, 2011). A woman of the so-called 21st century has misinterpreted the term empowerment, status and a reasonable standard of living. There is surely no better empowerment than to be one's own self. To behave like men denies her an independent life of her own. A woman can be a great scholar by keeping her chastity intact. She can run the business without having close proximity with the men folk. History witnesses for the feminism trade in Islam and the best example here befit is of Hazrat Khadija (RA). Empowerment can be taken only in lawful senses. A woman on a Rs.1 costing mouth freshener cannot talk about women empowerment as she herself degrades her value. Is it that awakened woman that has been dreamt by our great Islamic scholars? The answer is a resounding "No".

Islamic doctrine is the product of Quranic guidelines, as understood by Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh), as well as of the interpretations derived from the traditions of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad (SAW) (Hadith), that was agreed upon by majority of Muslim scholars as authentic beyond doubt on the science of Hadith. A woman in Islam is liberated not subjugated. Quran states that both men and women are equal and also states, that "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women."(Quran,

¹A pre-negotiated gift of monetary (for example, gold coins) or symbolic value which is promised to a bride by a groom upon marriage. A marriage gift, which is presented to her by her husband and is included in the nuptial contract, and that such ownership does not transfer to her father or husband. The concept of Mahr in Islam is neither an actual or symbolic price for the woman, as was the case in certain cultures, but rather it is a gift symbolizing love and affection.

4:34)¹. Sharia² provides for complementarianism, differences between women's and men's roles, rights and obligation. However, nowhere in the Hadiths and Quran is mentioned that women should be housewives. While praising the woman, a poet has beautifully admired that "Woman was created out of the ribs of man to be protected, near the heart to be loved, neither below the feet to be trampled upon nor above the head to be arrogant. Social autonomy means giving chance of participation in almost every sphere but not in the one where she becomes victim of others. She should be her first safeguard and not destroyer. She should be far away from such things which invite foreign bodies. She should be confined to what is meant for her. She should never cross the boundaries. Water once reached up to the brim spills over if again filled. In Islam the status of a woman is so high that even Jannah lies beneath her feet.

It is not the tone of Islam that brands woman as the product of devil or the seeds of evil. Nor does the Quran place men as the dominant lord of woman who has no choice but to surrender to his dominance, is however a big nuance and misconception not among the non-Muslim masses but also among the Muslim masses as well. A woman is recognised by Islam as a full and equal partner of men in the procreation of human kind, he is father; she is mother and both are essential for life. Her role is not less than his. By his partnership she has an equal share in every aspect, she is entitled to equal rights, she undertakes equal responsibilities and in her as many qualities and as much as humanity as there are in her partner. To this equal partnership in Islam the Almighty mentioned in the Holy Quran; "*O mankind, We have created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you know each other*" (Quran, 4:1). As a scholar who pondered about this verse states: "it is believed that there is no text, old or new that deals with humanity of omen from all aspects with such amazing brevity, eloquence, depth, ad originality as the divine decree" (El-Kouly, 1969).

Islam has upgraded and engulfed the feminine world not only in one dimension but it has wide domain ranging from spiritual, social, economic as well as in political arenas of the life. The dynamic and divine revelation nevertheless echoed in the wide desert of Arabia with a fresh, noble and universal message to humanity but has relevance and affirmation in the present contemporary so called developed world as well.

The Spiritual Aspect

¹The 4 indicates the chapter number and the 34 verse number of the Holy Quran and further wherever it is written indicates the same order.

²Shari'a represents the body of rules derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah (primary sources) and the Ijma, the Qiyas, and other supplementary sources. Shari'a is binding on Muslims

The Quran provides clear cut evidence that woman is completely equated with man in the sight of God in terms of her rights and responsibilities. The almighty says in the Quran: *“Every soul will be (held) in pledges for its deeds” (Quran 74:38)*. It is also mentioned that: *“Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will We give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the their actions. (Qur’an16:97 see also 4:124)*. It is clearly evident that there is no disparity on the basis of gender in the Almighty’s Kingdom. In terms of religious obligations, such as the Daily Prayers, Fasting, Poor-due, and Pilgrimage, woman is no different from man. However woman enjoys certain privileges of which man is deprived. She is exempted from some religious duties i.e. prayers, fasting in her regular periods and times of confinement. For example, the woman is exempted from the daily prayers and from fasting during her menstrual periods and forty days after child birth. She is also exempted from fasting during her pregnancy and when she is nursing her baby if there is any threat to her health or baby’s. As the missed fast is obligatory (during the month of Ramdan), she can make-up for the missed days whenever she can. She does not have to make-up for the prayers for any above reasons.

