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Concept of Sexual Equality in Islam

The subject of this article is Concept of Sexual Equality in Islam. Its main purpose is to identify the rights given to women by the Qur`an and to point out the discrepancy between the normative teachings of Islam and Muslim practice regarding issues dealing with women`s status and rights. However, the subject of “women in Islam” cannot be properly understood if looked at in isolation from the important issues facing Muslim societies—issues that do not reflect either Islam or the Islamic tradition.

As far as the women`s question is concerned, cultural and traditional influences tend to be quite strong. The Qur'an undoubtedly gave a great many rights to women and spelled them out in detail.

The Qur'an never intended to place under restrictions on the movements of women, nor did it require them to completely hide their faces while moving out of the house. Though the Qur'an puts no such restriction on women, the jurists did so in the context of their situation, and it is considered.

Historically speaking, there has been male domination in all societies throughout the ages except in matriarchal societies, which have been comparatively few. Women have been considered inferior to men. From this emanated the doctrine of the inequality of the sexes. A woman cannot match the power and competence of a man and hence she is considered not equal to him. Man must possess and dominate woman, have mastery over her and determine her future, acting either as a father, brother or a husband. It is in her interest, the argument goes, that she should submit to the superior sex. Confined to home and hearth, she was thought incapable of taking decisions outside her domain. There would be absolute disaster, it was said, if she happened to become the ruler of a country. Here we are mainly concerned with the status accorded to in the Qur'an and how Muslim jurists viewed it under different circumstances. Today women, especially Western educated women, are demanding equal status with men and they are, absolutely right. The question before us is: what

status did the Qur'an give to women? Is it an equal status or an inferior one? The 'ulama and the jurists maintain categorically that women have been given an inferior status; some modernists among Islamic scholars would like to believe that the holy book accords equal status to both the sexes. In my opinion it is difficult to give a categorical answer to this question. First, the Qur'an refers to it in both the normative and the contextual sense. Normatively speaking, the Qur'an appears to be in favour of equal status for both the sexes contextually speaking, it does grant a slight edge to men over women. But ignoring the context Islamic jurists tried to give a superior status to men in the normative sense. Second, the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses, as in the case of other scriptures, depends very much on one's own point of view. Ultimately it is one's ex. priority position which determines the meaning of a scripture for the reader or the interpreter. The same verse is understood differently by different people depending on their predilection and proclivities. Third and this is equally important to remember, the meaning of Qur'anic verses unfolds with time. What the verses meant to an Islamic scholar in the medieval period may be quite different from the meaning conveyed to a scholar living in modern conditions. Religious scriptures often use symbolic language which makes them pregnant with several levels of meaning, all of which may not unfold at any given time. It therefore, becomes necessary to interpret this symbolic language creatively to fit in with our own experiential context. Time and experiences are always in flux and so is our understanding.

Now the question is; what is concretely implied by equality of status of the sexes? First, in its generalised sense this means acceptance of the dignity of the sexes in equal measure. Second, one has to see both men and women enjoying equal rights: social, economic and political. Both should have equal rights to contract a marriage or to dissolve it; both should have the right to own or dispose of property without interference from the other; both should be free to choose their own profession or way of life; both should be equal in responsibility as much as in freedom. First, let us take what the Holy Qur'an has to say about equality of the sexes in the generalised sense of enjoying equal dignity. The Qur'an considers both the sexes as having originated from one living being and hence they enjoy the same status. It says: "O mankind, be conscious of your Sustainers, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of

it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women." Here the verse clearly says that all men and women have been created out of one nafs (living entity) and hence one has no superiority over the other. Again, as Muhammad Asad, a noted contemporary commentator on the Qur'an points out in the footnote to the above verse, the words'. "He created out of it (minha) its mate", "He created its mate (i.e. its sexual counterpart) out of its own kind (minjinshi'ha)..."

