

The Social Involvement of Women in Islam

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One of the persistent attacks against Islam is that it is a religion which stifles the social involvement of women. By social involvement, we mean involvement in those spheres of endeavor which occur outside of the home and impact on the general nature and direction of society. Islam, it is said, desires to divest women of any meaningful social role, to keep them "trapped" in the confines of their homes, under the constant surveillance and control of men. This claim, as we will endeavor to show, does not accurately reflect the fullness of Islamic teachings on this issue.

While Islam does advocate a social scheme which places great emphasis on the domestic role of women, it also creates ample space for their meaningful participation in public affairs. The purpose of this article is to examine aspects of that social involvement based on the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition. That examination will be preceded by a brief expose on the fundamental equality of men and women in Islam.

The Fundamental Equality of Men and Women in Islam

The Qur'an emphasizes that men and women are equal in their physical and metaphysical composition. We read in that regard, "We have surely ennobled the descendants of Adam." [1] This ennoblement of the human being precludes any claims to gender superiority, or any feelings of inferiority based on physical, or metaphysical composition. Such feelings underlie schemes of gender-based oppression, and have no place in Islam.

We also read in the Qur'an, "We have surely created the human in the best of molds." [2] Again, this process of human creation is not gender specific. It includes men and women. As human beings, they have both been created in the best of molds, and their respective ability to fulfill their human potential hinges on factors which have nothing to do with their physical differences.

Islam also emphasizes that both men and women are equal in their servitude to God. Neither gender is a greater or lesser servant of the Divine, even though that servitude may vary in some minor details. For example, women are ordered to cover their hair, while husbands are ordered to spend for their wives' maintenance. In the modern human-centric worldview, both of these orders would be considered manifestations of oppression; of women in the first instance, of men in the second. However, as Muslims we understand that these are simply two varying manifestations of servitude. We further understand that "God does not desire to oppress His servants in any way." [3]

Furthermore, men and women are rewarded equally for their righteous deeds. God says in the Qur'an, "And your Lord replied, 'I shall never cause the deeds of any of you to be lost, male or female, you are of each other.'" [4] This verse, and those immediately following it, advocate that women and men are equal in their religion, human worth, the rewards they receive for their worship, and the recompense for their worldly struggles. Imam Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi summarizes these meanings in his commentary on these verses:

There is no difference in God's response [to their supplications], nor in the recompense received by the male and the female [for their righteous deeds], as long as they are equal in steadfastly maintaining the obedience of God. This indicates that virtue in religion is based on deeds and not accidental attributes. The fact that some people are male or female, or from lowly or lofty lineage

has no bearing in this area. [5]

A related verse mentions that this fundamental equality also pertains in terms of their susceptibility to the punishment of God as a consequence of transgression. God says, "Whoever does wrong will be recompensed accordingly. And whoever does good, male or female, as long as they are believers, they will enter Gardens, provided for therein without stint." [6]

Even if one believed that men are "better" than women, that belief has no meaning in practical terms, as a particular woman can be better than a particular man, based on her deeds and actions. Similarly, the generality of women can be better than the generality of men in a particular time and place. The great grammarian, Ibn Hisham al-Ansari, elucidates this point in his explanation of the use of the definite article in the Arabic language. He says:

The definite article is for demarcating a category. Hence, your saying, "The man is better than the woman," if you do not mean by that statement a particular man or a particular woman. Rather, what you mean is that the [former] category in and of itself is better [than the latter]. It is not correct to say that every single man is better than every single woman, because reality contradicts that. [7]

Hence, there is no basis in Islam, if it is properly understood, for any woman to believe that she is inferior to any man. The deeds of the individual are what distinguishes him or her. One whose deeds are best, be he male or female, is best. As God proclaims, "The most noble of you with God is the most pious." [8]

The Social Involvement of Women

God says in the Qur'an, "Those who when we give them authority on earth, establish regular prayers, pay the poor due, command good, and forbid wrong. And unto God is the end of all affairs." [9] This verse presents four pillars of an Islamic social order, specifically:

Establishing regular prayer.

Paying the poor due.

Commanding the good.

Forbidding the wrong.

In a functional Islamic society women share all of these duties with men. This is made clear from the following verse in the Qur'an:

"The believing men and women are supportive and protective friends unto each other. They enjoin the right, forbid the wrong, establish regular prayer, pay the poor due, and are dutifully obedient to God and His Messenger. They will receive the Mercy of God. Surely, God is Almighty, Wise." [10]

In this verse, the four duties mentioned above are restated, and then mentioned as being undertaken by both men and women. The socio-political implications of this verse are made clear to us if we consider that the relationship it articulates between men and women is one of tremendous relevance in the greater societal sphere. This relationship is described by the Arabic term "Wilaya." This term is defined by al-Fayruzabadi in al-Qamus, one of the most authoritative Arabic dictionaries, as involving, "Planning, governance, and authority." [11] In all of these duties, men and women support and strengthen each other, as Ibn Kathir, among others, makes clear in his commentary on this verse. [12] The result of such a healthy relationship between the sexes would be a strong, balanced, just, and pious society.

