

Gender Equality and Islam

Ishfaq Hussain Bhat

Former Student,
Department of English,
University of Kashmir.

Abstract:

One of the most critical topics of the era that needs to be addressed in an impartial manner is the concept of Gender equality in Islam. Throughout ages, Islam has been presented as a religion that does not only suppress women but also makes their life miserable. The portrayal of Islamic teachings in different forms of literature and presentation is partial, partisan, biased and pathetic. The reality has been distorted to such an extent that the terms Islam itself has developed connotations of terror, oppression, suppression, subjugation marginality and the like. The representation of the relationship between men and women in Islam has greatly been distorted since the prehistoric times. However, when we study Islam without prejudice, especially the authentic sources i. e. The Quran and Sahih Hadith, we come to know and thereby appreciate the blessings and a respectful position that women holds in Islam. Islam provides for an ample space for the development of personality of both the sexes though, at the same time, it recognizes the physical, psychological, biological differences between them. Islam upholds the empowerment and upliftment of women and propounds that women be given due honour and respect as an equally rational being. The teachings of Islam demonstrate the divine origin of the Quran and the truthfulness of the message of Islam, which established such human principles which have neither become obsolete with the passage of time, nor can become obsolete in the future. The paper aims to establish that Islam, despite being presented in the most prejudiced, biased, and distorted manner throughout ages, does not only provide for a peripheral but, on the contrary, a central position of women in the Islamic society. Islam does not suppress and subjugate women. It empowers them and makes them embodiments of honour and dignity.

Keywords: Gender, rights, oppression, status.

Women and their status in the society is an issue that has been of great importance, and has greatly been discussed throughout history. It is a fact that, although women were occasionally given a modicum of respect, they were often oppressed, subjugated, suppressed and abused. They were often deprived of their basic rights – civil, political, social, economic, legal and natural. In most of the cultures, women were not considered human beings - they were denied humanity. They were largely marginalized, suppressed and treated as mere objects of pity, pleasure and desire. Almost in all ancient civilizations women were denied humanity and were equated with children, animals and, in some cases, to other inanimate insignificant objects. They were denied the right to a social life and the right to express their opinion and the right to have a self-identity and self- worth. Their condition was so pathetic that instead of being given the right of inheritance, they themselves were inherited and thus made mere objects of sexual desire and pleasure. Even marrying someone was not enough to end or lighten their misery - they were just transferred from one patriarch/master to the other. Right from the very outset, women were deprived of decision-making powers and of other civil, financial and basic rights. On the contrary, the teachings of Islam demonstrate the divine origin of the Quran and the truthfulness of the message of Islam, which established such human principles

which have neither become obsolete with the passage of time, nor can become obsolete in the future. After all, this is the message of the All-Wise and All-Knowing God whose wisdom and knowledge are far beyond the ultimate in human thought and progress. He further argues that the Quran has not given men a dominant status over women, nor was it Islam that introduced the question of whether or not woman has any soul in her. Never in the history of Islam has any Muslim doubted the human status of women, or her possession of soul and fine spiritual qualities. Abdalati posits that Quran does not have pejorative description, or stereotype for woman and that in Islam woman is not the product of the devil, or the seed of evil. Unlike other popular beliefs, Islam does not blame Eve alone for the first sin for the Original Sin. The Quran makes it very clear that both Adam and Eve were tempted, that they both sinned; that God's pardon was granted to both after their repentance, and that God addresses them jointly." (Quran 2:35-36, 7:19, 27:20.) (Abdalati, 184-185). Unlike other religions, Islam does not consider women as a source of disgrace, the cause of trouble and strife and the origin of the worldly existence.

DISCUSSION:

In order to fully understand and appreciate the position of Islam as regards to the status of women and to reach a conclusion, let us discuss the position of women vis-à-vis men in different spheres of life separately. Let us analyze the status of women vis-à-vis men by taking into consideration the spiritual, legal, educational, political, economic rights of the daughter, mother, sister and wife in Islam:

SPIRITUAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

Now we shall discuss the rights that Islam has bestowed upon its followers irrespective of whether it is a man or a woman. In Islam men and women are considered equal. Both men and women are given due respect and almost all the rights that are conferred on men are also given to women. There is a very common misconception among the non-Muslims, especially among the westerners, that in Islam, Paradise is only meant for the man. This misconception can easily be clarified by quoting just one verse from the glorious Quran: "And whosoever does righteous good deeds, male or female, and is a true believer [in the Oneness of Allah (Muslim)], shall will enter *Jannah* and not the least injustice, even to the size of *Naqira* (speck on the back of a date stone), such will not be done to them."¹

