

Women and Their Status In Islam

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History is silent as to whether there was any distinction in status between the male and the female sexes during the beginnings of human civilization. In later days no doubt the female sex was regarded as inferior to the male and the idea of inferiority developed to such an extent that the male sex not only claimed a complete superiority over the female sex, but further arrogated to itself the right to utilise and employ the female sex as it liked.

Surveying the history of the world on this point we find that in pre-Christian Europe and Greece, which was the centre of light and learning for a long time and which provided philosophical and scientific inspiration to the Europe of later days, regarded woman as something definitely inferior to man. She was a subservient creature who had come into existence solely for the purpose of breeding citizens for the state and soldiers for the army. Their great dramatist Euripedes puts into the mouth of Medea the remark. "Women are impotent for good, but clever contrivers of all evils," Such degrading conceptions led to a moral degeneration which ultimately ruined the Greek society. The names of virtuous women says Professor Lecky, scarcely appear in Greek history." (*History of European Morals*, Vol:II p. 307).

Conditions in Europe did not improve with the advent of Christianity. "Of the woman came the beginning of sin and the wickedness of man and through her we all die." Consequently, Paul, the Premier Saint of Christendom, proclaimed: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence, for Adam was first formed than Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in transgression." Other early Fathers were even more uncharitable and denounced woman as "the lance of the demon," "the gate of the Devil," "the road of iniquity," "the sting of the scorpion," a daughter of falsehood, the sentinel of hell," "the enemy of peace" and "of the wild beast, the most dangerous." Nay, they went still further. The Orthodox Greek Church denied that woman had a soul and, at the Council of Macon, a Bishop vehemently asserted that a woman did not belong to the human species. (*Westermarck*, p.663)

A council held at Auxierre prohibited women to receive the Eucharist in their naked hands and to come near the altar during the celebration of the Mass on the ground that she was an "unclean thing". "I may define

man," says Principal Donaldson (*Woman*, pp. 181, 182), "to be a male human being and woman to be a female human being . . . Now what the early Christians did was to strike the 'male' out of the definition of man and 'human being' out of the definition of woman. Man was the human being made for the highest and noblest purpose; woman was a female made to serve only. She was on earth to influence the heart of man with every evil passion. She was a fireship continually striving to get alongside the male man-of-war to blow him up into pieces."

In the Asian cradles of civilization woman was no better off. Hinduism, which is the oldest among the present day religions of the world, laid it down: 'In childhood a female must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband, when her husband is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent'. (*Manu, V 140*). "The legislator Manu", says the celebrated Hindu scholar, Sir R. G. Bhandarkar, "is equally hard on women. It must be acknowledged that the estimate of the old Aryan of womanly nature is not flattering to them generally. They are debarred from reading the Vedas; any religious rite in which they alone are concerned is directed to be performed without Vedic Mantras. Even the Bhagavad Gita gives expression to the general belief that it is only a sinful soul that is born as woman, Vaisya or Sudra". (*Collected Works*, p. 46 1). In Buddhism, says the Buddhist scholar, M May Oung, "the idea of wedlock and its attendant worldly life is opposed to the ultimate and -- the annihilation of Desire -- the striving for which must necessarily involve celibacy." (*Buddhist Law*, Par. 1, p. 2). In Buddhist ideology, therefore, according to the historian Westermarck, "Woman are, of all the snares which the temper has spread for men, the most dangerous; in women are embodied all the powers of infatuation which blind the mind of the world."

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the general conception of womanhood was of such a degraded type that her very existence was considered ignominious for the family. Female infanticide was consequently practiced on a wide scale. Those women, however, who escaped early death were allowed to live only on sufferance. For, an Arab woman "had no rights; she could not inherit property; her person formed part of the inheritance which came to the heir of her husband, and he was entitled to marry her against her will. Hence sprung up the impious marriages

of their sons with their stepmothers and others of an even worse character. . ." "Polygamy was universal and quite unrestricted; equally so was divorce at least as far as man was concerned; (Mohammed and Mohammedanism; Bosworth Smith; p 82)

Such was the condition of the female sex in the world when Mohammed (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) the Saviour of womanhood, stood up in Arabia and, through the Divine Revelation of the Lord of the Universe Who created both the male and the female and Who loves them equally, preached to the world that :

- females were just like males
- have equal rights
- have equal honour and
- equal status in life

They were on no account to be treated as the property of the males. They have the right of ownership of property in the same way that males have, though, no doubt under the principle of the division, the female sex has some specialised duties to perform in life, just as the male sex has its own duties.

