

Women's Rights and Status in Different Religions and Civilizations: A Comparative Study

Dr. Md. Rashid Zahed*

Abstract: The status of women in society is one of the crucial topics and dominant themes in the modern era, which theologians have been studying in terms of different perspectives. The aim of this research is to present a comprehensive study of women's rights and status in different societies (modern and ancient) and religions in the world. In addition, one major objective of this paper is to provide a fair evaluation of what Islam contributed (or failed to contribute) toward the restoration of women's dignity and rights in society in terms of different aspects of life. In order to achieve this objective, it may be useful to review briefly how women were treated in general in previous civilizations and religions, especially those which preceded Islam (Pre-610 C.E.). After the review of all sides of religions and societies, it has been seen that Islam regards men and women as being of the same essence created from a single soul where a woman has a completely independent personality.

Keywords: Woman, Civilizations, Religions, Islam, Society and Women's rights

Introduction

In many societies, a woman is still regarded as a second-class citizen and deprived of various basic rights enjoyed by the male population. Deeply resenting this discrimination, they have championed a fight to obtain for themselves an equal status which unfortunately to date eludes them in the more modern Western states.

* **Dr. Md. Rashid Zahed**, Professor Department of Qur'anic Sciences and Islamic Studies, International Islamic University Chittagong (IIUC), Chittagong, Bangladesh. E-mail: mrzahed1@yahoo.com

In practice, men still have the upper hand. The cause is not social conditioning, as feminists would have us believe. It is wholly biological and psychological. It is the biological factor which we are forced to conclude after 100 years of feminist struggle is the stumbling block in according women an equal position (that is, in the outside world) with men. It is the cruelty of nature rather than the cruelty of society which is to blame. Now that this has been established, the more militant among the feminists have started demanding that, in the womb itself, the science of eugenics should be applied to changing the genetic code in order to create a new biological system which will in turn produce a new breed of women¹. They maintain that, in this way, the male-dominated society could be replaced by one in which the sexes are equal in ability and performance. However, different religions present in their holy books diverse and conflicting views on the position of women. The Church Fathers laid the responsibility of man's fall upon woman, and represented her as being without a soul and an instrument of the devil. On the other hand, in the divine scheme of regulation of the relationship between men and women, Islam has assigned a position of dignity and honor to woman².

Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to present the rules and status of women in different religions and civilizations in a comprehensive way. The paper starts with a brief survey of the status of women in the pre-Islamic era. It then focuses on these major questions: What is the position of Islam regarding the status of women in society? How similar or different is that position from "the spirit of the time," which was dominant when Islam was revealed? How would this compare with the "rights" which were finally gained by women in recent decades?

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 1 introduces the background and motivation. The rights and social status of women in ancient societies (Roman, China, Pre-Islam Arabia) is mentioned in Section 2. In the sight of different religions (Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian) how women were treated and what were their values are illustrated in Section 3. Section 4 discusses the women in Islam in terms of social, political, economic and spiritual aspects. A comprehensive discussion on women in Islam and modern western countries are analyzed in Section 5. Finally, the conclusions are presented in Section 6.

Women in ancient civilization

In almost every inhabited corner of the globe, the societies of ancient times regarded the status of women as being inferior to that of men.

Women in Athenian society

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”³.

“In Athens,” says the Encyclopedia of Britannica, “woman’s status had degenerated to that of slaves. Wives were secluded in their homes, had no education and few rights, and were considered by their husbands no better than chattels”⁴.

Women in Roman society

In ancient Rome, a woman’s legal position was one of complete subordination, first to the power of her father or brother and later to that of her husband, who held paternal power over his wife. In the eyes of the law, women were regarded as imbeciles”⁵.

A Roman wife was described by an 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”⁶.

In the Encyclopedia Britannica, we find a summary of the legal status of women in the Roman civilization:⁷.

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. Among the Scandinavian races women were: under perpetual tutelage, whether married or unmarried. As late as the Code of Christian V, at the end of the 17th Century, it was enacted that if a woman married without the consent of her tutor he might have, if he wished, administration and usufruct of her goods during her life ⁸.

