

Women In Islam

Status Of Women In Islam

The status of women in society is based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the hadith of our prophet (ﷺ). In order to understand the status of women in Islam, we must have a brief survey of the status of women in the pre-Islamic era and it is only after that that we can see whether the status of women has changed or not.

Before the coming of Islam, women had no status. For instance, the rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is descent traced through males only to the exclusion of females. Their consent in marriage was not considered, they were the purchased properties of their husbands, they were like slaves, they had no civil or public offices, could not be witnesses, sureties, tutors, etc. Girls were killed or sold on the market as chattels. They were ill-treated and had no say in the society till the coming of the prophet (ﷺ) of Islam alongside the Qur'an. After the coming of Islam everything changed for women and the following lines are examples of in some fields of change. It is said in the Qur'an that 'O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them two has spread a multitude of men and women' (4:1). It is also said that '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' (4:34). These 2 verses are explicitly in accordance to the rights and status of women in Islam. In the first verse it is a direct order from Allah for men to keep their duties towards Allah and in the second verse, Allah elaborates on these duties as being protectors and maintainers of their wives and women. Allah gave the specific reasons as being more strong and responsible towards women and as both are supporters to each other. These 2 verses are enough to say that the rights of women must be respected and the status of women must be elevated in Islam.

As such, the Qur'an clearly elaborates on the status of women in different fields, For instance, in the **field of responsibility**, it is said that 'every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds' (74:38) meaning that just like for women, men also will be accountable for their deeds. The implication here is that Allah wanted to make men realise that whatever they have done or how they have treated their wives or women, they will be accountable for their deeds. Thus irresponsibility and ill-treatment towards women must not exist.

In the **field of reward**, it is said that '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 their actions' (16:97) meaning that the deeds of women same as men are valued and praised by Allah. As such the deeds of women are not taken for granted concluding that women have their status in this society.

In terms of **religious obligations**, such as the Daily Prayers, Fasting, Poor-due, 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 into the mosque during the days of the Prophet (ﷺ) and thereafter attendance at the Friday congregational prayers is optional for them while it is mandatory for men (on Friday).

On **social field**, there is no female infanticide and it is considered as a crime as the Qur'an says that 'And when the female (infant) buried alive - is questioned, for what crime she was killed' (81:8-9). Islam requires kind and just **treatment for girls**. Among the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) we find

‘Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise’ (Musnad of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, No. 1957). As a wife, the Quran 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. In order to show the status and importance of wives in Islam, Allah says "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." (30:21). Wives are signs and means of rest, peace of mind, love and mercy but not of persecutions, oppositions, disgrace or ill-treatment.

In the **field of marriage**, Islam has given women rights to choose their partners. There is no forced marriage in Islam and women have rights to ask for divorce. Ibn 'Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), 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 it is said that the girl decided willingly to stay after the choice was given by saying ‘Actually I accept this marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right (to force a husband on them)’ (Ibn Majah, No. 1873). It is also decreed that woman has the full right to her Mahr / dowry which is presented to her by her husband and is included in the nuptial contract, and that such ownership does not transfer to her father or husband.

In this **family life**, both husband and wife have the same rights as Allah says ‘And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them’ (2:228) and that ‘degree’ mentioned here is that of responsibility (Qiwama (maintenance and protection)) of the husband towards the wife.

Moreover, both partners have the **rights to mutual decision** as Allah says ‘If they (husband wife) desire to wean the child by mutual consent and (after) consultation, there is no blame on them’ (2:233) giving the wife a say in the procreation system.

The **behaviour of husbands** towards their wives must be out of kindness throughout their married lives. Allah says ‘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’ (4:19) meaning that husbands must be patient and avoid criticising their wives out of ignorance of unseen knowledge. The Prophet (ﷺ) said that ‘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).

If ever there is a **case of divorce**, Allah orders husbands to be kind though in such situation as ‘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) (2:231).’

Considering the **status of a mother** in Islam, Allah says ‘And we have enjoined upon man (to be good) to his parents: His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness (31:14)’, ‘Your Lord has decreed that you worship none save Him, and that you be kind to your parents (17:23) and there is a hadith where a man came to our Prophet (ﷺ) asking: ‘O Messenger of God, who among the people is the most worthy of my good company? The Prophet (ﷺ) said, Your mother. The man said then who else: The Prophet (ﷺ) said, Your mother. The man asked, Then who else? The Prophet (ﷺ) said, Your mother. The man asked, Then who else? Only then did the Prophet (ﷺ) said, Your father. (Sahih al-Bukhari 5971) and again a famous saying of the Prophet (ﷺ) is: "Paradise is at the feet of mothers." (Sunan an-Nasa'i 3104). These are to show to what extent mothers are respected and loved in Islam.

Islam decreed a right of which woman was deprived both before Islam and after it, 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. With regard to the woman's right to seek employment 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 Hanifah (رضي الله عنه) and Al Tabari holding there is nothing wrong with it. In addition, Islam restored to woman the right of inheritance as Allah says '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 (4:7).' She has no obligation to spend on her family out of such properties or out of her income after marriage.

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 Quran and in Islamic history we find examples of women who participated in serious discussions and gave allegiance to the Prophet (ﷺ) himself as Allah says 'O Prophet! when believing women come to you giving you a pledge (60: 12) meaning that women had rights to accept a leader and to swear allegiance to him. As such we can also see that women have been given the choice to work. It is said in the Qur'an concerning the history of Hazrat Musah (as) that 'When he arrived at Midian's waters, he found a group of men watering [their flocks], and beside them two women keeping their flocks back, so he said, 'What is the matter with you two?' They said, 'We cannot water [our flocks] until the shepherds take their sheep away: our father is a very old man.' He watered their flocks for them, withdrew into the shade, and prayed, 'My Lord, I am in dire need of whatever good thing You may send me' (28: 23-24). At another place Allah says that 'they will not be blamed, nor will there be any blame if you wish to engage a wet nurse, provided you pay as agreed in a fair manner. Be mindful of Allah, knowing that He sees everything you do' (2:233). These two verses are enough to say that women have the full rights to get engaged in economic activities and to have a wage or salary. Besides, there are hadith where there were wives of companions of the prophet (ﷺ) who were engaged at a moment of their lives in working field like Hazrat Bibi Khadijah (رضي الله عنها), Hazrat Bibi Faatima (رضي الله عنها), Hazrat Hind (رضي الله عنها), Hazrat Haalima Sa'diyah (رضي الله عنها) and many others.

