

Scholarly and Economic Empowerment of Women in early Islamic Era

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ABSTRACT: *This paper rests on the assumption that Islam, in essence, is a socio-political and economic movement that strives to establish a society based on the principles of justice, peace and economic prosperity. It reveals how, in the early Islamic phase, this movement, true to its spirit emancipated and enabled not only men, but women also. It empowered women, lifted them out of ignorance and gave them education and through them spread it. Not only that, but Islam accepted their right to earn and facilitated them to play an active role in society. Thus, the paper looks at scholarly and economic empowerment of women in early Islamic era. The paper cites the most authentic sources from the Islamic tradition of scholarship to establish its case and implies that any effort to show that Islam does not believe in emancipation and empowerment of women can be easily rebutted by harking back to the initial Islamic era.*

Keywords: Women Rights in Islam, Early Islam, Islamic Empowerment of Women, Early Islamic Women Scholars, Right to Earn

In the history of mankind, opinion about the role of women in society has always remained a matter of great significance. It is very difficult to describe the status of women before the advent of Islam in definite terms due to many contradictory facts reported in history. On the one hand, it is found that Arab women had considerable influence over their families and tribes; during times of war, opinion and advice from women were given great importance and indoors their decision was considered to be final. On the other hand, the birth of a baby girl was considered to be a matter of shame and a cause of disgrace. Women, at times, were given mythical status with a prominent position in society; while on the other hand, they were relegated to the dark peripheries of the society as well.

In the 21st century the debate about the role of women has acquired a profound status. The wave regarding women rights which had been initiated in the west during the twentieth century has not only brought along western cultural specificities to the third world but it has also spread false knowledge about various aspects of human history. One popularly believed notion about Islam that seems to have deliberately been spread is that it has been regressive as far as the role of women is considered. This paper contends to clear the haze around this subject. The paper cites authentic sources from the Islamic tradition in building its argument regarding empowerment of women that was enabled during the period of early Islam. It contextualizes the rights that were conferred upon women during the rise of Islam in 7th century A.D., shares evidence from the lives of Prophet Muhammad's (S.W) wives and women companions to reveal highlight their active role in society. These evidences, for the sake of brevity, in the present attempt, will be shared from the domains of scholarship and economics. Before these examples are shared from the early Islamic world, it would be pertinent to briefly survey the situation that existed regarding the role of women in society before the advent of Islam.

Greece, which is considered to be the cradle of Western civilization, was far from a society whose beliefs regarding women were just. According to Encyclopedia Britannica: "Women's status had degenerated to that of childbearing slaves. Wives were secluded in their homes, had no education and few rights, and were considered by their husbands no better than chattel" (Brown 3). Since the society was based on superstitious dogma, the treatment meted out to women was not fair. Women had been victims of these misleading dogmas. For instance, the ancient Greeks thought that women had fewer teeth than men. Bertrand Russell mocked it in the

following words: “Aristotle maintained that women had fewer teeth than men; although he was twice married, it never occurred to him to verify this statement by examining his wives mouth” (Russell 17).

The situation regarding the role of women in Rome was very similar to that of Greece:

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 eye of the law, women were regarded as imbeciles. (Britannica)

The following quote from a Rabbi also reflects the general attitude of women towards societies that predated Islam. It also reflects an attitude, which perhaps, continues to permeate many patriarchal societies of the world. Such societies still believe that, “A woman should only serve without asking any questions, they are not to be educated. Her absolution is only in giving birth to more and more children” (Brown 14).

The situation remained the same in Christianity as it was in Judaism. The clergy tyrannized women for many years in the name of witch-hunt. One of the arguments was that when Satan tried to disguise himself in the shape of a human body due to some reason he was unable to disguise himself completely into a man, instead he carried many weaknesses and human defects, and no one else but the woman among the humans was the exact portrait of it. So woman and Satan are two side of the same image. Due to the inappropriate role of the church an important part of the society was paralyzed. In 1735 a law was passed in England, which was called the Witchcraft Act of 1735. In Germany sorcery remained punishable by law until late eighteenth century (Wikipedia). Women had to bear severe punishments, went to prison and had to face the gallows. This is how woman were given lower ranks in every matter of the life (Brown 14).