According to the English Common Law:

...all real property which a wife held at the time of a marriage became a possession of her husband. He was entitled to the rent from the land and to any profit which might be made from operating the estate during the joint life of the spouses. As time passed, the English courts

devised means to forbid a husband's transferring real property without the consent of his wife, but he still retained the right to manage it and to receive the money which it produced. As to a wife's personal property, the husband's power was complete. He had the right to spend it as he saw fit ⁹.

Only by the late nineteenth Century did the situation start to improve. "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 contracts on a par with spinsters, widows, and divorcees"¹⁰. As late as the Nineteenth Century an authority in ancient law, Sir Henry Maine, wrote: "No society which preserves any tincture of Christian institutions is likely to restore to married women the personal liberty conferred on them by the Middle Roman Law"¹¹. 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 ¹².

Women in Pre-Islamic Arabian society

There is very scarce information regarding women who lived in Arabian society in the pre-Islamic period. According to the traditional Islamic narrative, women in Pre-Islamic Arabia had almost no rights. They were not considered equal to men and were thus dictated under a strict patrilineal system. They were viewed as objects and were constantly humiliated. Women had very little control over their marriages and could not inherit property. In the family, their purpose was nothing more than bearing children although they did not have any rights to them. When a female baby was born it was considered a disgrace to the family, and female infanticide was a common response.

Before Islam, women experienced limited rights, except those of high status. They were treated like slaves and were incessantly at the mercy of men. They were not considered human and had almost no rights at all. Women were not considered "worthy of prayer" and played no role in the religious aspect of life before Islam¹³. It is said that women were treated as no different from "pet goats or sheep"¹⁴. Women could not make decisions based on their own beliefs, and had little control over their marriages. They were never bound by contract for marriage or custody of children and

their consent was never sought. Women were seldom allowed to divorce their husbands and their views were not regarded for either marriage or divorce¹⁵. If they got divorced, women were not legally allowed to go by their maiden names again¹⁶. They could not own or inherit property or objects even if they were facing poverty or harsh living conditions¹⁷. Women were treated less like people and more like possessions of men. They, however, could be inherited and moved from home to home depending on the wants and needs of their husbands and their families. Essentially, women were slaves to men and could make no decisions on anything, whether it be something that directly impacted them or not. When a woman's husband died, his son from a previous marriage was entitled to his wife if the son wanted her. The woman had no choice in the matter unless she was able to pay him for freedom, which was impossible in most cases¹⁸.

One of the most extraordinary practices that took place was that if a husband died, his son could inherit his wife (his own mother) to be his own wife. If the son of a deceased husband (his deceased father) did not want his wife (own mother), the woman was forced to leave her home and live in a hut for one year. The huts were kept dark with very poor air circulation. After one year, the woman was allowed to come out of the hut, and people were permitted to heave camel excrement at her. People in Mecca would blame her for refusing to sleep with her own son. It was common for a new father to be outraged upon learning that his baby was a female. It was believed that girls ensured a bad omen and men thought that daughters would bring disgrace to the family. Because baby girls were thought to be evil, many of them were sold or buried alive¹⁹.

Women in Chinese society

In china, according to Westermarck, the condition of women has always been inferior to that of men, and no generous sentiment tending to the amelioration of her social position has ever come from the Chinese sages. Her children must pay her respect, but she in turn owes to her husband the subjection of a child; a wife is an infinitely less important personage than a mother in the Chinese social scale. Perhaps this idea of the inferiority of woman to man is mainly responsible for the cruel Chinese custom of squeezing woman's feet in shoes of lead and iron, thereby producing an unnatural deformity in size so that they cannot run away from their homes²⁰.

Foot binding (also known as "lotus feet") was the custom of applying painfully tight binding to the feet of young girls to prevent further growth. The practice possibly

originated among upper-class court dancers during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period in Imperial China (10th or 11th century), then became popular during the Song dynasty and eventually spread to all social classes. Foot binding became popular as a means of displaying status (women from wealthy families, who did not need their feet to work, could afford to have them bound) and was correspondingly adopted as a symbol of beauty in Chinese culture. Its prevalence and practice however varied in different parts of the country.