These are few instances listed above among so many others that the status of girls, women, wives and mothers has been elevated by Islam. Above all these examples, the foremost one is the **rights for education** where the first verse revealed upon the prophet (ﷺ) was 'Read' (96: 1) and the hadith 'Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim' (Ibn Majah Book 1, Hadith 229) indicating the importance of both secular and religious studies for both men and women leading to knowledge of their rights, duties and responsibilities in their lives.

Women At Work

The topic of women at work has always been of great controversy. This is due mainly to the differences of opinions of the different Islamic scholars. There are those who advocate that the place of women is at home and some say that women have the rights to go out from their homes to work. The following paragraphs will elaborate on the topic with clear examples.

Those advocating that women must stay at home bring forward verses of the Qur'an and Hadith from the prophet (ﷺ). Among these verses it is stated in the Qur'an that Allah says 'And stay in your houses, and do not display yourselves like that of the times of ignorance' (33: 33). According to this verse, it is clear that this is an order from Allah to women to stay in their houses. The order continues in the sense that women have not been allowed to display themselves like the women of pre Islamic Arabia and as such they have been ordered to cover themselves using the 'hijab' or staying at home. There is also a hadith that is used where the prophet (ﷺ) said 'Their houses are better for them'. This is from Abu Dawood hadith 567. This is about the permission to go to the mosque where women are allowed to do so but our Nabi (ﷺ) said that staying at home for their swalaat is better for them. According to Tafsir ibn Kathir, "And stay in your houses" means "stay in your houses and do not come out except for a purpose.

One of the purposes mentioned in Shari`ah is prayer in the mosque, so long as the conditions are fulfilled, as the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said ‘Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from the mosques of Allah, but have them go out without wearing fragrance’ (Abu Dawood hadith 565). According to such scholars, this explanation makes it abundantly clear that what Allah forbids for women is to move out of their houses showing off their physical charms and beauty. He instructs them to stay in their houses because their real sphere of activity is their home and not the world outside. However, if they have to move out of the house for an outdoor duty, they should not move out as the women used to do in the pre-Islamic days of ignorance. For it does not behove (it is not proper for) the women of a Muslim society to walk out fully embellished; to make their face and figure conspicuous by adornments and tight-fitting or transparent dresses, and to walk coquettishly. Some may advocate that the environment in this modern world may not be proper for women to go out from their houses. But when it comes to the searching for education, performing hajj and Umrah, going to the mosque, consulting the doctor, visiting the sick relatives, for passport and national identity requirements, and many others, are our daughters, wives, mothers and women still not allowed to go out from their homes.

However, according to the other group of Islamic scholars, it is permissible for a woman to go to work. There is no clear-cut verse of the Qur’an or any hadith indicating that women are restricted at home and are not allowed to work. However, taking form the above verse and hadith, it is clear that women have the rights to move out of their houses based on specific conditions like it is mentioned in not to display their beauties and not to apply fragrance. Allah says in the Qur’an as an order to our Nabi (ﷺ) ‘O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them when they go abroad. That will be better, that so they may be recognised and not annoyed (33: 59). It is clear from this verse that the wives and daughters of our Nabi (ﷺ) and the wives of the believers had been long authorised to get out from their houses under one condition, that is, to draw their cloaks close round them meaning to cover their body respectfully. In that same verse, Allah gave two reasons and advantages in doing so; one in being known as Muslim women and second to avoid being molested psychologically and physically by mischief mongers. Islam in so many instances has given women the rights to participate in the active social, religious or economic lives of the society. This can be proven by the participation of some of the great women in Islam as follows.

We have **Hazrat Khadija b. Khuwaylid** (رضي الله عنها) (d. 620). Even before her famous marriage to the Prophet (ﷺ), she was an important figure in her own right, being a successful merchant and one of the elite figures of Mecca.

Secondly, we have **Nusayba b. Ka‘b al-Anṣārīyya** (d. 634). Also known as Umm ‘Ammara, she was a member of the Banū Najjār tribe and one of the earliest converts to Islam in Medina. As a Companion of the Prophet (ﷺ), there were many virtues attributed to her. She is most remembered, however, for taking part in the Battle of Uhud (625), in which she carried sword and shield and fought against the Meccans. She shielded the Prophet (ﷺ) from enemies during the battle and even sustained several lance wounds and arrows as she cast herself in front of him to protect him.

Thirdly, **Khawla b. al-Azwar** (رضي الله عنها) (d. 639) was another contemporary of the Prophet (ﷺ). She is best known for her participation in the Battle of Yarmuk (636) against the Byzantines. According to later narratives of the Islamic conquests, authors described her as having the skill and fighting ability of the famed Muslim general Khālīd ibn al-Walīd. It is nonetheless notable that scholars such as al-Waqidi and al-Azdi, writing in the eighth and ninth centuries, found it necessary to ascribe such importance to a female warrior in the conquests.

Fourthly, **‘Ā’isha b. Abī Bakr** (رضي الله عنها) (d. 678) is a figure that requires almost no introduction, ‘Ā’isha was the wife of the Prophet (ﷺ) who had perhaps the most influence on the Muslim community after his death. She played a central role in the political opposition to the third and fourth caliphs Uthmān ibn ‘Affān and ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, even leading an army against the latter at Basra in 656. Although she retired from political life after her defeat, she continued to play a major role as a transmitter of Islamic teachings. She is one of the major narrators of hadith. In many ways, she is among the most controversial

figures in early Islam, especially since the implications of her actions for women's participation in scholarship, political life, and the public sphere clashed with later conservative conceptions of the role of women.

Fifthly, we have **Zaynab b. 'Alī** (رضي الله عنها) (d. 681) who was the grand-daughter of the Prophet (ﷺ) through his daughter Fāṭima (رضي الله عنها) (d. 633) and her husband 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (رضي الله عنه) (d. 661). She was among the most illustrious and admirable figures of the Ahl al-Bayt (Family of the Prophet (ﷺ)) and played a central role both during and after the Massacre at Karbala (680), where her brother al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī (رضي الله عنه), and 72 of her nephews and other brothers were killed by the Umayyads. For a time, she was the effective leader of the Ahl al-Bayt and served as the primary defender of the cause of her brother, al-Ḥusayn (رضي الله عنه). Her strength, patience, and wisdom makes her one of the most important women in early Islam.