In the same manner Christianity made a false dogma about woman that she was the one responsible for Adam’s expulsion from paradise. Woman was considered a deceiver or temptress in Christianity, and hence was given a secondary status as she was believed to be responsible for Adam’s downfall. With reference to this Encyclopedia Britannica writes as: “They were regarded as temptresses, responsible for the fall of Adam, and as second class human beings” (Britannica).

Like in Christianity and Judaism, women were also disregarded in Hinduism as they were not given the status they deserved. Although there is evidence pointing to an ancient past of matriarchal society, yet, afterwards, the situation changed. The goddesses of the matriarchal society were replaced with male gods. Though Oosha, Aranyani and Sareswatti were worshiped but all this was only due to their popularity, their allure and fascination (Malik 23). In the beginning of the Arian reign women were not so much disrespected as compared to later periods. They did not face funeral pyres at the time of their husbands' deaths. Things changed for women in the reign of Ramaiyan. One can perceive such change through Hindu folk tales. Afterwards such situation remained prevalent. Therefore even the thought of the re-marrying of a widow after the death of her husband began to be considered a crime. Consequently satti became a commonly practiced custom. In matters pertaining inheritance, Hinduism treated women in a manner similar to other religions (Malik 23).

The holy Quran is very clear about the rights of human beings and it does not discriminate on the basis of gender. It offers a mission-statement of all prophets of God. It says:

لقد ارسلنا رسلنا بالبينات وانزلنا معهم الكتاب والميزان ليقوم الناس بالقسط (الحديد 25).

This verse clearly states the purpose of the messengers of God. It is to establish justice among human beings. Based on a reading of all the incidents that are mentioned in the Holy Quran, it seems that none of the prophets has adopted a partial attitude in the matters concerning women. Queen Bilquees is asked to maintain justice by Prophet Sulaiman (A.S); the wife of Pharaoh who behaved courteously with Moses (A.S) has been admired; the story of Maryam (A.S) and her mother has been presented in an exemplary manner in the Quran due to their religious and social contributions. Through these incidents narrated in the holy text, the outlook of the prophets towards the women can be analyzed and it can be seen how the prophets did not discriminate against women on the basis of their gender. But as the followers of all the prophets have changed their religions, their behavior towards women has also deteriorated to baser levels that have been mentioned before.

Women in ancient societies:

Historically Islam has been very liberal and progressive in granting property rights to women. The fact is that there were no property rights for

Hindu women until 1956 when the Hindu Code Bill was passed whereas Islam had granted these rights to the Muslim women over 1400 years ago (Sachar).

We can conclude from the above-mentioned details that before Islam the decision regarding the status of women in Europe remained in an undefined form. In every period of the history brazen crimes were committed in this regard. Even the believers of the Holy Scriptures made woman a victim of brutality while ignoring the real teachings of their own religion.

The Collective Activity of the Wives of Prophet (PBUH) and Sahabiyat

During the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (S.W), there is overwhelming evidence that suggest the empowered status of women. The wives of the prophet, who have been accorded a special status in Islamic tradition in terms of respect and regard played exemplary roles in many walks of life. Women performed major social services during this early Islamic phase.

Education

Before the advent of Islam in Makkah, there were only five women in total who knew how to read while two of them were unable to write (Kahala 300). The following hadith of Prophet Muhammad (S.W) would be helpful in understanding the attitude he wanted to inculcate among his followers regarding women “Whosoever possessed a female servant (slave girl), and brought her up well and educated her well, then set her free and arranged her marriage, would get twice the reward” (Hanbal).

The Prophet who gave such an importance to the education of *slave girls*, how could he not induce his followers to ensure education of free women? Once the prophet was requested by women:

“In matters pertaining to learning, men have taken precedence over us; so please specify a separate day for us. He thus designated a day [every week] in which he used to teach them” (Bukhari *H* 99). Malik bin Haweris that they were a few youngsters who stayed with the prophet for twenty days and when the prophet realized that we had to leave for home, he told us: “Go to your wives and children and live amongst them and teach them matters pertaining to religion and ask them to act upon them” (Bukhari, Al’Azaan). Kholā binte Qais states: “I used to listen to the sermon of

Prophet Muhammad (S.W) though I used to be in the last row of women” (Ibne Saad 216).