The reason for the ill-treatment of women in ancient times was the prevalence of superstition. There were, in fact, very few matters upon which irrational beliefs of one sort or another had not been adopted. Such perverted thinking became elevated to the status of religion and, as such, had a pervasively baneful influence upon all human relations²¹.

Women in different religions

Women in Buddhism

Buddhism, which claims, and perhaps rightly, to be highly ethical and idealistic, has not assigned to woman any definite place, nor has it recognized the equality of the sexes. It has done very little towards the exaltation of the position of woman. The life of Gautama Buddha shows that he could not find in woman a helpmate and a comrade. The mere fact that Buddha could not attain *Nirvana* while in the company of his beautiful wife and surrounded by family ties clearly indicates the inferiority of woman as man's better half and partner in life²².

Buddhism teaches asceticism and monasticism. It also lays great stress on celibacy. Buddha succeeded in removing all distinctions of caste which flourished and still flourishes under Brahmanism; but he apparently left the question of the relation of the sexes somewhat severely alone. According to Westermarck, "To the Buddhist, women are of all the snares which the tempter has spread for man the most dangerous; in women are embodied all the powers of infatuation which bind the mind of the world".

Women in Hinduism

Hindu texts present diverse and conflicting views on the position of women, ranging from feminine leadership as the highest goddess to limiting her role to an obedient daughter, housewife and mother. Inequity and degradation of women are sanctified in the Hindu religion. Manu Smriti says²³:

Never trust a woman. Never sit alone with a woman even if it may be your mother, she may tempt you. Do not sit alone with your daughter, she may tempt you. Do not sit alone with your sister, she may tempt you.

Again the same Manu Smriti continues:

“Na stree swadantriya marhathi”. “No liberty for women in society”.

On the other hand, Ancient and medieval era Hindu texts present a diverse picture of duties and rights of women in Hinduism. The texts recognize eight kinds of marriage, ranging from father finding a marriage partner for his daughter and seeking her consent (Brahma marriage), to the bride and groom finding each other without parental participation (Gandharva marriage)²⁴.

Women in Judaism

There is a deep conflict between Judaism and feminism which stretches from the public (in synagogue) to the private. For example, in all Orthodox synagogues men pray separately from women and in many, women are relegated to an upstairs gallery. Gender hierarchies are entrenched in Jewish thought: a blessing orthodox Jewish man is required to say everyday thanks to God “who has not made me a woman”.

Reformed Jewish teaching is clear that men and women are equal: All parts of Jewish life are meant to be accessible to all Jews, men or women. Despite this strongly egalitarian heritage, however, we acknowledge - and are concerned by - the specific challenges women face in areas of public policy and equal rights. Women face attacks on their rights to determine their own health care and are disproportionate victims of violence in the home, while facing adversity in the workplace and endemic pay discrimination²⁵.

Women in Christianity

Christianity did little to improve this situation, having attached great importance to the erroneous belief given in the very first book of the Bible, according to which it had been Eve's wrongdoing which had caused Adam's ejection from the Garden of Eden. Referring to women in general in this context, the Encyclopedia Britannica says: According to Christianity, they were regarded as temptresses, responsible for the fall of Adam, and as second class human beings”²⁶. With such a myth ever-present in the collective consciousness of society, it is little wonder that women were allotted an

inferior position in both religious and secular matters. In the first letter addressed to the Corinthians, St. Paul says: “For the man is not of the woman; but the woman for the man.”²⁷ In this, St. Paul is simply reaffirming what is laid down as gospel truth in the Old Testament Book of Genesis.

Women in Islam

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:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا [(النساء: 1)
وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً]

“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” (Qur’an, 4: 1)²⁸.

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”²⁹. Stressing this noble and natural conception, then Qur’an states:

(الأعراف: 189) [هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ
إِلَيْهَا ...]

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)... (Qur’an 7: 189).