Sixthly, we have **Rābi'a al-'Adawīyya** (رضي الله عنها) (d. 801) who was one of the most important mystics (or Sufis) in the Muslim tradition, spending much of her early life as a slave in southern Iraq before attaining her freedom. She is considered to be one of the founders of the Sufi school of "Divine Love," which emphasizes the loving of God for His own sake, rather than out of fear of punishment or desire for reward. She lays this out in one of her poems: "O God! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship You for Your Own sake, hold not against me Your everlasting Beauty."

Seventhly, **Lubna of Cordoba** (d. 984) who was originally a slave-girl of Spanish origin, rose to become one of the most important figures in the Umayyad palace in Cordoba. She was the palace secretary of the caliphs 'Abd al-Rahmān III (d. 961) and his son al-Hakam b. 'Abd al-Rahmān (d. 976). She was also a skilled mathematician and presided over the royal library, which consisted of over 500,000 books. According to the famous Andalusī scholar Ibn Bashkuwāl: "She excelled in writing, grammar, and poetry. Her knowledge of mathematics was also immense and she was proficient in other sciences as well. There were none in the Umayyad palace as noble as her."

Ninthly, **Al-Malika al-Ḥurra Arwa al-Sulayhi** (d. 1138) whose full name was Arwa b. Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Sulayhī ruled as the queen of Yemen (1067 to 1138) in her own right. She was an Ismā'īlī Shi'i and was well-versed in various religious sciences, Qur'an, hadith, as well as poetry and history. Chroniclers describe her as being incredibly intelligent.

Tenthly, **Fāṭima b. Abī al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Muhammad b. Ghālib al-Ansārī al-Sharrāṭ** (d. 1216) was one of the most learned women in al-Andalus during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Her engagement with works of legal theory, jurisprudence as well as mysticism makes it apparent that she was familiar with a wide variety of Islamic sciences.

Another name was **Razia Sultan** (d. 1240) who was the ruler of the Sultanate of Delhi between 1236 and 1240. Her father, Shams al-Dīn (r. 1210-1236) had Razia designated as his heir before his death, therefore making her the official ruler of the sultanate. She was a fairly effective ruler and was a major patron of learning, establishing schools and libraries across northern India. In all matters, she behaved like a sultan, leading armies, sitting upon the throne and even adopting the same royal dress as her father; to the outrage of many, she also insisted on appearing unveiled in public.

Another woman was **Shajar al-Durr** (d. 1257) who was the widow of the Ayyubid sultan al-Sālih Ayyūb (r. 1240-1249) and played an important role in Egyptian politics following her husband's death. She was most likely of Turkic origin, beginning her life as a slave-girl in the Ayyubid court. By 1250, she had become the ruler (or *sultana*) of Egypt; her reign is generally considered to mark the beginning of the Mamluk sultanate of Egypt. She played an important role in the preparations in defending northern Egypt against the Seventh Crusade, defeating the crusaders (although she herself was not present) at the Battle of Fariskur (1250) and taking King Louis IX of France captive. She was the effective head-of-state.

Another one was **Zaynab b. Ahmad (d. 1339)**. She was perhaps one of the most eminent Islamic scholars of the fourteenth century. Zaynab belonged to the Ḥanbalī school of jurisprudence and resided in Damascus. She had acquired a number of *ijazas* (diplomas or certifications) in various fields, most notably *hadith*. In the early fourteenth century, she taught such books as *Sahīh Bukhāri*, *Sahīh Muslim*, the *Muwatta'* of Mālik b. Anas, the *Shamā'il* of al-Tirmidhī, and al-Tahāwī's *Sharḥ Ma'ānī al-Athār*. It is important to point out that Zaynab was only one of hundreds of female scholars of hadith during the medieval period in the Muslim world.

Last but not least we have **Parī Khān Khānum (d. 1578)**. A Safavid princess and daughter of Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524-1576) was one of the most influential Iranian women in the sixteenth century. She was renowned as an educated woman and was well-versed in traditional Islamic sciences, such as jurisprudence. She was also known to be an excellent poet.

It becomes clear, then, that far from being confined to their homes twiddling their thumbs, Muslim women will need to emerge very often in order to fulfil the obligations of Islam - such as seeking and imparting knowledge - and to perform social and moral duties in their society. It is for this purpose that hijab has been ordained and they have been warned in the same verse not to display themselves as in the days of the first ignorance implying that the same time of ignorance would re-emerge in the future, which has unfortunately happened. In order to conclude, Allah says that 'they will not be blamed, nor will there be any blame if you wish to engage a wet nurse, provided you pay as agreed in a fair manner. Be mindful of Allah, knowing that He sees everything you do' (2:233). This verse is enough to say that women have the full rights to get engaged in economic activities and to have a wage or salary. It must be clear that though women have the rights to work, they have their duties and responsibilities towards Allah in following the Shari'ah and inculcating moral values in themselves and to be responsible towards their husbands and children. Islam has not restricted women from working but our sisters must be aware of in which environment they are emerging.

To What Extent Are The Rights Of Women Respected?

The status of women in society is based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the hadith of our prophet (ﷺ). To what extent are these rights respected or not depends on the mentality of people and the changing society. The following will elaborate on the instances where these rights are tampered.

It is said in the Qur'an that 'O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them two has spread a multitude of men and women' (4:1). This means among others that it is Allah who has created both men and women and at the same time they both have their rights and duties on this earth. This has been accepted and put into practice throughout times. However, the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) in Pakistan concluded their 192nd meeting with the ruling that women are un-Islamic and that their mere existence contradicted Shari'ah and the will of Allah. But in fact, this institution is against the law of Allah and laws in the hands of this organisation tantamount to disrespect and ill-treatment towards women.

According to the Qur'an, it is also said that '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' (4:34). Most part of the world and in most family lives, men are protectors and maintainers of their wives. However, in Bangladesh, women do their best to fulfil their duties and take care of all their men's needs; yet women were abused by their husbands or their husbands' relatives. Very recently, a woman, Parul Akter, who was seven months pregnant, was killed and her body thrown in a river; her two other children are still missing. This is the reality that many women in Bangladesh face.

Another instance is that the Qur'an says that 'And when the female (infant) buried alive - is questioned, for what crime she was killed' (81:8-9). Islam requires kind and just treatment for girls. Among the

sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) we find ‘Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise’ (Musnad of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, No. 1957). It is a fact that most parents are kind to their daughters but still in Pakistan a 10-month-old girl, Sawera, was allegedly killed by her father inside her house in Eidu Goth within the limits of Bin Qasim police station. A Saudi Arabia man accused of trying to strangle his daughter for being with a man he disapproved of has been condemned.

