

Concept of Gender Equality in Islam

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Abstract: Gender discrimination is the daunting problem and important topic in the contemporary world. Men and women are definitely equal in Islam by means of human beings as Islam conclusively establishes that all human beings have a common origin. This point is declared in the Holy Quran: ‘O Mankind, verily we created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so you may know one another.’ Islam declares equilibrium women privileges and position in order to preserve social stability. The term ‘equality’ does not have the same repercussion in every society as it differs in different culture and society, or point of view. The West considered the political, social and economic rights as the meticulous standard that would determine the comprehensive equality between men and women as human beings. On the contrary Islam declares that all human beings are equal considering the status, preferment and dignity but determine the different responsibilities of male and female. Because the responsibilities must take into consideration of varying natural inclinations and affinity of individuals, so that Islam determines and prefers the concept of ‘justice’ rather than ‘equality’. Justice is more fruitful and rewarding then equivalence in many cases and situations. This paper discusses the concept of Gender equality in Islam in the light of the Quran and the Sunnah.

Key words: Gender equality, rights, responsibilities, Justice, discrimination.

Introduction

There is a widely propagated conception that women backwardness and deprivation have been the result of women’s marginalization in the society and state because of the Islamic ideology about the women’s right and equality. Basically this is the misconcep-

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tion and misunderstanding about Islam which is somehow the lack of scholarly presentation of Islam by the Muslims in general. The problem with Muslims generally that their conception about the Islam is fully influenced by the West and they are not trying to understand the concept presented by the Almighty in the Holy Quran. The Muslim leaders are trying to implement concept of the West which has a special context and history also totally different from Islam. Islam establish the women as equal human beings from the beginning of the creation of mankind in the earth and Prophet (sm.) reestablish the same before 1400 years ago when the West are full of ignorance about the right and equality of women even they does not consider the women as human beings. In the present world gender discrimination and violence against women remains prevalent in various dimension over the world. Besides Islam is the only way of life that ensure the equal and justified rights and status for both men and women with dignity and honor in all stage of life in the world.

Concept of equality in Islam.

The status of women in society in neither a new nor a fully settled issue. Islam gives women equal rights of religious independence. Status and spiritual development compared to men. The implication of the term equality may differ in different society and culture. The western concept of equality has developed over time as a reaction to Christian conception of woman. In Christianity, women is considered an inferior being, who committed the first sin and condemned forever. When the west broke itself away from religion, at the start of renaissance, there was nothing that could provide the basis for the concept of equality. The west then constructed a concept of equal rights in different spheres of life. This is what the whole feminist movement is all about. This meant that in order for a women to be equal to a men, as a human being, she must have equal political, social and economic rights as men without considering the ability, habit, tendency, duties and responsibilities. The west far from the religion it was impossible for them to have the judgment of the creator in this regard. Facing this dilemma the westerner towards political, social and economic rights as then standard that would define the equality between man and women as human beings. (Islam, 2006)

On the contrary to this concept Islam primarily establish the equality of men and women as human beings. Then Islam determined the duties and responsibilities for man and women on the basis of their nature, ability, tendency and capacity. Because the nature of Islam is not to burden a person beyond his capacity. Allah says, **﴿لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا**

وُسْعَهَا

‘Allah burdens not a person beyond his scope’ (Al Quran 2:286).

This is why Islam impose some responsibilities to man and escape the women from some responsibilities. because the determination of responsibilities much take in considering the varying natural in inclination and capabilities of the individuals, therefor Islam takes into account the concept of justices rather than equality.

Allah, the All-knowing and All aware is He who knows is creation best and the characteristics that distinguish the female from male, addresses everyone men and women equally, as Allah says, ﴿إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا﴾

‘verily the Muslims men and women, the believers men and women, the man and women who are obedient the man and the woman who are truthful, the man and the women who are patient, the man and the woman who are humble, the man and the woman who give sadaqat, the man and the woman who observe saom, the man and the woman who guard their chastity, the man and the woman who remember Allah much with their hearts and tongues- Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward (Al Quran 33:35)

Allah also says, ‘It is not for a believer, man or woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decreed a matter that they should have any option in their decision. And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he has indeed strayed in a plain error’. (Al Quran 33:36)

Allah also says, ‘Tell the believing men to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts, etc.). That is purer for them. Verily, Allah is All-Aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts.’ (Al Quran 24:30-31)

Equality in the human origin:

