

Status of Women in Islam

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There is a lot of talk about women's rights in Pakistan and other Muslim countries these days. The western media is projecting a very gruesome and poor plight of the women in Muslim countries with the intention of distorting the section image of Islam. Unfortunately, this propaganda is proving quite effective and the entire west and a small section of females in our society have misinterpreted Islam as being the cause of their troubles instead of the Aryan culture that we have inherited.

Family, society and ultimately the whole mankind are treated by Islam on an ethical basis. Differentiation in gender is neither a credit nor a drawback to anyone. Therefore, when we talk about status of woman in Islam we should not think that Islam has no specific guidelines, limitations, responsibilities and obligations for men. What makes one valuable and respectable in the eyes of Allah, the Creator of mankind and the universe, is neither one's prosperity, position, intelligence, physical strength nor beauty, but only one Allah-consciousness and awareness (taqwa).

Islam was revealed at a time when people denied the humanity of the woman; some were skeptical about it; and still others admitted it, yet considered the woman a thing created for the humble service of the man.

With the advent of Islam, circumstances improved for the woman. The woman's dignity and humanity were acknowledged for the first time. Islam confirmed woman's capacity to carry out Allah's commands, her responsibilities and observation of the commands that lead to heaven.

Islam considers woman as a worthy human being, with an equal share in humanity to that of the man. Both are two branches of a single tree and two children from the same father, Adam, and mother, Eve. Their single origin, their general human traits, their responsibility for the observation of religious duties with the consequent reward or punishment, and the unity of their destiny all bear witness to their equality from the Islamic point of view.

The status of women in Islam is something unique that has no parallel in any other religion. In the midst of the darkness that engulfed the world, the divine revelation echoed in the wide desert of Arabia with a fresh, noble, and universal message to humanity:

"O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate (of same kind) and from them twain has spread a multitude of men and women".(An-Nisa: 1)

A scholar who pondered about this verse states:

"It is believed that there is no text, old or new, that deals with the humanity of the woman from all aspects with such amazing brevity, eloquence, depth, and originality as this divine

decree."

Stressing this noble and natural conception, then the Quran states:

"He (God) it is who did create you from a single soul and there from did create his mate, that he might dwell with her (in love)".(Quran 7:189)

In the early days of Islam when a girl was born, she was buried alive. This custom is still observed in Hinduism. However, the Holy Quran forbade this custom and considered it a crime like any other murder. The Quran says: -

"And when the female (infant) buried alive - is questioned, for what crime she was killed."(Quran 81: 8-9)

Far from saving the girl's life so that she may later suffer injustice and inequality, Islam requires kind and just treatment to her. The sayings of Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW), in this regard, are following:

"Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise".

The Holy Quran provides us a clear-cut proof that woman is equal in all respects with man before God in terms of her rights and responsibilities. The Holy Quran states:

"Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds"
(Quran 74:38)

In terms of religious obligations, such as offering daily prayers, fasting and pilgrimage, woman is no different from man. In some cases indeed, woman has certain advantages over man. For example women can and did go into the mosque during the days of the Holy Prophet (SAW) and thereafter attend the Friday prayers is optional for them while it is mandatory for men.

This is clearly a tender touch of the Islamic teachings because of the fact that a woman may be nursing her baby and thus may be unable to offer prayers in mosque. They also take into account the physiological and psychological changes associated with her natural female functions.

The right of females to seek knowledge is not different from that of males. When Islam enjoins the seeking of knowledge upon Muslims, it makes no distinction between man and woman. Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said:

"Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim".

This declaration was very clear and was implemented by Muslims throughout history.

According to a hadith attributed to Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), he praised the women of Medina because of their desire for religious knowledge.

"How splendid were the women of the Ansar; shame did not prevent them from becoming learned in the faith."

Under Islamic law, marriage was no longer viewed as a "status" but rather as a "contract", in which the woman's consent was imperative. The dowry, previously regarded as a bride-price paid to the father, became a nuptial gift retained by the wife as part of her personal property.

The Holy Quran clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the two halves of the society and that its objectives, besides perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Its bases are love and mercy.

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 each other, except for one responsibility, that of leadership. This is a matter which is natural in any collective life and which is consistent with the nature of man. The Holy Quran thus states:

"And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them."(Quran 2:228)

Such degree is Quiwama (maintenance and protection). This refers to that natural difference between the genders which entitles the weaker gender to protection. It implies no superiority or advantage before law. Yet, man's role of leadership in relation to his family does not mean the husband's dictatorship over his wife. Islam emphasizes the importance of taking counsel and mutual agreement in family decisions. The Holy Quran gives us an example:

"...If they (husband wife) desire to wean the child by mutual consent and (after) consultation, there is no blame on them..."(Quran 2:233)

Islam also gives the option of divorce to the women and educated men to make a gracious end to the relationship if it cannot be continued. The Holy Quran states about such cases:

"And when you have divorced women and they have fulfilled the term of their prescribed period, either take them back on reasonable basis or set them free on reasonable basis. But do not take them back to hurt them, and whoever does that, then he wa wronged himself."(Quran 2: 231)

Woman is entitled to freedom of expression equal to man. Her sound opinions are taken into consideration and cannot be disregarded just because she belongs to the female sex. It is mentioned in the Holy Quran and history that woman can not only expressed her opinion freely but also argued and participated in serious discussions with the Holy Prophet (SAW) himself as well as with other Muslim leaders.

Apart from recognition of woman as an independent human being acknowledged as equally essential for the survival of humanity, Islam has given her a share in inheritance. Before Islam, she was not only deprived of that share but was considered as inherited property to man.

Out of the transferable property, Islam has made her an heir, acknowledging the inherent human qualities in woman. Whether she is a wife, mother, a sister or daughter, she receives

a certain share from the deceased kin's property, a share which depends on her degree of relationship to the deceased and the number of heirs. This share is hers, and no one can take it away or disinherit her.

Woman enjoys certain privileges which man do not have. She is exempted from all financial liabilities. As a mother, she enjoys more recognition and higher honour in the eyes of God. The Holy Prophet (SAW) acknowledged this honour when he declared that Paradise lies under the feet of mothers.

She is entitled to three-fourths of the son's love and kindness with one-fourth left for their father. As a wife she is entitled to demand of her prospective husband a suitable dowry that will be hers. She is entitled to complete provision and total maintenance by the husband. She does not have to work or share with her husband the family expenses. She is free to retain, after marriage, whatever she possessed before it, and the husband has no right whatsoever to any of her belongings.

As a daughter or sister she is entitled to security and provision by the father and brother respectively. That is her privilege. If she wishes to work or be self-supporting and share family responsibilities, she is quite free to do so, provided her integrity and honour are safeguarded.

By now it is clear that the status of woman in Islam is unprecedentedly high and realistically suitable to her nature. Her rights and duties are equal to those of man but not necessarily or absolutely identical with them. If she is deprived of one thing in some aspect, she is fully compensated for it with more things in many other aspects.

The fact that she belongs to the female sex has no bearing on her status or personality, and it is no basis for justification of prejudice or injustice against her.

It is also worthwhile to state that the status which women reached today in the west was not achieved due to the kindness of men or natural progress. It was rather achieved through her long struggle and sacrifices and only when society needed her contribution and work, more especially during the Two World Wars and due to the escalation of technological change.

In the case of Islam such compassionate and dignified status was decreed, neither because it reflects the environment of the seventh century, nor under the threat or pressure of women and their organisations, but rather its intrinsic truthfulness of Islam.