It is said in hadith that Ibn 'Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), 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 it is said that the girl decided willingly to stay after the choice was given by saying ‘Actually I accept this marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right (to force a husband on them)’ (Ibn Majah, No. 1873). However, in Bangladesh a woman still does not have the right to reject her parents’ choice of a partner or to insist on her own choice. The “Mahr” or bridal gift is turned into a “status-symbol” and mockery and never given to her. The husband, in case of nearing death or divorce, meekly begs her to forgive and forego the “Mahr” whereas to have it is her undisputed right.

At another place Allah says ‘And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them’ (2:228) and that ‘degree’ mentioned here is that of responsibility (Qiwama (maintenance and protection)) of the husband towards the wife. Moreover, both partners have the rights to mutual decision as Allah says ‘If they (husband wife) desire to wean the child by mutual consent and (after) consultation, there is no blame on them’ (2:233) giving the wife a say in the procreation system. However, in Bangladesh and in some places of Pakistan and India, women have no right to voice out their opinions and they are subjected to the ill-treatment and machoism of men.

Again it is said that Allah says ‘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’ (4:19) meaning that husbands must be patient and avoid criticising their wives out of ignorance of unseen knowledge. The Prophet (ﷺ) said that ‘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). However, women in Pakistan have been constantly complaining of having being isolated from the mainstream of society. Women feel disillusioned on being maltreated by the male-oriented set up in Pakistan. They strongly claim that if they are given a chance, they can contribute more positively towards the development of all social aspects. However, the Pakistani society usually adopts a hostile attitude towards the women. Their development in society is hindered due to many factors. Particularly the rural woman has to sustain, sometimes, unbearable dominance by the other sections of society where no help and assistance is obtained from the male gender.

At another place Allah says that ‘they will not be blamed, nor will there be any blame if you wish to engage a wet nurse, provided you pay as agreed in a fair manner. Be mindful of Allah, knowing that He sees everything you do’ (2:233). However, a woman’s right to work in Iran has been inconsistent over the past decades. After the 1979 Revolution, the Islamist government displaced most female workers, insisting that the physical and mental weakness of women makes them incapable of working in certain jobs.

Another example is where Allah says ‘and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms ...’ (24: 30) referring to hijab and a convenient dress or jilbaab. However, there are countries, including France (since 2004), which have banned the wearing of all overt religious symbols, including the hijab in public schools and universities or government buildings. Tunisia (since 1981, lifted in 2011) and Turkey (since 1997) are the only Muslim-majority countries which have banned the hijab in public schools and universities or government buildings

As such there are so many instances where women are not subjected to their rights. The following are some places where the rights of women are curbed by men. In Egypt, women are protesting their

marginalization and rampant sexual violence campaigns waged to deter them from raising their voices. In Tunisia, one of the most progressive countries in the region for women, activists are striving to preserve their past gains, and safeguard their rights in the constitution and legislation. In Syria, women are carrying the brunt of the devastating conflict. Female refugees have been victims of abuse, early and forced marriages, sexual violence, and exploitation due to their vulnerability. In Palestine women continue to suffer dual marginalization and oppression resulting from the combination of prolonged military occupation and a patriarchal culture. High on the women's agenda these days is the fight against the rising frequency of 'honour crimes'. In Yemen, where a peaceful revolution has been prematurely aborted, women still struggle for the right to participate in the political process and for equality. In Libya, women are fighting the effects of the violence and lawlessness plaguing their country, depriving them of basic safety and security. In Jordan, activists are addressing violence and discrimination and especially women's right to pass their nationality to their children born to non-Jordanian fathers. In Lebanon, women's organizations continue to push for legal frameworks to protect women from domestic violence in light of increasing incidents and grant them nationality rights. In Iraq, calls are mounting to abolish a newly drafted personal status law applicable to the Shiite community that allows the marriage of girls as young as 9 years old. In Morocco, where the women's movement is among the most active, calls continue for protection of women from violence. These were a few examples. In addition to the violence that women are subjected to during times of peace, women are particularly vulnerable during times of war. Islam condemns violence against women no matter what the circumstances. War is no exception. Our Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was strict in ensuring that non-combatants, primarily women and children, were not harmed during war time. Female genital mutilation, another form of violence against women, has no basis in Islam. Rather, it is a cultural practice which must be eliminated through education and the empowerment of women. Likewise, forced prostitution is another form of violence against women with no basis in Islam and which must be eradicated through the empowerment of women.

However, Islam has given women all their due rights. **In the field of divorce** Allah says '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) (2:231).

Considering the **status of a mother** in Islam, Allah says 'And we have enjoined upon man (to be good) to his parents: His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness (31:14)'.

In the field of inheritance, Allah says '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 (4:7)'.

In the field of politics, Allah says 'O Prophet! when believing women come to you giving you a pledge (60: 12) meaning that women had rights to accept a leader and to swear allegiance to him.

In the field of education, the first verse revealed upon the prophet (ﷺ) was 'Read' (96: 1) and the hadith 'Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim' (Ibn Majah Book 1, Hadith 229) indicating the importance of both secular and religious studies for both men and women. The rights granted to women by Islam, are rarely practised in some parts of the world, resulting in a pitiable, shameful condition of Muslim women. Various organizations and individuals have been fighting for decades to ensure justice for women but women's empowerment alone will not solve the problem; we need to treat women as human beings first, rather than simply as women. We need to break the silence and stand up against religious and cultural traditions that encourage the repression of, and violence against, women and children. Every civilized nation should dream that woman will be treated as equal human beings; that women will really be empowered; and as the main nurturer of the human race, they will lead the nation toward a more humane society.