The same message is repeated many times in the Holy Quran: "Whoever works righteous, whether male or female – while he (or she) is a true believer (of Islamic Monotheism) verily, to him We will give a good life (in this world with respect, contentment and lawful provision), and We shall pay them certainly and reward in proportion to the best of what they used to do (i.e. Paradise in the Hereafter)."²

The Quran propounds that men and women are equal at many places in the Quran: "And indeed We have honoured the Children of Adam, and We have carried them on land and sea, and have provided them with At-Tayibat (lawful good things), and have preferred them above many of those whom We have created with a marked preferment."³ Thus, Allah says that We have honoured the children of Adam i.e. both men and women irrespective of their sexual differences. Moreover, there are certain non-Islamic religions which put the blame for the Fall of Adam and Eve only on Eve for tempting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit because of which humankind is born in Sin. In Surah Al-A'raf from verse no 19-27, Adam and Eve are addressed many times and, unlike other religions, both are blamed for eating from the Forbidden Tree. The Quran says that both of them made a mistake, both of them repented and both

were forgiven. In Islam, therefore, the blame is put equally on both of them. There is not a single verse in the Quran which puts the blame exclusively on Eve alone. There is verse in the Quran which reads that both Adam and Eve disobeyed God but there is not a single exclusively saying that Eve alone was responsible for it: "Then they both ate of the tree..."⁴ *Taqwa* is the only criteria that Almighty God has created that makes a person superior to the other and it is the only criteria for Almighty God to differentiate one human being from the other. Thus, human beings are not differentiated/distinguished in Islam on the basis of sex, caste, colour, age, but only on the basis of *taqwa* (God consciousness, piety, righteousness).

LEGAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

In Islam men and women are legally equal. If they commit the same crime, they get the same punishment. For instance, if a man kills a woman, the man is put to death and if a woman kills a man, she is put to death. As far as the legal punishment for a crime is concerned, both men and women are given the same punishment. The Quran says in Surah Al-Baqarah: "O you who believe! Al-Qisas (the Law of Equality in punishment) is prescribed for you in case of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, and the female for the female..."⁵ Furthermore, if any organ of the body is damaged, irrespective of whether it is a male or a female, the punishment is the same. And suppose a person murders someone and the family members want to forgive him, it does not matter who is forgiving, it could be a male or a female. In case of forgiving someone, both men and women have the same rights – both can forgive. This implies that, women's opinion is not only acknowledged but also accepted in Islam. Even here, they are equal. This throws a remarkable light on the teachings of Islam that bestows equality and equal rights on men and women. In Islam, both men and women are given same punishment for the same crime. Even here we have equality between men and women which implies that legally they are equal. Establishing the legal equality of men and women, the Holy Quran says in Surah Al-Maidah: "Cut off (from the wrist joint) the (right) hand of the thief, male or female, as a recompense for that which they committed, a punishment by way of example from Allah. And Allah is All-Powerful, All-Wise."⁶ Thus the Quran makes it very clear that legally men and women are equal and that if somebody steals something he or is to be punished and the punishment has to be the same for both men and women. Allah forbids fornication in the Quran. And, in case a person indulges in that, irrespective of the gender, he or she is to be given the same punishment. Allah says in Surah An-Nur: "The fornicatress and the fornicator, flog each of them with a hundred stripes. Let no pity withhold you in their case, in a punishment prescribed by Allah..."⁷ So, as for the fornicator is concerned, whether it is a man or a woman, Islam says that you have to give him or her 100 lashes as a punishment (in case they are unmarried) which symbolizes or implies that men and women are legally equal in Islam.

EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

Women are not only given spiritual, political, legal rights in Islam, but they are also given the educational rights. The first guidance revealed by the Creator of the universe in the Quran was not about offering Salah, to give charity or to fast but it was about reading. The first word that was revealed in the Quran was "Iqra" which means "to read, to proclaim, to repeat". The first five verses revealed of the glorious Quran were from Surah Al-Alaq. Even these Ayahs are not only address to men but also to women. Acknowledging the great merit of learning/education, Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him) said: "Talabul Ilmi fareezatun Alaa Kulli Muslimin."⁸ It means that it is obligatory on every Muslim, man or woman, to acquire knowledge. The Prophet (may peace be upon him) specifically told the parents to educate the children especially the daughters. It is the duty of a husband to give

education to the wife especially religious education and if he does not give her the education, she has the right to go to the court and demand for it. If he cannot teach her himself, he will have to see to it that she gets educated somehow. There is a chapter in Sahih Al-Bukhari where the women approach the Prophet (may peace be upon him) and tell him that “You are always surrounded by men why don't you give us a special time in order to educate us” and the Prophet (may peace be upon him) agreed and he specifically dedicated time to teach women. He also sent the *sahaba*, the companions, to specifically educate the women. And when we read the history of Islam, even 1400 years ago, we find that there were many women who were scholars. The best example that comes to mind is of Aisha binti Abi Bakr (may Allah be pleased with her), the beloved wife of the Prophet (may peace be upon him). One of her very famous students by the name of *Arwah* states: "I have not come across a scholar greater than Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) in learning the Quran, in obligatory duties, in lawful and unlawful things, in literature and poetry, in Arabic genealogy. "

POLITICAL RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

In Islam, women hold a very respectable position and status. Women in Islam have been given political rights despite the biological, physiological and psychological differences between men and women. Despite having difference in the biological, physiological, psychological makeup, both men and women enjoy equal rights in Islam. By giving women the right to participate in public affairs and the right of decision-making Islam has done a great favour to them. Allah says in the Quran in Surah At-Tauba: “The believers, men and women, are *Auliya* (helpers, supporters, friends, protectors) of one another, they enjoin (on the people) *Al-Ma'ruf* (i.e. Islamic Monotheism and all that Islam orders one to do), and forbid (people) from *Al-Munkar* (i.e. polytheism and disbelief of all kinds, and all that Islam has forbidden)...”⁹ Similar message has been repeated in Surah Al-Mumtahanah: chapter no 16, verse no 12. In Islam, unlike other religions, women can also take part in law making. Once Hazrat Umar (Razi Allahu Tala anhu), the second caliph of Islam, was discussing with the *Sahaba*, the companions, whether they should put an upper limit for the Mahr i.e. a Marriage gift that the groom has to give his bride when he wants to marry her. “The women,” said Umar (Razi Allahu Tala anhu) “are demanding too much money for marrying.” The *Sahaba* while discussing this issue in the mosque were confronted by a woman who objected, and it must be taken into consideration that in the *Hadith*, even the name of the woman is not mentioned which implies that she was an ordinary woman. She said to the caliph of Muslims that when Allah (subhanahu wa ta'ala) has not put an upper limit to Mahr, how could Umar (Razi Allahu Tala anhu) put an upper limit to it? And the Caliph of the Muslim world instead of abusing the women, as the head of the state would do in this situation, claimed or rather acknowledged that he was wrong and the woman was right. Thus, women in Islam have been given the right to express their opinion and to participate in public affairs. As has already been mentioned, during the caliphate of Umar ibn Al Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him), a woman argued with him in the mosque, proved her point and made him declared in the presence of the people that a woman was right and Umar was wrong. That means she took an objection to the breach of the constitution and she participated in the lawmaking and expressed her opinion and her opinion, despite being a woman speaking to the head of the state and government of the Muslim world at that time, was not only acknowledged but also accepted.

Economic Rights of Women in Islam

The right of the ownership of property of women in Islam is very seminal for the discussion of women's rights in Islam and this is something that Allah has ordained. In Islam women are financially secure and they do not need to work for a living because it is the duty of the men to look after their financial aspects and needs. As has already been