Maulana Azad, another noted commentator, also interprets this verse more or less in the same manner. He says that divine wisdom creates all others from one person. But he interprets nafs in vahidatin (one living being, one person) `as father. Whether it is one person, one living being or father", the implication is the same: namely, that all have originated from one living being, men and women, and hence enjoy equal status. The Qur'an does not subscribe to the view that Eve was bom from the crooked rib of Adam and thus has an inferior status} It is in this general sense that Maulana Qari Muhammad Tyeb, who was chief of the Dar al-'Ulum, Deoband, accepts equality of rights of men and women. He says the fact is that women enjoy the same rights as men, and, in certain respects, they enjoy even more rights... He goes on to say that Hazrat 'A'isha is the wife of the Prophet (peace be on him). The Prophet says about her that half the knowledge of my revelation should be acquired from all my companions and the other half from 'A'isha (may Allah be pleased with her)°. After all 'A'isha Siddiqah is a woman and Allah has given such a status to women that thousands of the Prophet's companions are put on one side and a woman on the other side} Also the Qur'an says: "We have honoured the children of Adam". "“ Maulana Usmani maintains that bunt Adam (children of Adam) include men as well as women and hence, according to this verse of the Qur'an, both are equally honourable without any distinction of sex? The Qur'an also uses the metaphor of libas (apparel) for men and women. It says: "They are apparel for you and apparel for them". This clearly implies that, like apparel both need each other and one cannot be complete without the other. There cannot be inequality where there is complementarily."

I am also a Muslim woman, and facing lots of problems in my married life, people in my family don't want to send me out because according to them, a working woman is not honourable in our society. They always asked me to live only at home and concentrate in kitchen, look after my husband and kids as this is my duty and Islam orders us to live

accordingly. But I am very different; I look after my family and perform all the duties, whatever are mine. Because I think that if a man can live his life with freedom and respect then a woman can also do so. If I have any position and respect in our society, it's just because of my education and my work. And it is my right to live my life with my own views and norms, and I will fight for that.

women reading and understanding the Qur'an. Thus there are various women's organisations doing this exercise and re-interpreting the Qur'an. It is a better sign and I believe a healthier sign. Women have as much right to understand and interpret the Qur'an from their perspective. Even the most orthodox among the Muslims would agree that women have also right to interpret the Qur'an. The important question is whether the Qur'an accords equality to women or gives women an inferior position. According to conservative view, women have an inferior position and the 'ulama quote the Qur'anic verses in their support as well as hadith and opinion of the fuqahzf (Islamic jurists) in their favour. But this also raises an important question, which we must deal with. Would sexual inequality prevalent in the past in the Muslim societies be binding on the modern generations too? Or to ask the same question in reverse, ie can we be justified in projecting our modern values in the past? Should we expect that past generations follow our norms of sexual equality? Obviously, this would be an unfair position and so it would be equally unfair to expect that we blindly imitate the past generations and their leaders' opinion. We have to evolve our own norms and values. But many of us do not accept changes in norms and values and consider it against Divine will.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, commenting on this verse says that the Qur'an through these four words (Jehu:-mo mithiul Iadhi 'ulayhinmz) has made revolutionary declaration of equality of men and women. According to him these four words have given women all that was their right but they had never got. These four words lifted women from the dust of deprivation and humility and made her sit on the throne of dignity and equality. He also explains the words "and the men are a degree above women" by saying that they were earning and feeding them and the Maulana, it is interesting to note, also clarifies that men do not get any distinction by birth over women. If women earn and run the family, women would also have this distinction of being a degree above men. Thus the statement of Qur'an "men are a degree above (women)" is functional and not biological, in any way. The meaning of the scripture reveals itself differently in different cultures and social conditions. Our jurists and the 'ulama could not

have understood the meaning in their social and economic environment which we can understand today. Thus the interpretation of the Qur'an should not be static leading to freezing of Qur'an's meaning in one particular age. While we should not fault the interpretations of eminent jurists and 'ulama of earlier periods, we should not surrender our own right to understand and interpret the Qur'an under our own circumstances. Thus our struggle is against the status quo approach to the Qur'an and it is our duty to develop a new hermeneutics of the Qur'an which takes into account the economic and social needs and functions of our own times. Women are playing very vital role in our society and have even become economic leaders and managers. Thus the old hermeneutics cannot take us very far today.

When women were so aware of their rights in the time of the Prophet and were active on religious and social fronts, how can they remain passive today and accept the role assigned to them by the orthodox 'ulama that refuse to take into account the new socio-economic dynamics? It has always been a human endeavour to understand divine intentions as sincerely as one could. If our forefathers did it we can also do it today with same sincerity but different understanding mediated by our socio—economic needs.

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