Islam demonstrate the idea of equality of man and woman in all aspects of life that they are equal in, because both of them are from a common origin. Although there are some natural differences between them taking into consideration of the special qualities and attitudes. This reality is mentioned in many places in the Holy Quran. Allah says, يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا رُؤُوسَكُمْ وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً ۗ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا ۝

‘O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam), and from him (Adam) He created his wife [Hawwa (Eve)], and from them both He created many men and women and fear Allah through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship) . Surely, Allah is Ever an All-Watcher over you.’ (Al Quran, 4:1)

Allah also says, He created you (all) from a single person (Adam); then made from him his wife [Haws' (Eve)]. (Al Quran, 39:6)

Allah also says, ﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۗ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ﴾

O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has *At-Taqwa* [i.e. one of the *Muttaqun*. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware. (Al Quran, 49:13)

Equality in their common destiny,

Islam establishes the ideology that all mankind is going to return to the same destination. They all are return after their worldly life to eternal life and to the unlimited happiness or sadness. They will receive the rewards or punishments according to their good or bad deeds in the worlds. Allah says, ﴿كَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَكُنْتُمْ أَمْوَاتًا فَأَحْيَاكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمَيِّنْكُمْ ثُمَّ يُخَيِّبْكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ﴾

How can you disbelieve in Allah? Seeing that you were dead and He gave you life. Then He will give you death, then again will bring you to life (on the Day of Resurrection) and then unto Him you will return. (Al Quran, 2:28)

Allah also says, ‘And it is Allah that decreases or increases (your provisions), and unto Him you shall return. (Al Quran, 2:245) Allah also says, And whoever does righteous good deeds, male or female, and is a true believer in the Oneness of Allah (Muslim), such will enter Paradise and not the least injustice, even to the size of a *Naqira* (speck on the back of a date-stone), will be done to them.’ (Al Quran, 4:124)

Allah also says, ﴿كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ۗ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ﴾

Everyone shall taste the death. Then unto Us you shall be returned. (Al Quran, 29:57)

Equality in the aspects of Spirituality.

In the spiritual aspects, Al Quran declared that the man and women have same human spiritual nature (Al Quran 4:1, 6:63, 7:10,145, 15:17,29, 22:5 42:11, 23:12-13, and 32:9).

Both genders are recipients of the divine breath and they are created from the human soul. Both genders are dignified and trustees of Allah on the world (Al Quran 17:70, 2:30).

According to the holly Quran man and women have the same religious and moral duties and responsibilities. Now here does the Holly Quran state any superiority or inferiority of one gender over the other gender. In the Holly Quran there is no difference between the genders as per as their ontological and theological status in concerned. (Ahmad 2006). Allah says, ﴿الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ وَبَدَأَ خَلْقَ الْإِنْسَانِ مِنْ طِينٍ﴾ (ثُمَّ جَعَلَ نَسْلَهُ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِّنْ مَّاءٍ، ﴿ثُمَّ سَوَّاهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِنْ رُّوحِهِ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ﴾ (مُهَيِّنٍ)

‘Who made everything He has created good, and He began the creation of man from clay. Then He made his offspring from semen of worthless water (male and female sexual discharge). Then He fashioned him in due proportion, and breathed into him the soul (created by Allah for that person), and He gave you hearing (ears), sight (eyes) and hearts. Little is the thanks you give!’ (Al Quran 32:7-9).

In our society, the relationship between husband and wife is based on hierarchy, husband’s stands as if they enjoyed inherited advantage and placed above their wives. This approach is anchored in the traditional understanding of the verse of the Holy Quran:

﴿الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَانِتَاتٌ حَافِظَاتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ

‘Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. ’ (Al Quran 4:32). The meaning of the verse would be more clear if we look at the another verse of the Quran in which Allah mention the wives as their *Libas* for each other. (2:187).

In the recent Quran translation, the key sentence in the verse *الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ* –is understood quite differently like “men shall take full care of women” (Asad, 1980,4:34) or “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women” respectively. (Jeffrey Long, 1995:30)

Equality in the regards of social status

Islam recognizes the same social status of man and women in the shape of life without any discrimination against women. Al Quran confers social respect and care upon a woman as mother (17:23, 31:14) to secure the life of a daughter, the Quran effectively ended the cruel pre Islamic practice of female infanticide (81:8-9). Criticizing the attitude of such parents who reject their female children, the Quran states:

﴿وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِالْأُنثَىٰ ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُ مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿٨﴾
﴿يَتَوَارَىٰ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ مِنْ سُوءِ مَا بُشِّرَ بِهِ ۚ أَيُمْسِكُهُ عَلَىٰ هُونٍ أَمْ يَدُسُّهُ فِي التُّرَابِ ۗ أَلَا سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ﴾

‘And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonor or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision.’ (Al Quran 16:58-59).