The active role of prophet’s wives especially is worth observing. Some of them were considered authority in learning and scholarship. The most prominent among them is Hazrat Ayesha (R.A). Mahmood Bin Labaid says: “Most of the wives of the Prophet learnt Prophet’s Ahadith by heart, like Aisha and Umme Salma” (Ibne Sa’ad 375). Ibn-e-Hajar said:

A large number of people gained knowledge from Hazrat Ayesha (R.A) and preached it. A major part of orders of Sharia and manners are referred to her to the extent that it is said that one fourth of the orders of Shariah are narrated by Hazrat Ayesha (R.A) (Ibne Hajar, Fat’h ul Bari 107).

Abu Musa Ash’ri says:

“Never did we, the companions of the Prophet, faced a difficulty of the sort in which we, after having asked a question from Aisha (R.A), did not find an answer.” (Tirmizi *H* 3818). Ibn-e-Saad says: “Aisha used to issue the decree (Fatwa) in the reign of Umar and Usman, till her death (374).

Hazrat Ayesha had more than 200 students. Among them some of the prominent names are Abu Musa Ashari, Umer-o-bin-Alaas, Abdullah Bin Zubair, Abdullah Bin Abbas, Ibn-e-Umer and other such learners of hadiths as Abu Hurera and scholars of Islam: Alqama bin Qais, Saeed Bin Almusuib (Ibne Hajar “Atahzeeb” 434). The total number of narrations described by Hazrat Ayesha are 2210 (Abu-al- Falah 63). Ibn-e-hajar stands first among those who quoted most Ahadith. Among the first seven companions of prophet who quoted the most Ahadith from Prophet Muhammad, Hazrat Ayesha stands fourth (Abu-al- Falah 63).

Hazrat Ayesha’s (R.A) intellect was not just confined to the knowledge of Shariah as she had full grip on other subjects as well. She was skilled in medicine, history, literature, speech, poetry and also in the knowledge of jurisdiction from the Quran and Ahadith (Ibne Hajar “Atahzeeb” 435). Urva Bin Zubair (R.A) says: “I have not seen any person who has more knowledge of Quran, its injunctions, things allowed and forbidden, poetry, traditions of the Arabs and their lineage than Aisha (R.A)” (Eilam un Nisaa 106).

Hazrat Um-e-Salma (R.A) is another wife of Prophet Muhammad (S.W) whose stock of knowledge was the second highest among the pious wives after Hazrat Ayesha (R.A). Her knowledge included medicine, poetry and

philology in addition to her knowledge about religion. Mahmood Bin Labaid says:

“Most of the wives of the Prophet learnt Prophet’s Ahadith by heart, like Aisha and Umme Salma” (Ibne Sa’ad 375). In astute understanding of the Quran and Ahadith Hazrat Um-e-Salma (R.A) was such an expert that she used to give verdicts on any newly formed problem. Her verdicts are so great in number that one can compile them in the form of a booklet (Al’Jozi 244).

When the prophet stayed at the cave of Sawr for three days after his migration, Hazrat Asma Bint-e-abi Bakar (R.A) is that courageous Sahabiya who used to inform the prophet (PBUH) about the daily situation, and due to this reason the infidels beat her up. The fact that she raised a son like Abdullah Bin Zubair (R.A) speaks volumes for her understanding of the Islamic movement. The number of Ahadith narrated by her is 156 (Eilam un Nisaa 106).

Asma bint-e-Umais (R.A) was a profound scholar who occasionally consulted about different problems with the prophet (PBUH). She not only had the knowledge about hadiths but she also used to help in understanding the hidden truth behind dreams (Az’Zahabi 117). Hadiths quoted by her are 60 in number, to which many Sahabas and followers narrated from Prophet (PBUH) (Ibne Hajar “Al’Asaaba” 117).

Hazrat Nafeesa (R.A):

Among Hazrat Ali’s (R.A) children, Hazrat Nafeesa (R.A) was so well-known regarding her understanding of Islam, that even scholars such as Imam Shafi regularly attended her lectures in Egypt (Ibne Khalqaan 424).

Fatima bint–e-Khataab was the person behind Hazrat Umer Farooq’s (R.A), conversion to Islam. Everyone is aware of the prestige Islam got from Umer Farooq (R.A). His sister Fatima (R.A) was the person who enabled him to embrace Islam. When Hazrat Umer Farooq (R.A) got tired of beating his brother in law and his sister’s body was also severely wounded, in this condition, the following words came out of his sister’s mouth “Umer! Do whatever you want but Islam won’t leave this heart now”. These words left a peculiar impact on Hazrat Umer (R.A), he then looked with affection towards his sister whose body was bleeding and converted to Islam (Shiblee 12). One of the female followers named Labena was a maid before the acceptance of Islam, Hazrat Umer (R.A)

used to beat her so hard that when he got tired of beating he would say ‘let me catch my breath then I will beat you more’ but the maid remained steadfast in her faith (Shiblee 35).