The political implications of commanding the good and forbidding the wrong are further clarified by

the wording of the Second Oath of 'Aqaba, which is referred to as the Oath of War, because of its clear political implications. This oath is distinguished from the First Oath of 'Aqaba, which focused on issues related to personal piety and individual conduct, and was known as the Oath of the Women. [13] The former oath, as related by Ibn Hisham, reads as follows:

The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, spoke. He recited the Qur'an, invited [people] to God, encouraged them to accept Islam, and then said: "I take the oath from you that you protect me as you protect your women and children." Al-Bara' b. Ma'rur took his [blessed] hand and said, "Yes, O Messenger of God! We will protect you as we protect our womenfolk and our very souls! We take the oath from you O Messenger of God! We are a warrior people, armed with weapons we have inherited over long generations. [14]

In addition to the men taking this oath, which clearly delineates socio-political duties and obligations, it was also entered into by two women, Umm 'Umarah Nusayba bint Ka'b, and Umm Muni' Asma' bint 'Amr, and accepted from them by the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him. [15] This is a clear proof that both men and women are equal partners in the Islamic social project. From this general description of the social involvement of women in a Islamic society, we wish to move to specific examples.

Women Fighting to Protect Islam

During the Battle of Uhud, Umm 'Umara Nusayba bint K'ab, one of the women present at the Second Oath of 'Aqaba, valiantly defended the Messenger of God, sustaining twelve wounds in the process. She nearly killed Ibn Qami'a, one of the fiercest warriors in the opposing force. After the fray, the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, praised her courage and skill. [16] This affirmation from the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, prevents anyone from denying the permissibility of women fighting under similar circumstances, even if other prophetic traditions argue against such fighting being obligatory for them. [17]

The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, also gave tidings to Umm Haram bint Mulham that she would fight in a naval battle. This came after she sought his permission to go forth in a military campaign. She subsequently married Ubada b. as-Samit, and participated with him in a naval expedition. [18] The fact that her participation in that battle occurred with the foreknowledge and permission of the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, is again a powerful argument against those who would refuse to acknowledge the permissibility of this and far lesser significant types social involvement.

It is a well-known principle in the Divine Law that in the face of a direct invasion of a Muslim land by non-Muslim forces, it is mandatory for every able-bodied woman to join the Muslim defenses to repulse the aggressor. [19] As a general practice, the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, would bring women along on military campaigns to function as nurses and to undertake other support and logistical roles. [20] 'Aisha, Umm Sulaym, Umm Salit, and many others distinguished themselves performing such duties.

Direct Participation of Women in the Political Process

If we can generally define the political process of a particular society as the method by which publicly binding decisions are made, then it is clear that women were an integral part of the political process in the polity presided over by the Prophet Muhammad, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him. An example of this would be the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, accepting the advise of his wife, Umm Salama, to go out and sacrifice his animal then shave his

head during the crisis which occurred at al-Hudaybiyya. All of the companions, dissatisfied with the conditions of the treaty that had been struck between the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, and his enemies, refused his order to end their lesser pilgrimage. However, when they saw the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, undertake the rites of release they quickly followed suit. Hence, it was the counsel of a woman which ended one of the greatest political crisis yet to occur in the nascent Islamic state. [21]

A similar example can be taken from an incident which occurred during the conquest of Makka. Umm Hani' bint Abi Talib, the sister of Imam 'Ali, granted an oath of protection to two idolaters who had actually fought the advancing Muslim forces. When she informed the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, of that, he responded, "We give our collective oath of protection to anyone you have pledged to protect, Umm Hani'." [22] This act of Umm Hani' was a state-level political edict which was affirmed by the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him. These and many other examples clearly indicate that the social involvement of women in Islam reaches the highest levels of public affairs

The social involvement of Muslim women is further illustrated by the controversial issue of 'Aisha leading a military campaign to seek retribution for the murder of 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, the third leader of the Muslim community after the passing of the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him. 'Aisha did not enjoy universal support in the endeavor. Among those refusing to endorse 'Aisha's mission was Abu Bakra. [23] He based his refusal on a tradition he had heard from the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, mentioning that a people who depute their affair to a woman will never succeed. That tradition reads as follows:

In the days prior to the Battle of the Camel, God benefited me from a prophetic tradition I [recalled] hearing from the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him. [24] When it reached the Prophet that the Persians had elevated the daughter of Kisra to the throne, he said, "A people who depute their affair to a woman will never succeed." [25]

Hence, Abu Bakra deduced that 'Aisha's effort was futile. However, this conclusion was not shared by other companions, many of them more learned than Abu Bakra. 'Aisha, a great jurist in her own right, agreed to lead the expedition. Talha and al-Zubayr, two of the ten specifically promised Paradise, supported her decision. Hence, from this earliest time, there was a difference of opinion as to the scope and parameters of a woman's leadership.