[قَاطِرُ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْاَرْضِ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ اَنْفُسِكُمْ اَزْوَاجًا...] (الشورى: 11)

The Creator of heavens and earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves ... (Qur’an 42: 1 1).

وَاللّٰهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ اَنْفُسِكُمْ اَزْوَاجًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ اَزْوَاجِكُمْ بَنِيْنَ [(النحل: 72)
وَحَفَدَةً وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبٰتِ ؕ اَفِيَاْبٰطِلٍ يُؤْمِنُوْنَ وَبِنِعْمَتِ اللّٰهِ هُمْ يَكْفُرُوْنَ...]

And Allah has given you mates of your own nature, and has given you from your mates, children and grandchildren, and has made provision

of good things for you. Is it then in vanity that they believe and in the grace of God that they disbelieve? (Qur'an 16: 72).

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

The spiritual aspect

The Qur'an provides clear-cut evidence that woman is completely equated with man in the sight of God in terms of her rights and responsibilities. The Qur'an states:

[كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ رَهِينَةٌ... (المدثر: 38)]

“Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds” (Qur'an 74: 38). It also states:

[آل عمران: 195] فَأَسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَا أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَمَلٍ مِّنْكُمْ مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ تَطَّعْتُمْ مِّنْ بَعْضٍ... [

...So their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female. You proceed one from another ... (Qur'an 3: 195).

[مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّاهُ حَيَاةً] (النحل: 97)
[طَيِّبَةً نَّطَّعْتُمْ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ...]

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'an, 16: 97, see also 4: 124).

Woman, according to the Qur'an, is not blamed for Adam's first mistake. Both were jointly wrong in their disobedience to God, both repented, and both were forgiven. (Qur'an, 2: 36, Qur'an, 7: 20-24). In one verse in fact (Qur'an, 20: 121), Adam specifically was blamed.

In terms of religious obligations, such as the Daily Prayers, Fasting, Poordue, 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 mosque during the days of the prophet 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 mosque at the time of the prayers. They also take into account the physiological and psychological changes associated with her natural female functions.

The social aspect

As a child and adolescent

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

[وَإِذَا الْمَوْءُدَةُ سُئِلَتْ، بِأَيِّ ذَنْبٍ قُتِلَتْ] (التكوير: 8-9)

“And when the female (infant) buried alive - is questioned, for what crime she was killed” (Qur'an, 81: 8-9).

Criticizing the attitudes of such parents who reject their female children, the Qur'an states:

(النحل: 58-59) [وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِالْأُنثَىٰ ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُ مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ،
يَتَوَرَّى مِنَ الْقَوْمِ مِن سُوءِ مَا بُشِّرَ بِهَا ۗ أَيُمْسِكُهُ عَلَىٰ هُونٍ أَمْ يَدُسُّهُ فِي التُّرَابِ ۗ أَلَا
سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ]

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 later suffer injustice and inequality, Islam requires kind and just treatment for her. Among the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) in this regard are the 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 (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).

A similar hadith deals in like manner with one who supports two sisters (Ibn-Hanbal, No. 2104). The right of females to seek knowledge is not different from that of males. Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) said:

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: " طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ " رواه البيهقي، رقم الحديث: 1546

"Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim" (Al-Bayhaqi - 1546). Muslim as used here including both males and females.

As a wife

The Qur'an 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.

Among the most impressive verses in the Qur'an about marriage is the following.

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ [(الروم: 21)
بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ]

"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. Lo, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect" (Qur'an, 30: 21).

According to Islamic Law, women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent. Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad

(SAAS), 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. 2469). In another version, the girl said: “Actually I accept this marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right (to force a husband on them)” (Ibn Maja, No. 1873).

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, 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 Qur’an thus states:

... وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ ۖ [البقرة: 228]
 [دَرَجَةٌ]

“And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them” (Qur’an, 2: 228).