Hazrat Um-e-Shareek used to preach Islam secretly among the women of Quraish and invited them to enter Islam, when the Quresh became aware of this they threw all these women out of Makkah (Ibne Hajar “Al’ Asaabah” 466).

Hazrat Um-e-Sulaim (R.A):

The passion for preaching Islam among Sahabiyat was so intense that they didn’t care about their possessions and valuables. With regard to this some of the mentioned incidents of Um-e-Saleem (R.A) suggest that when Hazrat Abu Talha (R.A) wanted to marry her in the state of being a non-believer, Um e Saleem (R.A) declared his acceptance of Islam her Mehar (the dower of the bride).

The evidence of women’s empowerment in the early Islamic society are numerous. Consider the following advice of a sahabia, as a testimony, to the most powerful caliph of the world, Umer:

O Umer there was a time when I saw you in the bazaars of Akkaz, at that time you were known as Ameer, you worked as a shepherd and then the time came when people started to call you Umer and now you are recognized as Ameer ul Momineen. Look! keep fearing Allah Almighty in matters related to the public and remember that the person who fears from the grip of the Almighty considers a stranger like a close relative and the person who does not fear death, there will always be a chance that he will lose the thing he desires the most (Ibne Hajar “al’ Asaabah” 290).

One can deduce from the afore-mentioned quote the empowered state of women in the society where a person from the so-called weaker gender had the audacity to advise the ruling caliph about matters pertaining to governance.

The wives of prophet Muhammad (S.W) and other sahabiyat participated in the acquisition of knowledge as well as in the propagation of Islam with such zeal and enthusiasm that the process remained intact among the Muslim women for centuries. In this sense Allah Almighty blessed the daughter of Imam Malik who is famously known as Imam Dar-e-Hijra (Imam of the Abode of Emigration) with such command on hadiths that whenever a student made a mistake while reading his book (Mawataa) her

daughter knocked the door so Imam Malik would ask the student: “Read it again! You are at mistake; therefore the student would read it again knowing he had made a mistake before” (Ibne Hajjaj 215).

Hazrat Umrah Bint-e-Abdul Rehman was the successor of the knowledge of Hazrat Ayesha Sadiqa (R.A). Imam Zahri says that he had begun to visit her gatherings on the suggestion of some intellectuals and came to know that she was an ocean of knowledge. She had such a high status in terms of her knowledge of the ahadith that many authoritative figures of ahadith like Imam Zahri, Yahya bin Syed Al-Qatan and Abu baker bin Hizm used to appear before her to benefit from her knowledge. Her reputation with regard to having a firm grip on knowledge was so much that Hazrat Umer bin Abdul Aziz ordered Ibn-e-Hazam to write down the ahadith narrated by Umrah Bint-e-Abdul Rehman (Ibne Sa’ad 480).

Hajeema Bin Hiyad Mashqiya was a Taa’bia (one who had benefited from the companions of the prophet) Scholar. She had full command over hadiths and fiqh. She had such a strong grip on the knowledge of ahadith that the narrators of the sayings of the Prophet who had a significant place in narrating ahadith were among her students. The names of some of them are as follow;

Salim bin Abbi-el jaid, Zaid bin Aslam, Shehr bin Hoshab, Sufwan bin sufwan, Ismail bin ubaid ullah bin abi el mahajir, Abu hazim bin deenar el madini, Tallah bin Abdullah bin karaiz, Abdullah bin abi zakariya, Usman bin hayan ud el mashqi, Atta ul kaikhrani, Makhol shami, Rja bin Hewa, Memon bin Mehran, and Habib bin abi Umrah (Eilam 205).

A famous woman named Ayesha bint e Ali bin Muhammad who lived in the 8th century, was an extraordinary narrator of the sayings of the Prophet and a scholar of the Quran. Many great scholars came to her to seek knowledge (Eilam 18).

