

Gender in Islam in light of Quran and Hadith and comparison with other religions

Md Faisal Hussain

Assistant Professor, Janki Devi Memorial College, Delhi University (INDIA)

I. INTRODUCTION

“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... "He (God) it is who did create you from a single soul and therefrom did create his mate, that he might dwell with her (in love)...” ". Chapter (4) sūrat l-nisāa (The Women)

I begin my paper with these verses of Holy Quran from sūrat l-nisāa (The Women) where **Almighty Allah** has equated females at par with their male counterparts.

My paper presentation will emphasise on representation of women in Islam in the light of Quran and Hadith and how the females have been portrayed in different religion.

Islam is the most misunderstood and misrepresented religion in the world especially with regard to the concept of Jihad & Gender. In my paper I have tried to clear some of the common misconceptions pertaining to female representation in the Holy book Quran and the erroneous inferences that has been drawn by scholars across the globe. The position of Islam on women issues has been presented to the world with the least objectivity. My paper is intended to provide a brief and authentic exposition of what Islam stands for in this regard. The teachings of Islam are based essentially on the Quran (God's revelation) and Hadith (elaboration by Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him). A brief survey of the status of women in the pre-Islamic era gives us an insight on these major questions: How the females have been projected in Islam? What changes have come in the social milieu from the time when Quran was revealed? How would this compare with the "rights" which were finally gained by woman in recent decades?

THE issue of gender equality is important, relevant, and current. In order to truly understand the status women have been given through Islam, one must compare it with other systems of law that exist today and that existed in the past. **The Greek System**, which has been discussed in **Marriage East and West by David And Vera Mace and by Allen, E.A. in History of Civilization** throws light on the female status in various civilization.

It is stated in the **Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911**: **“In India, subjection was a cardinal principle. Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a state of dependence says Manu. The rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is descent traced through males to the exclusion of**

females.” In Hindu scriptures, the description of a good wife is as follows: “a woman whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection, acquires high renown in this world, and, in the next, the same abode with her husband.” (Mace, Marriage East and West).

In Athens, women were not better-off than either the Indian or the Roman women: “Athenian women were always minors, subject to some male – to their father, to their brother, or to some of their male kin.” (Allen, E.A., **History of Civilization**). Her consent in marriage was not generally thought to be necessary and “she was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents, and receive from them her husband and her lord, even though he were stranger to her.” (Previous source)

The Roman system

A Roman wife was described by a historian as: **“a babe, a minor, a ward, a person incapable of doing or acting anything according to her own individual taste, a person continually under the tutelage and guardianship of her husband.” (Allen, E.A., History of Civilization).**

In **The Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911**, we find a summary of the legal status of women in the Roman civilization: **“In Roman Law a woman was even in historic times completely dependent. If married, she and her property passed into the power of her husband ... the wife was the purchased property of her husband, and like a slave acquired only for his benefit. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office ... could not be a witness, surety, tutor, or curator; she could not adopt or be adopted, or make will or contract.”**

In Britain, the right of married women to own property was not recognized until the late 19th Century. **“By a series of acts starting with the Married Women's Property Act in 1870, amended in 1882 and 1887, married women achieved the right to own property and to enter into contracts on a par with spinsters, widows, and divorcees.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968).**

In France, it was not until 1938 that the French Law was amended so as to recognize the eligibility of women to contract. A married woman, however, was still required to secure her husband's permission before she could dispense with her private property.

In the Mosaic (Jewish) Law The wife was betrothed. Explaining this concept, the **Encyclopedia Biblica, 1902**, states: **“To betroth a wife to oneself meant simply to acquire**

possession of her by payment of the purchase money; the betrothed is a girl for whom the purchase money has been paid." From the legal point of view, the consent of the girl was not necessary for the validation of her marriage. "The girl's consent is unnecessary and the need for it is nowhere suggested in the Law." (Previous source).

As to the right of divorce, we read in the Encyclopedia Biblica: "The woman being man's property, his right to divorce her follows as a matter of course." The right to divorce was held only by man, The Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911, states: "In the Mosaic Law divorce was a privilege of the husband only..."

The position of the Christian Church until recent centuries seems to have been influenced by both the Mosaic Law and by the streams of thought that were dominant in its contemporary cultures. In their book, **Marriage East and West, David and Vera Mace** wrote: "Let no one suppose, either, that our Christian heritage is free of such slighting judgments. It would be hard to find anywhere a collection of more degrading references to the female sex than the early Church Fathers provide.

Lecky, the famous historian, speaks of 'these fierce incentives which form so conspicuous and so grotesque a portion of the writing of the Fathers ... woman was represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought that she is a woman. She should live in continual penance on account of the curses she has brought upon the world. She should be ashamed of her dress, for it is the memorial of her fall. She should be especially ashamed of her beauty, for it is the most potent instrument of the devil.'

One of the most scathing of these attacks on woman is that of Tertullian: 'Do you know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; you are the first deserters of the divine law; you are she who persuades him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.' Not only did the church affirm the inferior status of woman, it deprived her of legal rights she had previously enjoyed."

In his essay **The Subjection of Women, John Stuart Mill** wrote:

We are continually told that civilization and Christianity have restored to the woman her just rights. Meanwhile the wife is the actual bondservant of her husband; no less so, as far as the legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called.

Quran states:

[He is] Creator of the heavens and the earth. He has made for you from yourselves, mates, and among the cattle, mates; He multiplies you thereby. There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing. Chapter (42) sūrat l-shūrā (Consultation)

The Quran outlines the position of Islam regarding the status of woman in society from its various aspects - spiritually, socially, economically and politically.

In its Spiritual Aspect 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 Quran states:

And their Lord responded to them, "Never will I allow to be lost the work of [any] worker among you, whether male or female; you are of one another. So those who emigrated or were evicted from their homes or were harmed in My cause or fought or were killed - I will surely remove from them their misdeeds, and I will surely admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow as reward from Allah , and Allah has with Him the best reward." Chapter (3) sūrat āl 'im'rān (The Family of Imrān)

In terms of religious obligations, such as the Daily Prayers, Fasting, Poor-due, and Pilgrimage, woman is no different from man. In some cases indeed, woman has certain advantages over man. For example, the woman is exempted from the daily prayers and from fasting during her menstrual periods and forty days after childbirth. 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 her baby's. If the missed fasting is obligatory (during the month of Ramadan), she can make up for the missed days whenever she can. She does not have to make up for the prayers missed for any of the above reasons. Although women can and did go into the mosque during the days of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and thereafter attendance at the Friday congregational prayers is optional for them while it is mandatory for men (on Friday).

This is clearly a tender touch of the Islamic teachings for they are considerate of the fact that a woman may be nursing her baby or caring for him, and thus may be unable to go out to the mosque at the time of the prayers. They also take into account the physiological and psychological changes associated with her natural female functions.

Despite the social acceptance of female infanticide among some Arabian tribes, the Quran forbade this custom, and considered it a crime like any other murder.

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

Criticizing the attitudes of such parents who reject their female children, 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?" [Noble Quran 16:58-59]

If this indicates anything, it would demonstrate the divine origin of the Quran and the truthfulness of the message of Islam, which, unlike human philosophies and ideologies, was far from proceeding from its human environment, a message which established such humane principles as neither grew obsolete during the course of time and after these many centuries, 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.

This clearly demonstrates that Quran not only talks about woman rights but also condemns any kind of violence against women.

AUTHORS

First Author – MD Faisal Hussain, Assistant Professor, Janki Devi Memorial College, Delhi University (INDIA)