There are three stages through which womenfolk will pass in life: (a) daughter (b) wife, and (c) mother.

(a) DAUGHTER

Islam denounces in unequivocal terms the pre-Islamic inhumane custom of female infanticide and commands people to love and cherish their daughters even more than their sons.

The Holy Qur'an says that on the Day of Judgment, the female infant who was buried alive will be questioned: "*For what crime wast thou murdered?*" [Qur'an 81:8,9] Thus before the Almighty, the victim herself will be able to give evidence against those who killed an innocent creature of Allah simply for the sake of satisfying their vanity.

Allah again commands humanity: "*Kill not your children for fear of want. We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily, to kill them is a great sin.*" [Qur'an 17:31]

Fatimah was the youngest daughter of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him). In dealing with her, he set an example of fatherly love which is a model for mankind. "*Fatimah,*" he would say, "*is a part of my being; whosoever annoys her annoys me*" (Mishkat-ul-Masabih, XLIV:S)

He also emphasised preferential treatment towards

the female sex and said "*When you bring anything for your children for distribution, begin with the girls first because the girls love their parents more than the boys.*"

(b) WIFE

Marriage, in Islamic law is really a contract just like other civil contracts between two parties. As far as the conditions of the contract are concerned, both the parties, the man and the woman, stand upon the same level. Each party has certain rights and duties. Islam commands justice to be observed in every contract, and so in the contract of marriage too justice should be observed. The Holy Quran says: "*The women have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable.*" [Qur'an 2:228]

No doubt, under the principle of the distribution of labour, work should be divided between the pair. The womenfolk have naturally to take care of their offspring until they grow up. They have to engage themselves in bringing them up and so are not in a position to pay attention to securing their means of livelihood. The men, therefore, have been made responsible for maintaining the family, including the wife, and have been given the duty of securing all the requirements of the home. Thus we might say that in a Muslim home, the husband is supposed to work as the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the wife as the Minister of the Interior.

The Holy Prophet is reported to have said : "*A woman is the queen of her house.*" The Holy Quran describes the position of the wife in a beautiful verse, "*He created for you mates from among yourselves that you might find solace in them and he ordained between you love and mercy,*" [Qur'an 30:21]

The Prophet said: "*The most perfect of believers in faith is the best of them in morals and the best of you are those who are kindest to your wives.*" In his famous Address at the Farewell Pilgrimage, the Prophet again laid stress on the good treatment on womenfolk. He said: "*O my people, you have certain rights over your wives and so have your wives over you they are Allah's trust in your hand. See that you treat them with all kindness.*"

Before this Saviour of the female sex preached his Message, there was no limit for the males in respect of the number of their wives. Islam really imposed a limit and allowed plurality of marriage with the idea of abolishing adultery. Polygamy is permitted in place of illegal intercourse in cases where it becomes difficult or rather impossible ill the interest of social health to restrict marriage to strict monogamy. There are two definite occasions in the lives of human beings when polygamy

becomes necessary. For example, if the marriage proves fruitless the husband can, in most cases, be kept on the path of virtue and uprightness only by allowing a second marriage. Again, when there is a surplus of women, as happens after men have died in wars, human society can be saved from corruption and also extinction by the permission of marrying more than one wife.