Islam granted several rights to Muslim women but men folk deny them at specific instances through Qur'an and Hadith misinterpretation or hiding of the truth. In all these roles the Muslim woman suffers. But she suffers the most as a wife and a daughter-in-law. Her rights are glorified at the highest pitch from

microphones on bedecked stages by garlanded leaders, her duties counted endlessly. True, Islam gives her unbelievable rights, exalted status and a constructive role in society, but that is what Islam gives her. What has the community given her? All her rights are mentioned in the Shari'ah. All her duties and extra-duties are imposed on her in totality from the society. The yawning gap between theory and practice has swallowed up the Muslim woman like a hungry lion. There is the need to change the mentality of men, leaders and the society not the Shari'ah. However, it must be noted that to a certain degree the situation has worsened by the attitudes of women in the domain of seeking the knowledge of Islam ('ilm ud deen). It is seen that women at a certain level of being wives or mothers don't have time to search for the truth through the Qur'an and Hadith. They are stagnant and they accept the authority of men without putting that authority into question. As such the birth of a girl is lamented. Her death is engineered at times, her education is stalled as it will not benefit her parental family, her taking up a job is welcomed as her earnings would benefit the family. Her salary is snatched, her assets are frozen. She cooks and cleans, bears and rears children. She works double at home and outside too, and then, this tired, ill-fed, ill-clad, ill-treated woman is expected to be a fresh, glamorous bed-partner at night.

Legal Status of Women in Islam

The basic premise of equality between the sexes is taken from a verse of the Holy Qur'an where Allah Almighty states he created man and woman from a single source and origin:

"O Mankind, Be dutiful 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".

An-Nisa, 4:1

Stressing this noble and natural conception, the Qur'an further states:

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)...

Al-A'raf, 7:189

"And Allah has made for you azwaj (mates or wives) of your own kind, and has made for you from your mates, children and grandchildren, and has made provision of good things for you. Do they then disbelieve in false deities and deny the favor of Allah?"

An-Nahl, 16:72

Since men and women have been created from one origin and one entity, neither of them can claim superiority over each other. They have been created from the same source and so their essence is the same. This is reinforced in the Qur'an many times so as to ensure mankind is aware that both are equal in the eyes of God.

When the Qur'anic injunctions regarding women were revealed, the status of women at that time must be also appreciated. In pre-Islamic Arabia, and indeed throughout the world, the very legitimacy of women as human beings was still being questioned and debated, so even the idea of bestowing her with formal rights and favors was not open for discussion. Women were seen as mere objects and pieces of chattel for men to buy and sell at their whim, existing for the fulfillment of male desire or reserved for the procreation of the human race. Other than this, women were neither respected nor considered equal to their male counterparts.

Moreover in pre-Islamic Arabia it has already been well documented how baby girls were buried alive by the Arabs who felt shame and humiliation if a girl was born, not wishing to endure any expense on her behalf, preferring her death to a life long burden of maintenance. Thus in such a society did Allah Almighty elevate women to the position of equals with man. With the advent of Islam, the status of

women was revolutionized. Firstly she was considered to be the equal of man, upgraded to be on par with him which necessarily entailed giving women rights and duties for her to fulfill. She was now considered an essential part of the society, indispensable to man, honored, revered and to be respected by all. Having been neglected for so long women were dramatically catapulted into the limelight of life and offered full participation in society.

Indeed this was a new phenomenon since it is very easy to give rights to a person but difficult to have those rights enforced and obeyed. The Arabs of that time were unfamiliar with this new concept, having spent generations upon generations neglecting and abusing women. Suddenly they were being asked to treat them with kindness and generosity but also with respect and as equals. However for any such change to be realistically implemented a culture needs to be created or adapted to promote the enforcement of rights. Rights in themselves cannot be very effective unless society itself is ready to accept and enforce them.

In order to do this the Holy Prophet (saw) himself led the way by setting the example by giving women their due rights and be treated as equals. On numerous occasions he acted in a manner solely to elevate women and show to his Companions the dignity of womanhood. A notable incident is the role that his wife Sayyidina Khadija (rad), played in the history of Islam. She is famous in Islamic history for being the first woman to convert to Islam, but in fact she was the first person, male or female to accept Islam and the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw).

When the Holy Prophet (saw) received divine revelation for the first time, perhaps it would have been more natural for him to seek advice and consolation from his best friend Sayyidina Abu Bakr (rad), as opposed to his wife. Since the Arab society was a patriarchal one, where males dominated every walk of life, or an Arab man it would have been much more natural to seek counsel with a man than a woman. However the Holy Prophet (saw) chose to return to his wife and seek her advice. Of course he was in no need to do so, being aware of all matters, but he did so to set an example for the rest of mankind.

So when the Holy Prophet (saw) received the first divine revelation from Almighty Allah he was naturally surprised and shocked and returned immediately home to consult his wife. What is interesting about the reply of Sayyidina Khadija (rad) is that she could have merely placated him, consoled him with gentle words and offered him food and rest. However instead she made what can only be described as the first speech in Islamic history. She reassured the Holy Prophet (saw), stating since he had never done a wrong in his life, had always helped the poor and needy, been kind to the orphans and widows and always gave financial help to those in debt, anything that could happen to him could only be the truth and right. Thus from the very inception of Islam, women have played a pivotal role in its birth to its expansion.

Men and Women are not Adversaries

Although men and women are considered equals in the eyes of Allah Almighty, a key element in Islamic thinking is that men and women are not considered each other's adversaries. They are not in competition with each other and there is no concept of the 'battle of the sexes'. Instead they are considered partners in life, created together to compliment each other, assist each other and be a source of peace and contentment for one another. Both of their roles are integral to the foundations of society and each are given roles to accommodate differing needs.

Thus when Allah (swt) created the first man, Sayyidna Adam (a.s) he also created Sayyidina Hawwa (Eve) so they would dwell together in happiness. Even in Heaven, where every need and desire could be fulfilled, Allah Almighty (swt) still thought fit to create a pair of individuals as opposed to just Prophet Adam (a.s), since one cannot exist without the other.

"Dwell you and your wife in Paradise and both of you freely with pleasure and delight of things therein as wherever you will, but come not near this tree or you both will be of the Zalimun (wrongdoers)".

(Al-Baqarah, 2:35)

"And of everything We have created pairs, that you may remember".

Adh-Dariyyat, 51:49

Moreover although men and women have been created on an equal footing, created together to be a source of contentment and peace, Islam does not consider men and women to be the same. Men and women are equal in status, equal as human beings, as individuals in their own right, but they are considered to be fundamentally different from each other, both physically and emotionally, thus in the context of rights and duties they have equal rights but their rights reflect their differing personalities. The Noble Qur'an states:

"And the male is not like the female".