Such degree is Quiwama (maintenance and protection). This refers to that natural difference between the sexes which entitles the weaker sex to protection. It implies no superiority or advantage before the 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 Qur’an gives us an example:

... فَإِنْ أَرَادَا فِصَالًا عَنْ تَرَاضٍ مِنْهُمَا وَتَشَاوُرٍ فَلَا جُنَاحَ ۗ [البقرة: 233]
 [عَلَيْهِمَا ۝]

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

Over and above her basic rights as a wife comes the right which is emphasized by the Qur’an and is strongly recommended by the Prophet (SAAS); kind treatment and companionship. The Qur’an states:

... وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ فَإِنْ كَرِهْتُمُوهُنَّ فَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تَكْرَهُنَّ ۚ [النساء: 19]
 [شَيْنًا وَيَجْعَلُ اللَّهُ فِيهِ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا]

“...But consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them it may happen that you hate a thing wherein God has placed much good.”
(Qur'an, 4: 19).

Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) said:

The best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family.

The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and best of you are those who are best to their wives (Ibn-Hanbal, No. 7396).

Behold, many women came to Muhammad's wives complaining against their husbands (because they beat them)- those (husbands) are not the best of you.

As the woman's right to decide about her marriage is recognized, so also her right to seek an end for an unsuccessful marriage is recognized. To provide for the stability of the family, however, and in order to protect it from hasty decisions under temporary emotional stress, certain steps and waiting periods should be observed by men and women seeking divorce. Considering the relatively more emotional nature of women, a good reason for asking for divorce should be brought before the judge. Like the man, however, the woman can divorce her husband without resorting to the court, if the nuptial contract allows that. More specifically, some aspects of Islamic Law concerning marriage and divorce are interesting and are worthy of separate treatment. When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible for any reason, men are still taught to seek a gracious end for it. The Qur'an states about such cases:

وَإِذَا طَلَّقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَبَلَغْنَ أَجَلَهُنَّ فَأَمْسِكُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ أَوْ [البقرة : 231]
[سَرَّحُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ ۖ وَلَا تُمْسِكُوهُنَّ ضِرَارًا لِّتَعْتَدُوا]

When you divorce women and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits) (Qur'an, 2: 231) (See also Qur'an, 2: 229 and 33: 49).

As a mother

Islam considered kindness to parents next to the worship of God.

[وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ وَهَنَا عَلَى وَهْنٍ ...] (لقمان : 14)

“And we have enjoined upon man (to be good) to his parents: His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness...” (Qur’an, 31: 14) (See also Qur’an, 46: 15, 29: 8).

Moreover, the Qur’an has a special recommendation for the good treatment of mothers:

[وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ وَيَالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا...] (الإسراء : 23)

“Your Lord has decreed that you worship none save Him, and that you be kind to your parents...” (Qur’an, 17: 23).

A man came to Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) asking:

O Messenger of God, who among the people is the most worthy of my good company? The Prophet (SAAS) said, Your mother. The man said then who else: The Prophet (SAAS) said, Your mother. The man asked, Then who else? Only then did the Prophet (SAAS) say, Your father (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

A famous saying of The Prophet is “Paradise is at the feet of mothers” (In Al’Nisa’I, Ibn Majah, Ahmad). “It is the generous (in character) who is good to women, and it is the wicked who insults them.”

The economic aspect

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.

With regard to the woman’s right to seek employment it should be stated first that Islam regards her role in society as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential one. Neither maids nor baby-sitters can possibly take the mother’s place as the educator of an upright, complex free, and carefully-reared children. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as “idleness”.

However, there is no decree in Islam which forbids woman from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature and in which society needs her most. 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.

لِّلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا [(النساء : 7)
] تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ ۚ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا.

“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).

Her share in most cases is half the man's share, with no implication that she is worth half a man! It would seem grossly inconsistent after the overwhelming evidence of woman'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 variations in financial responsibilities of man and woman according to the Islamic Law. Man in Islam is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, his children, and in some cases of his needy relatives, especially the females. This responsibility is neither waived nor reduced because of his wife's wealth or because of her access to any personal income gained from work, rent, profit, or any other legal means.