The Social Aspect

Now-a-days, the birth of female young one or even having confirmation of conceiving the female sex makes the darkness on the face of the parents as the girl child is considered a burden both for the parents as well as for the society. This is not only observed in the so called modern societies but was also present in the earlier civilisation like in the Arab before the emergence of Islam. At that time the girls were buried alive, but the modern societies have gone one more step ahead as they don’t allow them come in the world. This is one of the major reasons that the child sex ratio is continuously declining as is evident from the census data 2011 in India.

The Quran forbade this custom and considers it as a crime like any other murder: *“And when the female (infant) buried alive - is questioned, for what crime she was killed.” (Qur’an 81:8-9)*. Not only this, Islam criticizes the attitude of such parents who reject the female child, the Quran states: *“When news is brought to one of them, of (the Birth of) a female (child), his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on (sufferance) and contempt, or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on? (Qur’an 16: 58-59)*.

Far from saving the girl’s life so that she may latter suffer injustice and inequality, Islam requires kind and just treatment for her. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) in her regard says: *“Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise. (Ibn*

Hanbal, No. 1957). Whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the Day of Judgment as this (and he pointed with his two fingers held together).

Another myth among the modern societies is that Islam does not provide the opportunity to have life partner on its own choice. But, the Qur'an clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the two halves of the society, and that its objectives, beside perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Its bases are love and mercy. Almighty mentions in the Quran: *"And among His signs is this: That He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest, peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Herein indeed are signs for people who reflect."* (Qur'an 30:21). Islamic law does not make any kind of compulsion for woman to marry anyone without her consent. Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad (P.), and she reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice (between accepting the marriage or invalidating it). (Ibn Hanbal No. 24690).

Besides all other provisions for her protection at the time of marriage, it was specially decreed that woman has full right her Mahr. The rules for married life in Islam are clear and in harmony with upright human nature. In consideration of the physiological and psychological make-up of man and woman, both have equal rights and claims on one another.

Furthermore the Quran states: *"And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them."* (Qur'an 2:228). However note that such a degree is Quiwama (maintenance and protection). This refers to the natural difference between the sexes which entitles the weaker sex to protection. It is not the end, but among the parent's Islam has made it clear the priority for the mother than father. A man came to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) asking: O Messenger of God, who among the people is the most worthy of my good company? The Prophet (P) said, your mother. The man said then who else: The Prophet (P) said, your mother. Again the man asked for the same and Prophet (SAW) replied the same answer. It depicts that a mother has been given thrice importance as to a father. The man then asked for the fourth time, Then who else? Only then did the Prophet (P) says, Your father. (Al-Bukhari and Muslim). A famous saying of The Prophet is "Paradise is at the feet of mothers." (In Al'Nisa', Ibn Majah, Ahmad).

Economic Aspect

Woman worldwide face side discrimination in education, health care, employment and control of assets. Statistics shows that women represent 70% world poor. But according to Islam, God created for mankind the earth to secure his or her share of

world's wealth and sustenance. Woman in Islam have certain rights supported by the Qur'an to protect them financially, emotionally, and physically. However, these rights are not only dependent on different interpretations of scripture but also on women's social and legal protection.

Islam decreed a right of which woman was deprived both before Islam and after it (even as late as this century), the right of independent ownership. According to Islamic Law, woman's right to her money, real estate, or other properties is fully acknowledged. This right undergoes no change whether she is single or married. She retains her full rights to buy, sell, mortgage or lease any or all her properties. It is nowhere suggested in the Law that a woman is a minor simply because she is a female. It is also noteworthy that such right applies to her properties before marriage as well as to whatever she acquires thereafter. The Muslim woman is an independent legal entity that retains her own name and financial independence before and after marriage. Unlike men, in marriage women are entitled to retain all and any of their wealth and earnings for themselves without having to consult their spouse. "The logic of these differences in obligations may lie in fact that the Qur'an is simply providing women with added security in a difficult patriarchal world. But in today's legal language, the Qur'an engages in affirmative action with respect to women" (Al-Hibri, 2000-2001)