Al-Imran, 3:36

The Holy Prophet (saw) also stated:

"Treat women well, for they have been created from a rib. The rib is most curved in its upper part, so that if you try to straighten it out, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain intact. Therefore, follow my advice on giving fair treatment to women"

(Sahih Bukhari, Kitab An-Nikah)

This Hadith alludes to the fact that women are innately more delicate and sensitive than men and so being harsh and imposing upon them will only serve to break and not change them. Women do think differently to men, have different ideas and views and thus should not be forced to change or adopt anything with force or harshness. This is where Islam differs from current thinking in the West. Over the last fifty years or so there has been a shift towards a uni-sex society where emphasis is placed on the idea that not only are men and women equal but they are also the same. Equality is equated with similarity and thus it is argued women and men should have the same rights, obligations and duties as each other.

This may sound very acceptable in principle but the problem arises in the case of women. In the West, equality is linked to achieving goals and standards set by men thus emphasis is usually placed on women, who are encouraged to adopt male attitudes and thinking as opposed to men adopting more feminine roles. So women are encouraged more and more to enter the work force, work side by side with men, adopt their attitudes and desires, and embrace their ideals and goals. Roles that have been traditionally aligned to men are considered more worthy and respected thus women are encouraged to pursue them. However this leaves a vacuum regarding the home. Who should be responsible for the domestic affairs of life and all that it entails? This question is rarely discussed. If equality is similarity then surely Western society should put pressure on men to give equal time to cooking and cleaning as well as working outside the home. However other than a few slogans about the emergence of the 'new age man' men's roles have primarily remained the same with the vacuum in the home again being filled by woman who ultimately adopt a double role.

On the contrary, the essence of womanhood, being a mother or wife is being undermined and undervalued. If a woman is asked about her profession she will gladly say she is a doctor or lawyer but reluctantly admit she is 'only a house wife' or say she is 'just a mother' looking after her children. Women also lose out in real and practical terms. If both the husband and wife work, inevitably it will be the wife or female partner who will still be the primary carer of the children, be responsible for the cleaning and cooking, and be responsible overall for the domestic affairs of the house. Thus by pursuing and adopting male roles, women have given themselves a double shift – one outside the home and one inside it. This is not to say that Islam does not encourage women to work or frowns upon working women. This is not the case at all. Islam acknowledges the need for women to enter all areas of life and

society. However Islam appreciates the role of the mother, valuing it above all other roles in society. A mother is bestowed with high status, privileges and children and adults alike are asked to respect and value what she does. Once the Holy Prophet (saw) was asked by a Companion who is entitled to be treated the best by him. The Holy Prophet replied "your mother". The Companion asked and after that? The Holy Prophet replied "your mother". The Companion again asked and after that? He replied "your mother". Only after being questioned the fourth time did the Holy Prophet reply "your father". (Sahih Bukhari – kitab-al-adab).

This appreciation is something that is non-existent in Western society. No matter how much is said to the contrary, women who are housewives or look after children are not valued and are portrayed as being stuck in a derogatory and unfulfilling role. However Islam embraces a woman's femininity and allows her to follow her natural instinct, but at the same time gives her the freedom to pursue activities she needs and desires, but without devaluing her. Women are under tremendous social pressure to enter the work force and imitate men. Those women who are unable to participate often suffer from frustration and psychological disturbances, feeling undervalued, unappreciated performing a duty in the home which is more important than any other profession, requiring skills, patience and aptitude that very few men can boast of but, are still deemed to be inferior according to the standards of society.

In contrast it is very apparent that many Muslim women who are mothers and wives are greatly satisfied with their roles, knowing the society they live in values what they are doing and also secure in the knowledge that had they been living in a different society, they would still have to adopt these roles out of practical necessity but be burdened with the hardships of earning and supporting their families too.

So in order to ensure the healthy functioning of society Islam creates a division in responsibility and sets out specific roles for women.

"The Mothers shall wean their children for two years (that is) for those parents who desire to complete the term of suckling, but the father of the child will bear the cost of the mother's food and clothing, on a reasonable basis".

(Al-Baqarah, 2:233)

"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women"

Al-Nisa, 4:34

This does not mean that these roles cannot be changed, adapted or exchanged for practical needs and desires but what it does insure is that a woman is valued for her natural role as a mother but if she has to enter the work place or engage in responsibilities not traditionally assigned to her, that work is highly valued for she is considered as performing a **great favor for her husband and family**. It is not her natural duty to go out and work for example, but if she chooses to do so (after consulting her family) and then uses her income for instance to support the family she will be seen as doing **ihسان**, favoring her family and thus receive not only adulation and respect from her family and society at large but also receive great rewards in the Hereafter.

Contrast this situation with a woman living in the UK for example. She will bear the children, cook and clean for them, make breakfast for her husband and children and then have to go to work, maybe part or full time. She will then normally pick up her children from school or college, and then have to wait on her husband too. Although more and more men are helping in domestic affairs, very few of them take more than a superficial interest and never consider themselves fully responsible, even if both husband and wife work full time.

Thus Islam creates a division in roles so that both men and women can live in harmony together. Since men have been given a greater burden in being duty bound to support their wives they are therefore

allotted a greater share in inheritance. (In real terms very few people inherit a great deal these days). The woman on the other hand, in exchange for looking after the house and family, is given the right to be fully maintained by her husband or male member of the household, alleviating any financial responsibility from her. If she chooses to work, she can do so, or she can decline, even if her family is in desperate need since it is her husband's primary duty to care for her. If she chooses to work she can keep her income for herself she and if she chooses to spend it on her family she will be doing that family a favor, as opposed to the husband who is duty bound to do the same.

Men and Women Compliment Each Other

Although Islam does not consider men and women to be the same, it appreciates that men and women have to live and work together in society, so the Qur'an promotes positivism towards each other stating:

"..You are from one another".

An-Nisa, 4:25

"The Creator of heavens and earth. He has made for you pairs from among yourselves"

As-Shura, 42:11

Islam also recognizes the indispensable nature of men and woman. They compliment each other, working for the ultimate goal of seeking the pleasure of Almighty Allah and His Prophet (saw) in life and so cannot do with out each other. Just like a bicycle, in order for it to work, it needs two wheels. A bicycle has been created so that it functions best with two wheels. If one is missing one cannot travel far. If one of the wheels is smaller or larger than the other, this will create an imbalance. However if the wheels are equal and fitted in their respected sides the bicycle will run smoothly. Such are the roles of men and women, who are created to work together in uniformity, possessing the same goals and objectives, equal but not identical, complimentary and not adversaries.