In the social aspect of Islamic principles, the female has equal right to accept or reject marriage proposals. Her consent is a prerequisite to validity if the marital contract according to the prophet’s teaching (Ibn majah, 2001, vol.1. hadith no 1873). Social responsibilities in Islam is derived from the Quranic verse which states:

﴿وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللَّهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ﴾

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); they perform *As-Salat* (*Iqamat-as-Salat*) and give the *Zakat*, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah will have His Mercy on them. Surely Allah is All-Mighty, All-Wise. (Al Quran 9:71).

This verse shows that women and men are to work together in the religious Islam, in the social realm, and in the political and educational realm. The references in they verse to the activities required, e.g. enjoining the right, prayer etc. show that both women and man are to take in active role in society rather than merely a passive one. (Islam 2006). Tariq Ramadan Expressed his opinion to reconsider the status of women in society, as he says, We have said about that Islam offers to the women, besides absolute equality before God, inalienable rights that all societies must respect. We remember, moreover that the Quranic revelation produced a progressive reform of mentalities and drove new Muslims to reconsider the status of women in society. In the same manner, during the last 23 years of the Prophet’s life, it become possible for women to understand, from

within and by means of spirituality, their private and social duties and rights. This parameter of time, of evaluation and of accomplishment is inescapable on the personal plane just as it is within social strategy. (Tariq Ramadan, 2001)

Equalities in the aspect of economic rights and ownership of property.

Islam established property rights of women before and after marriage. In order to guarantee a women's dignity and guard herself, mother, guardian and husband or nearest male relative, regardless of her wealth (Al Quran 4: 7, 32, 34). Islam thus release all women from having to earn their livelihood and be subject to the degradation usually accompanying a women in want. Nevertheless, a woman is free to work and adjoin to her personal income if she wishes and her requisite talent and competence. Somewhat to balance this favorable position in the economic life society, Islam assigned to the male heir double the share of the female in the property inherited from parents. (Ahmed, 2006)

Islam decreed a right of independent ownership for women which she was deprived before Islam. According to Quranic law a women retains her full rights to money, real estate, property, buy, sell, mortgage or lease any or all her properties. This right is similar whether she is single or married and remains after marriage. Allah says, ﴿وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوْا مَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بِهِ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ ۚ لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبُوا وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبْنَ ۚ وَاسْأَلُوا اللَّهَ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا﴾

‘And wish not for the things in which Allah has made some of you to excel others. For men there is reward for what they have earned, (and likewise) for women there is reward for what they have earned, and ask Allah of His Bounty. Surely, Allah is Ever All-Knower of everything.’ (Al Quran 4:32)

In fact, Islam is biased in favor of women and seeks her protection and welfare at all times. A married woman gets mahr and is not responsible to spend money from her property and income on the household. She is entitled to full financial support before marriage and after marriage even during the waiting period in case of divorce. Generally women are guaranteed support in all stage of her life. Such as daughter, wife, mother and sister. These additional advantages of women over man are somehow balanced by the provision of the inheritance laws which means that the male inherits are more responsible financially then female inherits. While the female can keep her all income, investment, property and financial security without any legal obligation to spend any part of it even for her own sustenance.

Equality in the aspect of legal rights.

Islam is the first religion in human history to establish women as a legal person, fully endowed to perform all legal functions. According to Islamic principles men and women are entitled to equality before the law and court of law. Justices in Islam is considered without any discrimination of gender. But a charge against Islam refers to the refusal of Islamic law to consider woman's witness as equal to a man's but this is a misunderstanding. Islamic law regarded a women's witness on a par with man's in cases of legitimacy, inheritance and family relations- the area with which most women are indeed familiar, but only half the weight of a man's witness in case of civil, administration and criminal laws, with which she is usually not knowledgeable. (Ahmed 2006).

The most cases of reference to witness in the Quran do not make mention to gender.