mentioned, before her marriage, it is the duty of her father, brother and other relatives to look after her financial needs and once she is married it is the duty of her husband and her son to look after her lodging, boarding, clothing and her other financial needs. There is a misconception in many people that women are not allowed to work outside the four walls of the house; but Islam does give women the freedom to work outside the four walls of the house as long as it is within the purview of the Islamic *Sharia*. In Islam, if a woman works and whatever she earns it is only hers and she does not need to spend it on the family. She can keep it for herself that is her right; while as, if a man earns it is a duty and a right of his, to spend it on his family: on his mother, on his wife, on his sisters, on his daughters, et cetera. But if a woman wants to take part and help in the financial aspects, she can do so but no one can force her to spend her money that she has earned on the family or on anything else. Islam has greatly uplifted women because prior to Islam, women were themselves considered an object of inheritance in most of the cultures. Islam has protected her right of inheritance to such an extent that her share is completely hers and no one can make any claim on it including her father, her brother or her husband. Allah says in the Quran: "To men of the family belongs a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, and to women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be a little or much - a determinate (legal) share." ¹⁰ However, since in most cases her share is one half the man's share, it does not imply that she is worth half a man. It would seem grossly inconsistent after the overwhelming evidence of women's equitable treatment in Islam, which was discussed in the preceding pages, to make such an inference, this variation in inheritance rights is only consistent with the variation in financial responsibility of men and women. According to Islamic law, the man is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, his children, and in some cases of his needy relatives especially the females. Women, on the other hand, are far more secure financially and are far less burdened with any claims on their possessions. The possessions that she has 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. Moreover, there are many *Hadith* which establish economic rights of women in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam) said: "Fear Allah and treat your wives kindly. They have been entrusted to you by Allah and have been made lawful to you by the word of Allah, and it is your duty to maintain and clothe them in a reasonable manner." ¹¹ When the father of Hakeem bin Mu'aawiya Al-Qasheeri asked the Prophet, as to what is the right of a wife upon her husband? He said: "Feed her as and when you feed yourself; clothe her as and when you clothe yourself. Do not strike her on the face, do not abuse her and do not separate yourself from her except inside the house." ¹²

RIGHTS OF DAUGHTER IN ISLAM

During the Jahiliyya period, the period of ignorance, many atrocities were done to the women, especially to the female child. The female child in Arabia was buried alive. The Quran prohibits the female foeticide and female infanticide. In the Holy Quran in Surah At-Takwir Allah says: "And when the female (infant) buried alive (as the pagan Arabs used to do) is questioned: For what sin she was killed?" ¹³ The Quran does not only prohibit female infanticide and their killing but it also prohibits the Killing of all infants, all children whether male or female. Some of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam) which establish and equality between the male and female child are the following: "Whosoever has a daughter and he does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise." ¹⁴ According to the teachings of Islam, one cannot force a girl to marry anyone without her consent. Ibn Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God and reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Prophet (may peace be upon him) gave her the choice of either accepting the marriage or invalidating it. ¹⁵

RIGHTS OF THE MOTHER IN ISLAM

Islam upholds kind treatment of the parents. It, in a way, considers kindness to parents next to the worship of Allah. Allah says in the Quran: "And we have enjoined upon man (to be good) to his parents; his mother bears him in weakness upon weakness."¹⁶ The Quran also states: "Your lord has decreed that you worship none except him, and that you be kind to your parents."¹⁷ The *Hadith* that throws an immense light on the kind treatment of parents especially the mother in Islam is the following: A Man came to the Prophet (may peace be upon him) and said: "O Messenger of God! Who among the people is the most worthy of my good company? The Prophet (may peace be upon him) said: "Your mother." The man asked: "Then who else? The Prophet (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam) said: "Your mother." He then asked: "Then who else?" The Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu alaihi wasallam) said: "Your mother." And the man again asked: "Then who else?" The Prophet (may peace be upon him) said: "Your father."¹⁸

VEIL (PURDAH)

A very renowned scholar, Abdalati states: "The veil which she must put on is one that can save her soul from weakness, her mind from indulgence, her eyes from lustful looks, and her personality from demoralization. Islam is most concerned with the integrity of woman, with the safeguarding of her morals and with the protection of her character and personality."¹⁹

Conclusion:

To conclude many things need to be brought up together. In Islam men and women are equal but equality does not mean identity or identicalness. Depending upon the makeup, depending upon the background, men and women are psychologically, biologically, physiological, physically different; and depending upon the makeup of men and women, Almighty God, the Creator, has set different roles for them that are consistent with their biological, physiological and psychological make-up. However, women enjoy a very seminal position vis-à-vis men in the Islamic society. Their rights are protected to such an extent that at times they surpass men in so far as the dignity and honour is concerned. Islam provides for a secure position of women. It does not only propound the upliftment and empowerment of women, but also ensures a central and dignified position of women in society.

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