In a Hadith of the Holy Prophet he states:

"Women are the other half of men"

(Sunan Abu Dawud, Kitab At-Taharah

"They (wives) are libas (body cover or garments) for you (husbands) are the same for them"

Al- Baqarah, (2:187),

"The believers, men and women are auliya (helpers) of one another"

At-Taubah, (9:71)

By describing husbands and wives as garments for each other, alludes to them being each others' protectors, supporters and friends. They should help each other and since one is indispensable to the other they should both aim to live in harmony and tranquility, as Sayyidina Adam was directed when Sayyidina Hawwa (rad) was created as his mate for him (7:189)

Women are not blamed for the 'Original Sin'

Another important aspect of Islam is that women are not blamed for the 'original sin' as denoted by Judea- Christian tradition. This legacy has tarnished the reputation of women from the beginning of time and has been the source of much of the contempt about women in general. In the Christian traditions, Sayyidina Hawwa (rad) is described as a temptress, enticing Sayyidina Adam (a.s) to disobey God wishes. Since she was blamed for the 'original sin', this was used as a justification to humiliate and debase her. However the Islamic tradition is much different.

"O Adam! Dwell you and your wife in the Paradise and eat both of you freely with pleasure and delight of things therein as wherever you will, but come not near this tree or you both will be of the Zalim'n (wrongdoers).

Al-Baqarah, 2:35

Although the divine order of prohibition was given to both Adam (a.s) and his wife, Sayyidina Hawwa (rad) is not blamed in any way for what occurred next.

"Then the Satan made them slip therefrom (the Paradise), and got them out from that in which they were"

Al Baqarah, 2:36

The Qur'an does not solely blame Hawwa for the act but lays the blame on both. Moreover it clears the fact that neither did Sayyidina Hawwa tempt Sayyidina Adam (a.s) to eat from the tree, nor did she initiate the act herself. Shaitan was held responsible for the temptation which is the reverse of the Old Testament version. Once they realized their mistakes, both of them repented and they were forgiven:

"Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If You forgive us not, and bestow not upon us Your Mercy, we shall be losers".

Al-A'raf, 7:23

In many places in the Qur'an, it is Sayyidina Adam (a.s) who is specifically mentioned in the Qur'an as having been responsible for the error and he is addressed alone in this matter.

"And indeed We made a covenant with Adam before, but he forgot, and We found on his part no firm will-power."

Ta-Ha, 20:115

"Then Satan whispered to him saying, "O Adam! Shall I lead you to the Tree of Eternity and to a kingdom that will never waste away?"

Ta-Ha, 20:120

"Thus did Adam disobey his Lord, so he went astray."

Ta-Ha, 20:121

It was argued in the past that women by nature were corrupt and thus could never be seen as equals to man, a concept Islam categorically rejects. Instead Islam stresses the high respect and esteem that is due to woman, something that no society or religion actively advocates. Women have been fighting for equal rights for hundreds of years in the West and to a large extent have succeeded in obtaining equal *legal* rights. However rights in themselves are not enough to create equality or even a sense of worth. The environment and society needs to be conditioned and its participants made to think in a particular way, to be motivated and encouraged to view women with dignity and honor. This is why Islam is so unique since it actively states again and again that women must be regarded highly by men.

In a Hadith of the Holy Prophet (saw) he states:

"Only a man of noble character will honor women, and only a man of base intentions will dishonor them"

Kanz-ul-amal 16:33

"The most perfect man in religion is one who excels in character. The best amongst you is he who gives the best treatment to his womenfolk"

(Sahih Thirmidhi, Abwab ar-Rada)

Men are also asked to overlook any faults a woman may have encouraging kindness and gentleness towards them. The Holy Prophet stated:

"No believing man should hate a believing woman, since if there is any habit of hers that displease him, there will be some other habit that will please him"

(Sahih Muslim, Kita bar-Rada)

Thus to respect and honor women and treat them with equality is linked to a Muslims faith since he will be rewarded in the Hereafter for his dealings.

Birth of a daughter should be a time to rejoice

Islam also sees the birth of a baby girl as a blessing as opposed to a burden. This may seem strange to a Western audience but in pre-Islamic Arabia, female infanticide was socially acceptable and indeed encouraged. The birth of a daughter was considered a shameful act and unfortunately similar sentiments still exist in some parts of the Asian sub-continent. Often non-Muslim commentators equate this practice with Islamic values and practices but in reality there is only condemnation for any such behavior. Female infanticide is considered a crime of murder just like any other unlawful killing:

"And when the female (infant) buried alive - is questioned, for what crime she was killed."

At-Takweer, 81: 8-9

The Qur'an also criticizes those who lament when a baby girl is born:

"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?"

An-Nahl, 16: 58-59

Islam sees the birth of a girl as a time to rejoice and in celebration of womanhood, those who treat their daughters kindly with respect and kindness are guaranteed paradise, a privilege mentioned only in the context of females. The Holy Prophet (saw) said;

"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).

"One who brings up three daughters, teaches them good manners and morals, and arranges their marriages and treats them with fairness, deserves to be ushered into Paradise"

(Sunan Abu-Dawud, Kitab-al-Adab)

Religious and Social Responsibilities are the same

A woman has an equal right and is indeed bound to observe religious and social obligations as men are.

"Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds"

(Qur'an 74:38).

A woman must pray, fast and give charity as her male counterpart and will be held accountable if she fails in her obligations.

"...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"

Al-Imran, 3: 195

Thus a woman is seen as an independent individual, with her own personality and traits and thus will be rewarded or punished according to the acts she does. This is important since Islam recognizes a woman as a separate entity from her husband or father or brother, so she too must be educated and be given the opportunity to seek knowledge so she can fulfill her role in society too. She must imbue within her conduct the same moral standards as men and is equally responsible for maintaining peace and contentment within the society around her. The Qur'an states:

"For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (33:35)

However since the underlying principle within Islam is that women are equal but different it takes this aspect into account regarding her duties. Though a woman must pray daily as men must do, she is exempted from this if she is on her menstrual cycle. It is mandatory for Muslim men to attend the Friday prayer, but for women this obligation has been relaxed and made optional for her. She also does not have to fast during her menstrual cycle, and is also exempted from keeping the fasts during pregnancy and whilst suckling her child if she or her child is at risk. Thus a woman is given leniency in this regard, having due regard to her femininity.

A woman is also under the same ethical obligations as men in respect of her social duties for society.