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 the “*Mahr*” which she takes from her husband at the time of marriage. If she is divorced, she may get alimony from her ex-husband. 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.

The political aspect

Any fair investigation of the teachings of Islam into the history of the Islamic civilization will surely find a clear evidence of woman's equality with man in what we call today "political rights".

This includes the right of election as well as the nomination to political offices. It also includes woman's right to participate in public affairs. Both in the Qur'an and in Islamic history we find examples of women who participated in serious discussions and argued even with the Prophet (SAAS) himself³⁰.

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."

Although not mentioned in the Qur'an, one hadith of the Prophet is interpreted to make woman ineligible for the position of head of state. The hadith referred to is roughly translated: "A people will not prosper if they let a woman be their leader." This limitation, however, has nothing to do with the dignity of woman or with her rights. It is rather, related to the natural differences in the biological and psychological make-up of men and women.

According to Islam, the head of the state is no merely a figurehead. He leads people in the prayers, especially on Fridays and festivities; he is continuously engaged in the process of decision-making pertaining to the security and well-being of his people. This demanding position, or any similar one, such as the Commander of the Army, is generally inconsistent with the physiological and psychological make-up of woman in general. It is a medical fact that during their monthly periods and during their pregnancies, women undergo various physiological and psychological changes. Such changes may occur during an emergency situation, thus affecting her decision, without considering the excessive strain which is produced. Moreover, some decisions require a maximum of rationality and a minimum of emotionality - a requirement which does not coincide with the instinctive nature of women.

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 a figurehead, a woman commander of the armed services, or even a 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 a 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.

Women in modern civilization

In the western society it is seen that modern western man falls deeply into error in his blind acceptance of the concept of the equality of the sexes without giving due consideration of what equality-in its best sense-ought to mean, or what in practice it entails. According to modern thinking, giving equal status to women means bringing them out of their homes and standing them face to face with men in all facets of life without any regard for the practical and moral problems which might ensue.

Islam, on the other hand, defines separate roles, and, therefore, separate spheres of work for men and women, since it is natural and realistic to do so. The other great error made by modern western thinkers is to assume that a role which is separate and different, and played out in other than traditionally masculine strongholds, is necessarily of trifling importance-in short, inferior. As such, the West concludes that in giving a separate role to woman Islam gives them an inferior position. Conversely, since it is held in the West (in theory) that women must be given a place in all masculine spheres it is also concluded that the West gives her a superior position.

True equality means equality not in the workplace but in status. Human equality does not mean that every man should be engaged in the same work as everyone else. It means rather that every man should be looked upon with the same respect, and should be able to expect the same treatment, legally and morally.

Women in Islam and the West: true reality

A contemporary commentator once observed that as perversion has set in western society, so also has it taken root in Muslim society. Then how do you regard western civilization as being wrong and Islamic civilization as being right? This objection, if we examine it, will be found to be ill-judged, because our comparison of western and Islamic civilizations makes a judgment on the basis of standards versus behavior. The rot of Muslim society is the result of deviation from Islam, while the rot of western society is the result of putting into practice the very principles in which it believes. The evils of Muslim societies stem from the gap between principles and practice, whereas the evils of western society are the result of a clash between principles and

realities. Western civilization of modern times has formed principles, independent of religious principles, to govern social life, and has maintained that modern principles were superior to older principles. Through colonization and the industrial revolution, etc. the western nations achieved political and material domination over large areas of the world, which placed them in a position to reject the old principles of life and construct a human society based on modern principles of life.

Western colonization of Islamic territories accompanied by armies of Christian missionaries eager to spread the gospel justified their actions by claiming virtuous intent. They affirmed that they were on a mission to provide help and enlightenment to improve what was depicted to be an inferior and backward Islamic culture. They claimed that the conquest of Muslim nations, and the process of plundering their resources, was part of their “civilizing mission”. They focused especially on what they depicted as the “miserable status” of the Muslim women they sought to liberate: segregated, ignorant, swathed and generally mistreated.