This difference of opinion occurring amongst the Companions, concerning the extent of a woman's political authority continued among latter jurists. While they agreed on the prohibition of a woman ascending to the highest office in the Islamic state, the Caliphate, they differed concerning other high level positions. For example, Imam al-Tabari and Ibn Hazm considered it permissible for women to serve as judges, unconditionally. Imam Abu Hanifa viewed it permissible for a woman to serve as a judge in those issues where her witness is accepted. Others viewed it as being impermissible for a woman to serve in the judiciary under any circumstances. [26]

We should note that the interpretation of the Prophet's, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, words concerning the outcome of a woman's leadership, may involve intangibles which we are incapable of comprehending. In that context, they might not be the expression of a binding historical law. Were it the expression of such a law, it would seemingly be contradicted by events which occurred both before and after its utterance.

As for pre-Islamic times, the Qur'an itself relates the story of Bilqis, the legendary Queen of Sheba. She is mentioned in the Qur'an as attaining worldly success, [27] and as eventually accepting Islam. Ibn Kathir mentions that she commanded a council of 312 delegates, each of whom represented 10,000 men. [28] She was a very successful leader, and her people prospered under her reign.

After the time of the Prophet, Peace and Blessing of God be upon him, there are similar instances of successful woman leaders. Both in general, and in specific military campaigns, of the type undertaken by 'Aisha. In this latter category, we could mention the British rout of the Argentines during the 1982 Falklands War. That victory occurred at a time when England was under the leadership of two women, Queen Elizabeth II, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

These two examples in no way contradict the statement of the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, "A people who depute their affairs to a woman will never succeed," if we accept that the tradition in question has an interpretation beyond our superficial understanding. Surely, God knows best.

In conclusion, Islam is for all people, all times, and all places. It is flexible enough to accommodate many different types of societies, and societal arrangements. It advocates a balanced social order where men and women occupy largely complimentary roles. Although these roles are not always "equal" as we have come to use that term in the context of contemporary analyses of gender relations, they have enough flexibility to accommodate the dignified social involvement of women. The examples used in our brief analysis could have been expanded to include areas such as seeking knowledge, teaching, commerce, business, professions, and other realms. However, what we have mentioned should suffice to show that claims which posit that Islam denies women a space for meaningful social involvement are both misleading and inaccurate.

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[1] Al-Qur'an 17:70

[2] Al-Qur'an 95:4

[3] Al-Qur'an 40: 31

[4] Al-Qur'an 3:195

[5] Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi, at-Tafsir al-Kabir, (Beirut: Dar Ihya at-Turath al-'Arabi, 1417/1997), vol. 3, p. 470.

[6] Al-Qur'an 40:40

[7] Ibn Hisham al-Ansari, Qatr an-Nada wa Ball as-Sada, ed. Muyiddin 'Abdul Hamid (Sayda, Lebanon: al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 1421/2000), p. 135.

[8] Al-Qur'an 49:13

[9] Al-Qur'an 22:41

[10] Al-Qur'an 9:75

[11] Tahir Ahmad az-Zawi, Tartib al-Qamus al-Muhit, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), vol.4, p. 658.

[12] See, for example Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Adhim, (Sayda, Lebanon: Al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 1421/2000) vol. 2, p. 336.

[13] For an English language account of these two oaths in see Martin Lings, Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1997), pp. 108-112.

[14] Ibn Hisham al-Mu'afiri, As-Sirah an-Nabawiyah, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1410/1994), vol. 2, p. 75.

[15] Ibn Hisham al-Mu'afiri, vol. 2, p. 74.

[16] For one of the earliest accounts of the heroics of Umm 'Umarah during the Battle of Uhud, see Muhammad b. Sa'd az-Zuhri, *At-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya at-Turath al-'Arabi, 1417/1996), vol. 8, pp. 440-441, #4535.

[17] This would include those traditions that mention the best Jihad for women is the Pilgrimage. See for example, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar as-Salam, 1418/1997), vol. 6, p. 96, #2875, 2876.

[18] For an account of her story, see Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, vol. 6, pp. 94-95, #2877-2878.

[19] Muhammad Khayr Haykal, *Al-Jihad wa'l Qital fi as-Siyasa ash-Shar'iyya*, (Beirut: Dar al-Bawadir, 1317/1996), vol. 2, pp. 880-881.

[20] See Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, vol. 6, p. 96, #2880.

[21] For an English language account of this incident, see Lings, pp. 254-255.

[22] For a narration of this incident, see Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, vol. 6, p. 328; #3171.

[23] Abu Bakra's full name is Nufay' b. Ma'ruq. He should not be confused with Abu Bakr as-Siddiq.

[24] The Battle of the Camel, 35AH/656AD, involved the forces of Imam 'Ali and the hosts supporting 'Aisha. Imam 'Ali's forces achieved a quick and decisive victory. For an account of the events leading up to that conflict, see Marshal Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 212-215.

[25] Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, vol. 13, p. 67; #7099.

[26] Wahbah Az-Zuhayli, *Al-Fiqh al-Islami wa Adillatuhu*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1418/1997), vol. 8, pp.6238-6239.

[27] In the Qur'an 27:23 she is mentioned as having been given, "An abundance of all things." Ibn Kathir, qualifies this as meaning that she was given everything needed by a successful, well-established king. See Ibn Kathir, vol 3, p. 338.

[28] Ibn Kathir, vol. 3, p. 338.