"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 their actions.

An-Nahl, 16:97

She must play an active role in her community by enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong.

"The believers, men and women, are "Awliya," (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)

At-Taubah, 9:71

And then both will be rewarded for their works

And who so does good works, whether male or female, and he (or she) is a believer, such will enter Paradise and they will not be wronged the dint in a date-stone.

Al-Nisa, 4:124

Whosoever does right, whether male or female, and is a believer, him verily We shall quicken with good life, and We shall pay them recompense according to the best of what they do. (16:97)

In both these verses Allah Almighty saw it fit to mention women in particular. He could have addressed the believers as a whole, or the whole of mankind in general which He does so in other parts of the Qur'an but by specifically stating "whether male or female" denotes the importance of including women, emphasizing the need for their active involvement.

It is thus apparent that women are highly regarded and esteemed in an Islamic society, encouraged to participate actively for its betterment.

The Great Women of Islam

The contributions of women in Islam is indisputable. Some women have had a great role and status in Islam and are, therefore, revered and appreciated in Islamic history.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

“Sufficient for you among the women of mankind are Mariam bint ‘Imran, Khadijah bint Khuwailid, Fatimah bint Muhammad and Asiyah the wife of Fir’awn.”

Al Tirmidhi (Sahih)

The Prophet has also mentioned a fifth woman and that is Aisha, whereby he ﷺ said:

“The superiority of ‘Aishah to other women is like the superiority of Tharid (the most popular signature dish at the time) to other kinds of food.”

Al-Nisai (Hasan)

Here are some of the greatest Muslim women in Islamic history in more detail. So who are these women and why are they so special?

1. Khadijah Bint Khuwaylid

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said:

“The best of its women is Khadijah bint Khuwailid, and the best of its women is Mariam bint ‘Imran (Virgin Mary)”

Al-Tirmidhi (Sahih)

Khadijah was the first wife of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. She was a wealthy merchant and was able to successfully run the business her late father left her. Despite her wealth, she always helped the poor and made sure to support all her family. Khadijah was the biggest advocate of the Prophet ﷺ. She was there for the Prophet ﷺ when the revelation came to Him for the first time. She always stood by Him ﷺ, despite people going against his message of Islam in the beginning.

Following the Prophethood of Muhammad ﷺ, she went through a great amount of suffering and undertook many sacrifices to support his mission. The Prophet never forgot her great service to himself and the Islamic faith. He would in fact always remind others of her great favor years after her passing. Aisha says in a narration:

“....The Prophet (ﷺ) used to mention her (Khadija) very often, and whenever he slaughtered a sheep, he would cut its parts and send them to the women friends of Khadija. When I sometimes said to him, “(You treat Khadija in such a way) as if there is no woman on earth except Khadija,” he would say, “Khadija was such-and-such, and from her I had children.” Bukhari

2. Aisha Bint Abu Bakr

Aisha was the wife of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the daughter of Abu Bakr As-Siddiq. She is one of the most renowned Mothers of the believers and is considered one of the greatest scholars of Islam.

Many narrations of the Prophet ﷺ are narrated by Aisha due to her proximity to the Messenger and her great understanding of the Quran and Islam.

The Prophet ﷺ was once asked, "O Allah's Messenger! Who amongst all the people is the dearest to you?" He replied, "Aisha". The Companion then asked, "Out of the men?" He replied: "Her father."
Sahih Muslim

Many companions would always go to Aisha for consultation in religious matters, her intellect and scholastic abilities are a role model for women. Aisha's status in Islam breaks the stereotype that only men can be scholars of Islam.

3. Maryam Bint Imran (Virgin Mary)

Maryam, the mother of Jesus, Eesa, is one of the most revered women in Islam. Her story features in detail in the Quran, and she, in fact, has an entire chapter named after her.

The Quran actually sheds light on the story of Maryam prior to her birth, whereby we learn of her mother's supplication for a righteous child. "But when she delivered her, she said, "My Lord, I have delivered a female." And Allah was most knowing of what she delivered, "And the male is not like the female. And I have named her Mary, and I seek refuge for her in You and [for] her descendants from Satan, the expelled [from the mercy of Allah]." (Quran 3:36)

And surely Maryam lived on to dedicate her life to worshipping Allah. Her immense piety is in fact reiterated in the Quran on multiple occasions. "So her Lord accepted her with good acceptance and caused her to grow in a good manner and put her in the care of Zechariah. Every time Zechariah entered upon her in the prayer chamber, he found with her provision. He said, "O Mary, from where is this [coming] to you?" She said, "It is from Allah. Indeed, Allah provides for whom He wills without account." (Quran 3:37)

"And [the example of] Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We blew into [her garment] through Our angel, and she believed in the words of her Lord and His scriptures and was of the devoutly obedient. (Quran 66:12)

Despite all the hardships she faced from people accusing her chastity she remained steadfast and obeyed Allah with unceasing faith.

4. Aasiyah the Pharaoh's wife

Another woman who is given great stature in Islam is the wife of Pharaoh, Aasiyah. Despite being the wife of one of the greatest tyrants, she still believed in Allah. She chose leave all the wealth and accepted to be tortured by the Pharaoh for believing in Allah.

In the Quran, Allah refers to her as an "example for the believers". Allah also makes mention of her supplication for a Palace in Paradise near Allah.

"And Allah presents an example of those who believed: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, "My Lord, build for me near You a house in Paradise and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds and save me from the wrongdoing people."

(Quran 66:11)

5. *Fatimah Bint Muhammad*

Fatimah is the daughter of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ from his first wife Khadijah. She was known to be the biggest supporter of her father and she accompanied him from the beginning of his journey as a Prophet. She is a role model of faith, humility, purity, sacrifice and patience. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ used to stand up when she'd come into the room and kiss her forehead.

He ﷺ said:

“Fatimah is a part of me, and he who makes her angry, makes me angry.” (Bukhari)

She was nicknamed “Al-Zahra” by the Prophet, which means “The Splendid One”. She also married the cousin of the Prophet, Ali Ibn Abi Taleb, and gave birth to four children, Hassan, Hussain, Zainab and Um Kulthum. She lived a life of simplicity and often experienced great hardship and poverty.

The Prophet also informed her on his deathbed that she would be a leader of the women in Paradise. These were women distinguished by sabr who found the true friendship of Allah through their unfailing steadfastness in the face of grinding sacrifices.