The Holy Quran restricts the number of wives to four and also orders complete equality and justice between them: *"And if you fear that you will not deal fairly towards the orphans, marry of the women who seem good to you, two or three or four, and if you fear that you cannot do justice between them, then (marry) only one."* [Qur'an 4:3]

The conditions of the marriage contract are to be settled by the parties of the marriage. If, on the one hand according to the Islamic teaching, the husbands are entitled to have the right of divorce, the wives are also entitled to the right of fixing their dowry and maintenance as they like, and they may also take the authority of separating themselves from their husbands when they find it necessary to do so. If agreement at a time of marriage is made with complete consideration, the parties stand practically at the same level and there remains no possibility for the womenfolk to suffer. Islam enjoins justice, equity and straightforwardness. Therefore if those who claim to be Muslims do not observe Islamic principles, then it is their fault and Islam can on no account be accused for that. If today people misuse the permission for polygamy and try to hide their lustful actions under the cloak of Islamic legality, it is their fault and they deserve the most severe punishment at the Court of the All-Knowing Allah who knows what is in their hearts.

(c) MOTHER

As mothers, the status of women has been raised by Islam to such an extent that nothing higher is conceivable.

The Holy Quran says: *"Your Lord has commanded that you shall worship none but Him and goodness to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor rebel them, but address them in terms of honour. And make yourself submissively gentle to them with compassion and say: O my Lord bestow on them compassion even as they cherished me in my childhood."* [Qur'an 17 23-24]

It is reported that when the Prophet was questioned by a disciple as to who after God and his Prophet should be revered most, the Prophet said "Your mother." When

questioned "Who, after the mother?" The Prophet said "Your mother." He was again asked "And, then, who after the mother?" He again replied: "Your mother". The man put the question for the fourth time and the Prophet then answered: "Your father." This tradition shows that the position of the mother in the eyes of her sons and daughters should be three times higher than that of the father.

It is reported that once a disciple came to the Prophet and said "O Prophet Of Allah, on a hot day in the desert of Arabia, in the sunny noon when the stones and sands were burning like fire, my mother and I were travelling by foot without any shoes. I carried my mother on my shoulders so that she may not suffer the pain of walking bare-footed on the hot sands and stones. Could I pay the reward of the pains she had to bear in bringing me up?" The Prophet replied: **"No, not even a fraction of the pain she suffered at the time you were born."**

In Islam the best action of worship is the performance of Pilgrimage to Mecca, i.e., the Hajj, and the reward to a person who performs the Hajj properly is that all his past sins are pardoned and he receives a high rank in the estimation of Allah. But in expressing the dignity of the mother, the Holy Prophet said: **"One who looks at the face of his mother with sentiments of reverence and love once, is rewarded as if he had performed the Pilgrimage." The people asked him, what if he looked twice, to which he replied: "It is as if he had performed two Pilgrimages, and thrice, as if he had performed three Pilgrimages and so on.**

In this respect, the Prophet himself set a model for the world. Once Halimah, the lady who nursed him in his childhood came to see him. The Prophet was sitting with his disciples. As soon as he saw her, he stood up with reverence and spread his mantle on the floor and requested his foster-mother to take her seat there.

It is quite evident from the above that the respect which a mother receives from her children in Islam is the highest to which no other worldly relationship can aspire. The doors of spiritual elevation are open to woman in the same way as they are open to men. They are commanded to educate themselves in the same way as the men, and if they attain a high position in learning, then even the men are expected to learn and benefit from their knowledge and wisdom. It is reported that after the Prophet's death, his disciples used to visit Ayesha, the wife of the Prophet, and seek knowledge from her. Islamic history is resplendent with a long list of the names of the ladies who received the highest honour in society, the highest degree in learning and the highest qualifications in different branches of human activity. It was through the

influence of other societies, which were not Muslim, that the idea of the inferiority of the female sex already existing in those societies spread to the uneducated class among the Muslims, who knew very little about the teachings of Islam. If they had known the teachings of Islam, they would have known that in Islam **the female sex deserves the same position, the same respect and the same dignity as the members of the male sex who, in their turn, are not allowed to degrade and insult them and make them their tools.** To touch them with a bad intent is considered a sin and even to glance at them with a bad motives is counted as adultery in Islam. That is why in the Holy Quran men are commanded :

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them." [Qur'an 24:30]