According to professor Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot of the University of California at Los Angeles, the religion of Islam is not responsible for determining the position of women in Muslim societies since the Qur’an has injunctions protecting their social, economic, political and spiritual rights. Rather, she argued, it was family customs and social traditions that are responsible for impeding the progress of women in Muslim societies.

Conclusions

In its assessment of the status of women, the western mind has made the same error as was made by ancient man: it has formed opinions based on irrational beliefs. This accounts for latter-day distortions of thought regarding women in the advanced western countries and for the resultant serious distortion in the concept of women. On the other hand, to interpret the Islamic concept of woman as “degradation” of woman is to distort the actual issue because Islam has never asserted that woman is inferior to man; it has only made the point that woman is differently constituted. If all the laws relating to men and women in Islam are based on this fundamental reality that men and women are of two different sexes, it is because distinctive differences between man and woman are established biological facts.

Endnotes

1. Yvonne, H. (2005). *The study of women in Islam and the West: A select bibliography*, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden.
2. Khan, M. W. (2012). *Woman between Islam and Western society*, The Islamic centre, New Delhi. p. 497.
3. Allen, E. A. (n.d.). *History of Civilization*, Vol. 3, p. 444.
4. Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1984). Vol. 19, p. 909.
5. Ibid. p. 909.
6. The Encyclopedia Britannica. (1911). 11th ed., op. cit., Vol. 28, p. 782.
7. Encyclopedia American International (edition) (n.d.). Vol. 29, p. 108.
8. Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1968). Vol. 23, p. 624.
9. Quoted in Mace. (n.d.). *Marriage East and West*, op. cit., p. 81.
10. Usmani, M. (2011). "The Miserable Condition of Women before Islam", Shariah Program,
11. Esposito, J. (2002). *What Everyone Needs To Know About Islam*, Oxford Press. p. 80.
12. "Women in the Pre-Islamic Societies and Civilization". *Women in Islam*. Retrieved 1 December 2011.
13. Abdul-Rahman A. S. (2013). *Women in Islam & Refutation of some Common Misconceptions*. p. 109.
14. Ibid. p. 109.
15. Bossan, M. J. (2004). *The Art of the Shoe*, Parkstone Press Ltd. p. 164. ISBN 978-1-85995-803-2.
16. Ibid. p. 164.
17. Gates, H. (2014). *Footbinding and Women's Labor in Sichuan*, Routledge. p. 8.
18. Ibid. p. 8.
19. Harvey, P. (2000). *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge University Press. p. 384.
20. Pandey, R. (1969). *Hindu Saṁskāras: Socio-religious Study of the Hindu Sacraments*, pp. 158-170 and Chapter VIII.
21. Jump up to: a b c d *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism: A-M*, James G. Lochtefeld (2001), p. 427.
22. *Jewish Views on Women's Rights & Reproductive Choice*, Jewish Views on Women's Rights & Reproductive Choice - See more at:

<http://www.reformjudaism.org/jewish-views-womens-rights-reproductive-choice#sthash.6itXCWBN.dpuf>

23. Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1984), Vol. 19, p. 909.
24. Bible, I Corinthians, 11: 8.
25. Ali, Y. (n.d.). The Holy Qur'an, note No. 504.
26. 19 El-Kouly, Al-Bahiy. (n.d.), "Min Uses Kadiyat Almar'ah," Al-Waa'y Al-Islami, Ministry of Wakf, Kuwait, Vol. 3, No. 27, June 9, 1967, p. 17, Translated by the writer.
27. Mustafa, Al-S. (n.d.). op.cit., Al-Marah Baynal Fiqh Wal Qanoon (in Arabic), pp. 31.
28. Hammudah, A. A. (n.d.). Islam in Focus, pp. 117-118 and Al-Sibaa'i, Mustafa, Al-Marah Baynal Fiqh WalQanoon (in Arabic), pp. 31-37.
29. Adeel, G. H. (n.d.). Status of women in Islam: A critical analysis on a matter of equality, Message of Thaqaalayn, Spring 2010, Vol. 11, No. 1.
30. Qur'an, 58: 14 and 60: 10-12.