However, there is no decree in Islam which forbids woman from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fits her nature. Examples of these professions are nursing, teaching (especially for children), and medicine. Moreover, there is no restriction on benefiting from woman's exceptional talent in any field. Even for the position of a judge, where there may be a tendency to doubt the woman's fitness for the post due to her more emotional nature, we find early Muslim scholars such as Abu- Hanifa and Al-Tabary holding there is nothing wrong with it. In addition, Islam restored to woman the right of inheritance, after she herself was an object of inheritance in some cultures. Her share is completely hers and no one can make any claim on it, including her father and her husband. The Almighty clearly mentions in the Holy Quran: "*Unto men (of the family) belongs a share of that which Parents and near kindred leave, and unto women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be a little or much - a determinate share.*" (Qur'an 4:7).

Woman, on the other hand, is far more secure financially and is far less burdened with any claims on her possessions. Her possessions before marriage do not transfer to her husband and she even keeps her maiden name. She has no obligation to spend on her family out of such properties or out of her income after marriage. She is entitled to "Mahr" as it is mentioned in the Quran: "*And give women their dower*

freely and if they are good, enough to remit any of it of their own free will, then enjoy it with a good conscience”(Quran, 4:3) There is also a mention that the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) settled 500 dhirams on each of his wives with the exception of OmmBabeebah (from Abyssinia) on whom he settled 4000 dhirams((Agnes, 1996). An examination of the inheritance law within the overall framework of the Islamic Law reveals not only justice but also an abundance of compassion for woman (for a detailed discussion on it see Abd al-Ati, Hammudah, Islam in Focus, pp. 117-118 and Al-Sibaa'i, Mustafa, Al-Marah BaynalFiqhWalQanoon (in Arabic) pp. 31-37.)

Political Aspect

Islam has considered woman’s equality with man in what we call today “political rights”, she has the right to participate in public affairs of her country at the local and international levels. Therefore, she has the right of election and accession to political and administrative offices. There is nothing wrong with all these as long as Islamic doctrines and teachings would be highly guided by. It is mentioned in the Quran: History has recorded that during the Caliphate of Omar Ibn al-Khattab, a woman argued with him in the mosque, proved her point, and caused him to declare in the presence of people: “A woman is right and Omar is wrong. Even in modern times, and in the most developed countries, it is rare to find a woman in the position of a head of state acting as more than figurehead, a woman commander of the armed services, or even proportionate number of women representatives in parliaments, or similar bodies. One cannot possibly ascribe this to backwardness of various nations or to any constitutional limitation on woman's right to be in such position as a head of state or as a member of the parliament. It is more logical to explain the present situation in terms of the natural and indisputable differences between man and woman, a difference which does not imply any "supremacy" of one over the other. The difference implies rather the "complementary" roles of both the sexes in life.

Conclusion

Can a religion that considers morality to be a part of faith clearly define the equality of men and women and their rights and responsibilities? The answer is a resounding “yes”. The general picture that is displayed by the media is biased .The impression that some Muslims give to the world is often not a true reflection of the religion. Islam ,the religion for all people in all places and times which takes the equality of men and women very seriously .It sees the liberation of women as essential and considers modesty, good character and manners to be the way to achieve such liberation. Over 1400 years ago, Islam raised the status of women from position of oppression to one of liberation and equality. In western countries where liberation encompasses unlimited freedom, many women are actually finding themselves living

lives that are unsatisfying and meaningless. The natural inclination of women is to please, comfort and support their men: husbands, fathers, brothers or sons. The natural inclination of men is to protect, provide and support for the women lawfully in their lives: wives, mothers, sisters and daughters. A Muslim woman knows her place in society and in the family infrastructure. Her religion is her first priority (S. Aisha, 2008)

Liberation undoubtedly means freedom but not the freedom to do as one pleases. Freedom must never be at the expense of oneself for of the wider community. When a woman fulfils the role for which she was meant, not only she is liberated but is empowered. Oppression grows in a society that is crumbling because its members have lost sight of the true purpose of their existence. Liberation arises and takes roots in a society that is just, cohesive and based on natural order and divine guidelines. Islam is such a society and this is what makes a Muslim woman liberated.

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