The ladies too have been commanded in similar terms: *"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and their ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof, that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or those whom their right hands possess, or the male servants not having need (of women), or small children who have not attained knowledge of what is hidden of women; and let them not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden embellishment."* [Qur'an 24:31]

There is an important point in this connection which might be elucidated here with advantage. Every human being is endowed with a mind, and the more the mental faculty is trained, the more willpower is increased. The training of this faculty is done through the exercise of concentration. The student of hypnotism forms an idea and concentrates upon it to such an extent that for a certain moment he forgets other things. Through this training he achieves a strong power which sometimes enables him to make other persons his objects and influence them with an idea in his mind. For instance, he forms an idea that X is having a headache. He makes X object, and within a few minutes, X feels that he has a headache. Similarly, if he wants to attract Y towards himself, Y is attracted because the hypnotist's willpower influences that of Y. This willpower varies in its strength from man to man just as we say, regarding an engine, that it has ten, twenty or a hundred horse power, similarly we say of a hypnotist that he possesses ten, twenty or a hundred men's willpower.

Now it is clear that a human being can influence other human beings through willpower, and can create in his object, ideas which conform to those existing in his own mind. So, when a male casts a lustful glance at a female, his passions will arise, sexual thoughts will come to his mind, and if he possesses any willpower, the same ideas will be automatically produced in the mind of a female. And if hundreds of such masculine eyes fall upon that lady with the same motives and ideas behind them, she is bound to be affected by the poisonous radiations of the sexual thoughts injected into her brain through the influence of the willpower of the males, though she herself may be absolutely pure in heart and blotless in character. In a society which allows promiscuous intermingling of sexes, the atmosphere must necessarily remain charged with what might be called "sexual thought-waves" of which the consequences for womanhood can be nothing else but disastrous.

The importance of a woman in society cannot be over-estimated. She is the mother of humanity. She brings up the child in her womb for nine months, feeds him at her breast for at least two years and is mainly responsible for his training at least up to the age of six or seven.

It is a well known fact of medical science that mentality of the mother affects the mentality of her children just as, or even more than, her physical qualities influence their physical build. Islam, therefore, commands women to keep themselves away from places where there may be the slightest chance of their being influenced by an evil force or evil idea so that their chastity and purity may be preserved and the mentality of their offspring may be safe from corruption. This is why Allah says in the Holy Quran,

"O wives of the Prophet, you are not like any other women; if you fear Allah, be not soft in speech lest he in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire; and speak a speech that is just. And stay quietly in your houses and do not make a dazzling display like that of the former times of ignorance; and establish regular prayer, and give regular charity and obey Allah and His Apostle. Allah only desires to remove all abomination from you, O people of the household, and to purify you a (thorough) purifying." [Qur'an 33:32,33]

"There is no blame on them (the women) (if they appear unveiled) before their fathers, nor their sons, nor their brothers, nor their brothers' sons, nor their sisters' sons, nor their own women, nor of what their right hand's possess. And fear Allah;

surely Allah is a witness of all things," [Qur'an 33:55] "

"O Prophet tell your wives and your daughters and the believing women that they cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad). This will be more proper, that they should be known as such and not molested. And Allah is oft-Forgiving and most-Merciful." [Qur'an 33:59]

Examples of the way in which the above commandments were interpreted by the Prophet can be seen in the Prophet's beloved daughter Fatimah, and his beloved wives, Khadijah and Ayesha. Nowhere do we find any evidence that the Prophet's wives or his daughters were ever seen with an open face and an open head in front of strangers save at the time of performing acts of worship like prayer or pilgrimage. In the requirements of prayer it is laid down that the body of the woman must be entirely covered except her face and hands. There is also an express injunction in the hadith that no woman should put on a veil during the pilgrimage. In the prayer and pilgrimage, men are strictly forbidden from gazing at the faces of the womenfolk and they have been warned to remember that the female servants of Allah are in the presence of their Creator.

Thus with respect to their position in life, their inherent rights as human beings and their relations with Allah men and women are on an equal plane in Islam. This was the teaching of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). And this too is the verdict of the Holy Quran for Allah says,

"Never will I waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female. You are members, one of another." [Qur'an 3:195]