In the 9th century a woman named Fatima Bint e Ahmad bin Yahya not only had touched the heights of knowledge and intellect but also had the ability to draw out conclusions of Islamic ordinances and she used to discuss many issues with her father (Eilam 31). In these events an interesting aspect was that her husband was a scholar and had his commitments with teaching and learning. Whenever he faced any problem during his teaching he would come home and consult the matter with his wife who would solve the problem, and when he came out to answer the

specified question to his students, the students would bluntly reply that the clarification was not yours but from the person behind the curtain.

During the time of middle centuries many women established educational institutions and from these institutions not only women but men also got benefited. So the ancient principal mosque of Zaitonia, Tunisia is the educational institute of Islam which was built by Ataf; the wife of the leader Banu Hafs in the year 1283 in Qaisroon (present-day Tunisia). Many great scholars belonged to this place; Ibn-e-khaldoon got his early education from this institute. In Egypt (School) Madrassa tul Ashoria, was built by Ashora bint e Saruh. Madrassa al qabtiya was made by princess Asmat udin bin adadi. We can find many educational institutes in Damascus which were constructed by women, including Madrassa Al-sahabiya Shezadi Rabia bin Najam udin, Madrassa alazarviya, Shezadi bint e Noor udola, Madrassa shamiya abramiya aljavaniyah shezadi silt el sham bint e Najamudin, Madrassa al atabkiyah Khatoon bint e azadin wife of Alashraf alnaiye and Madrassa tul Maghiya built by an ordinary woman; the wife of Shuja udin aldmagh are among the famous one's (Haisiat-e-Niswan 95-6).

Economic Activities:

There are many Sahabiyat who had the ability and aptitude to earn their living through various economic activities. The Prophet (PBUH) never opposed these activities instead on many occasions benefits emerged from their abilities regarding economics. That is the reason an economic responsibility was consigned by the Prophet (PBUH) to Shifa Bint e Abdullah (R.A) in the bazaar of Madina where women used to bring the material related to trade (Hamidullah 265).

Among the wives of the Prophet (PBUH) Hazrat Khatija (R.A) had her business, established before Islam that remained intact even after her acceptance of Islam and the Prophet (PBUH) never stopped her. Rather on one occasion he appreciated her saying that she had assisted him a lot financially (Hanbal *H* 1952).

Most of the wives of the Prophet (PBUH) earned their living by themselves and spent in collective goodwill.

Hazrat Jaber Bin Abdullah says: when my aunt got divorced from his husband, she intended to earn her living by cutting trees and selling them during Id'dah (the waiting period of a widow consisting four months and

ten days), a man strictly forbade her to do so. My aunt went to the Prophet (PBUH) in search of the information regarding this issue, the Prophet (PBUH) allowed her to proceed with her work (Abu Daod *H* 1952),

With this perspective there is another incident that Hazrat Asma (R.A), the daughter of Hazrat Abu Baker (R.A) was married to Hazrat Zubair (R.A). They migrated to Madina from Makkah and were a victim of poverty. In order to provide them the necessities the Prophet (PBUH) gave Hazrat Zubair a piece of land which was two miles away from Madina. Hazrat Isma (R.A) says that it was her responsibility to cut and bring the fodder of horse and camel of Zubair (R.A) and says: "I used to carry the date stones on my head from Zubair's land given to him by Allah's Messenger and this land was two third Farsakh (about two miles) from my house" (Bukhari *H* 1952).

Many evidences are found regarding some Sahabiyat that they did different kinds of businesses. Previously we have mentioned Hazrat Khadija's business. Besides it is found about Malika Um el Saib that: "She had a business of perfumes" (Ibne A'seer 548). Regarding Hazrat Hafsa (R.A) Ibn e Saad says: "She had business of silk" (Ibne Sa'ad 370).

The Sahabiyaat after the Prophet (PBUH) also carried on their economic activities and this liberty remained with them well into the reign of the rightly-guided calips. Hazrat Umer (R.A) not only consulted Hazrat Um e Sulaman daughter of Abi Hatma regarding trade issues, but also made her supervisor of the bazaar and trade activities. In this context Ibn e Hajer says: "Umar (R.A) preferred her opinion, had great regard for her, and assigned her distinguished position. And sometimes designated her on the inspection of matters (cases) related to market" (Ibne Hajer "Al'Asaabah" 519).

We can conclude by looking at the afore-mentioned examples that Islam, in essence, has been pro-women and has not only accepted their rights as equal to men but has also, in its initial days, ensured their empowerment. In the earliest societies established by Islam, women were empowered in the fields of education and economy where they took a leading role and contributed to the collective well-being of the society.

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