Many references fully involve the testimony of males and females. Allah says, ﴿وَالَّذِينَ يَزْمُونَ أَرْوَاجَهُمْ وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُمْ شُهَدَاءُ إِلَّا أَنفُسُهُمْ فَشَهَادَةُ أَحَدِهِمْ أَرْبَعُ شَهَادَاتٍ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَمِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ﴾ (وَالْخَامِسَةُ أَنَّ لَعْنَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ) ﴿وَيَذُرْ أَعْنَاهَا الْعَذَابَ أَنْ تَشْهَدَ أَرْبَعَ شَهَادَاتٍ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَمِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ﴾ (وَالْخَامِسَةُ أَنَّ غَضَبَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهَا إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ)

‘And for those who accuse their wives, but have no witnesses except themselves, let the testimony of one of them be four testimonies (i.e. testifies four times) by Allah that he is one of those who speak the truth. And the fifth (testimony) (should be) the invoking of the Curse of Allah on him if he be of those who tell a lie (against her). But it shall avert the punishment (of stoning to death) from her, if she bears witness four times by Allah, that he (her husband) is telling a lie. And the fifth (testimony) should be that the Wrath of Allah be upon her if he (her husband) speaks the truth’. (Al Quran 24:6-9)

The Quran distinguish between the witness of a male and female in one place that is related to financial transaction. The Holly Quran says, ‘O you who believe! When you contract a debt for a fixed period, write it down. Let a scribe write it down in justice between you. Let not the scribe refuses to write as Allah has taught him, so let him write. Let him (the debtor) who incurs the liability dictate, and he must fear Allah, his Lord, and diminish not anything of what he owes. But if the debtor is of poor understanding, or weak, or is unable himself to dictate, then let his guardian dictate in justice. And get two witnesses out of your own men. And if there are not two men (available), then a man and two women, such as you agree for witnesses, so that if one of them (two women) errs, the other can remind her. And the witnesses should not refuse when they are called on (for evidence). You should not become weary to write it (your contract),

whether it be small or big, for its fixed term, that is more just with Allah; more solid as evidence, and more convenient to prevent doubts among yourselves, save when it is a present trade which you carry out on the spot among yourselves, then there is no sin on you if you do not write it down. But take witnesses whenever you make a commercial contract. Let neither scribe nor witness suffer any harm, but if you do (such harm), it would be wickedness in you. So be afraid of Allah; and Allah teaches you. And Allah is the All-Knower of each and everything.’ (Al Quran 2:282)

This verse is not the proof of general rule of testimony that the worth of a female’s testimony is only half that of a male in all cases. The context of this verse related to the testimony on financial transactions which are complex and complicated. And that does not make blanket generalization of the rules of testimony. No reference was made to the inferiority or superiority of one genders witness or the others. The reason given is to collaborate the females witness and prevent. Unintentional errors in the business dealings and transections.

Conclusion:

In present world, many lows and convention has been disseminated worldwide especially in the West to give equal rights and status of women like those of men. But they failed to establish gender- neutral society and stop violence against women. There are many reasons behind gender inequality like traditional patriarchy, women’s psychological insecurity, gender biased mindsets, socio-cultural rituals, early marriage of premature girls, negative attitude towards female education, seclusion of women from socioeconomic activities, male dependency of women, lack of strong family bondage, discrimination in access to decision making process and consideration of women as advertising and enjoyable instrument and finally the lack of Islamic teaching and ideology about the philosophy of life in the world. Islam recognizes the women as equal human being and establish their rights, status , dignity and honor before 1400 years ago which have been recognized in the West after passing many stage of history.

Although it is an irony of fate that women’s right still now are not established fully in Muslim society. Several reasons could be behind this fact that is misinterpretation of Islam by a group of Muslims, the customs and traditional habits to undermine the right of women, influence of western propaganda through media that Islam subjugates women a second class citizen in the society; at the same time lack of knowledge about Islam and the women themselves are not aware about of their right- make the situation complicate and difficult in the Muslim society. Islam secured the women’s rights of life

and education .But till now, in Muslim society, the birth of a female child is unexpected in the family. In case of inherited property, most women have been deprived by their close relatives like father, brother and uncle. Islam makes education compulsory for all the Muslim irrespective of gender. But fact is that the rate of illiteracy is higher among the Muslim countries in the world. The Muslim Ummah is far from the practice and preserve the teaching and ideology of Islam. Islam establish the rights, dignity and honor of women are equal to those of man but they are not necessarily identical with them. Equality and sameness are two different concept. Islam has given them a status which is more prestigious than that bestowed by the western world.

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