

Prophet Muhammad's Role in the Empowerment of Women in Arabian Society

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Abstract—*The status and role of women in Islam remains a complex issue especially in the present day societies, because of the feminist trend and movements emerged both in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. History witnessed that women had played an important role in each and every aspect of life. Women played a very important role in every sphere of life particularly when we see the era of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), there is no field in which women did not show their abilities. During the Prophet (S.A.W) period women played a very vital and significant role in every field of life like social, religious, economic, education etc. Women were given equal opportunity to play their social role and become effective members of the society. Women had a great role in building up the Islamic society as Prophet (S.A.W) gave equal opportunities to both men and women in every sphere of life to utilize their abilities. The contemporary Muslim world in general fail to provide the social position and status to women as granted by Islam to them and thus has often been the subject of much debate. This paper will be an attempt to study the prophetic role in the empowerment of women in order to ensure their participation for the development of contemporary Muslim world.*

Keyword: Women, Feminism, Social role, Muslim world.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most misunderstood areas on Islam is that of the role of women. The general perception in the Muslim world is that women are inferior and recognize that their role is only limited in household activities. Majority of Muslims consider their outside role unlawfully/immoral and unfortunately this statement is apparently justified in the name of religion. But we see a very different picture when go through the source of Islam i.e, Quran and Sunnah. The status and role of women in Islam remained a complex issue especially in the present day societies, because of the feminist trend and movements emerged both in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. History witnessed that women had played an important role in each and every aspect of life. They had taken part in social, economic, religious and political revolutions of several countries. The study will be an attempt to focus on the role of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the upliftment of women in Arabian society. In present days women are not

enjoyed such roles which they were given by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) during His (peace be upon him) time. From the beginning, Islam stressed that women as half of the society, should be offered all opportunities which could enable them to develop their natural abilities, so that they might participate effectively in the development of society.

The social role of women has its own importance in the world. Women had become a useful member of society with her participation in different activities in the society. But unfortunately the role of women has been deprived, in present day society and is facing lot of problems regarding their role in society. However Islam did not stop women to play her role in society and became effective and essential member of the society

The contemporary Muslim world in general fail to provide the social position and status as granted by Islam to them and thus has often been the subject of much debate. This work is intended to provide the social position of women enjoy during the Prophetic Era. The Quran and *Sunnah* considerably improved women's status by comparison to pre-Islamic (*Jahiliyah*) period. To develop a clear picture of the status and role of women in Islam one should know their status during *jahiliyah* (the period of ignorance or the pre-Islamic period).ⁱ

During pre-Islamic period (*jahilliyah* period), the women were treated as chattel. When a person died his wife was inherited by his son or brother. The birth of a female child was a sign of dishonour to the family. Many men preferred burying their daughters alive. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) upheld the rights of female children. He (S.A.W) reminded his followers that female children should be treated the same as male children.ⁱⁱ The Quran also mentions that the Arabs in jahilliyah used to bury their daughters alive.

Holly Quran describes this phenomenon as follows:

“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 it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on?*ⁱⁱⁱ

Role of Prophet (S.A.W) in the Empowerment of Women:

The Quranic treatment of the subject of woman must include a review of the roles fulfilled by the female characters mentioned, whether explicitly or indirectly, in the text. The Quran does not support a specific and stereotyped role for its characters, male or female. The roles of the woman who have been referred to in the Quran fall into one of three categories:

1. A role which represents the social, cultural, and historical context in which that individual woman lived, without compliment or critique from the text.
2. A role which fulfils a universally accepted (i-e nurturing or caretaking) female function, to which exceptions can be made and have been made even in the Quran itself.
3. Role which fulfils a non-gender specific function i.e the role represents human endeavors' on the earth and is cited in the Quran demonstrates this specific and not the gender or the performer, who happens to be a woman.^{iv}

The Islamic history is constituted by both men and woman together. If the role of woman is removed from history, it would be useless and dull. When Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) presented the dawah of Islam, woman also came forward with man to accept it. For this, they bore all kinds of hardships, abandoned their house and family, separated from their relatives, stood firmly like mountains in the flood of severe tests and strife, offered sacrifices of wealth and life and marched forward with the prayer to Allah for acceptance of their deeds. The Prophet's (S.A.W) wife *Zainab* (R.A) prepared hides, devoting the proceeds of the sale for charitable work. Women helped as laborers in the fields when necessary, served male guests at a feast, carried on business. The great Lady *Khadija* (R.A) herself had a well-established business. They could sell and purchase from men and men could sell and purchase from them.^vThe *Sahabiyat* (women companions) were the noble women who were to contemporaries of the Prophet (S.A.W). They were the pure, virtuous crusaders of Islam and were honored during the very lifetime of the Prophet (S.A.W) with the prediction that they would live forever in paradise in the hereafter. Their achievements and influence are found in every sphere of that momentous period in the history of the world, when the whole of humanity would transfigure forever.^{vi}

Empowerment of Women in Religious and Social Aspects of Life

Among the many services that one can render to Islam, is to fight in the battlefields. Few, if any, examples of such zeal, determination, perseverance and courage can be found in history when the disbelievers attacked the Muslims during the Battle of *Uhud*, only a few devoted followers were left to fight

with the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). At this critical stage the women companion *Umm Ammarah* (R.A) shielded him with her body and warded off *the enemy with her sword as well as her bow and arrows*. In the battle of *Ahazab*, the companion *Safiyah* (R.A) displayed brilliant military strategy in handling the Jewish attack, and slew one of the Jews. In the Battle *Hunain* *Umm Salim* (R.A), Set out to attack the enemy with her sword. The *Sahabiyat* usually accompanied the Prophet (S.A.W) on his military expeditions and took part in battles both on land and at sea. Besides taking an active part in the war, there were many other services that the *Sahabiyat* performed, like giving medical aid to the soldiers, nursing the wounded on the battled fields and providing food and water to the wounded and thirsty. Standing side by side with the soldiers they would hand them arrows, nursing the wounded and generally help to keep up the morale of the army. They also help to carry the martyred and the wounded back to *Al-Madinah*. An *Ansari Sahabia*, *Umm Ammara* (R.A) showed manly and daring courage during the battle of *Uhud*. She herself relates: "I had reached the battlefield early in the morning to serve *Mujahedeen* (the warriors of Islam. *Tabarani* relates:

Another aspect of missionary work is to preserve the religion in its pristine form and protect it from any modifications, impurities and innovations they may creep in because of cultural or traditional practices already prevalent in society. This very important work of preserving the purity of Islam was performed by money of the *Sahabiyat*, most prominent among who was *Aisha* (R.A). Leading the prayers and calling the *Athan* or the call for prayer is another important aspect of religious life. Although women cannot lead men in prayers, they can do so with assemblies of women. Many women contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) performed this task as well. *Aisha*, *Umm Salim*, *Umm Waraqah* and *Sadah-bint-Qamamah* (R.A) were some of the most prominent but among these *Umm Salamah* because of her beauty, knowledge and wisdom held on eminent position.

Empowerment of women in Educational Field

Islam strongly emphasizes learning and attaining more and more knowledge. Islam infact, exhorts man to gain vast knowledge and stimulates him to extend knowledge to others. Consequently, within a short span of time education was spread everywhere and very learned people comprised both men and women. Woman have not only been allowed to obtain education in religious and mundane branches of knowledge, but their education and cultural training has been considered as important as that of men. Women also used to taking from the Holy Prophet (S.A.W) along with men, though they had separate arrangements for the purpose. The wives of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W) especially *Hazrat Aisha* not only taught women, they taught men also. Many an illustrious companion and followers of the companions learnt the Quran, *Hadith* and *Islamic jurisprudence* from *Hazrat Aisha*. Besides educating

men and nobility, the holy Prophet (s.a.w.) had enjoined the Muslims to educate their Slave girls, too. A tradition says:

*“ if a person has a slave girl, then he educates her liberally and trains her in the best manner and culture, then sets her free and marries her, he has a double reward (from his Lord).
(Al-Bukhari)*

This shows that in so far as the acquisition of knowledge and cultural training is concerned, Islam does not allow any distinction between man and woman. From the Islamic point of view, the right sort of education for women is that which prepares her to become a good wife, good mother and good house keeper. There were great scholars of women also like; Hazrat Aisha was treated as an authority on traditions and Islamic jurisprudence.^{vii} Hazrat Aisha (R.A) was so graceful and intelligent in accounts that the senior companions of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W) used to consult her on matters of inheritance. Umrah bin Abdur Rahman was one of the students of Hazrat Aisha (R.A). Ahmad IbnHambel (R.A) says about her, “The Jurist Umrah bin Abdur Rahman was brought up by Hazrat Aisha (R.A).she related a great number of Hadith through her which is authentic, her memory is sharp.”^{viii}

The knowledge of the holy wives of the Prophet (S.A.W) greatly helps in the solution of the problems which puzzled the companions of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W). Imanibn Qaiyim (R.A) says: “When there was any difference of opinion amongst the companions of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) and any of the *Ummahatul Momineen* quoted any Hadith, then they accepted it and forget their differences.”

Prophet and Political Empowerment of Women:

The women of the early Islamic history were not kept aloof from political activities. They not only had the knowledge of the current political condition of that period, but also had a keen insight into it.

In sum, Muslim women are thus seen prominent in all fields-moral and etiquette, conduct and character, learning and knowledge, political and social and what not. They worked for the cause of Islam, its safety, propagation and for the Islamic Movement as a whole with all their potentials, enthusiasm and courage and patience and wisdom, to such an extent that no one can ignore their vital role in the way of Islam nor can be underestimate it such were the women of the early period and of the period of companions and of the successors of the companions who adorned the pages of history with their high intellectual faculties, great abilities, clear understanding and straight forward thinking. Inside the house, they proved themselves to be devoted wives, affectionate mothers, loving daughters and sincere sisters outside the house, they displayed their patience at the time of harshness, they showed their stability and firmness at the hour of suppression and tyranny, laid down their lives at the time of sacrifice, sent instructions and gave suggestions to the caliphs of their time and marched to the battlefields at the time of war. History proves all these

facts. No one can dare overlook this truth nor hide this reality.^{ix} In Islam beginning from the days of Prophet (S.A.W) mutual consultation has been recommended for finding out solutions regarding important issues. Muslim believes that the Prophet (S.A.W) was the wisest of all the believers (past, present and future); yet God asked him to consult the believers in regards to problems that he had to deal with from time to time. While addressing the Prophet (S.A.W) God ordained: “*And consult them (the believers) in affairs (of moment). Then, when taken a decision, put thy trust in God. For God loves those who put their trust (in Him).*”^x

Prophet (S.A.W) used to consult not only his male companions but also female ones in urgent matters. In the case of the coffin, there was no well-established tradition among the believers. Initially Hazrat Abu Bakr's wife Asmah bin Umais during her stay in Euthopia (at the time of first migration of Muslims to that country) saw it in the case of Christians. She suggested that the Muslim should adopt it. This suggestion was accepted; therefore it was adopted in the case of all Muslims which is followed even today. All of us know that during the life of Khadija-tul-Kubrah, the Prophet (S.A.W) used to consult her in all important matters. For women especially during the Prophet's (S.A.W) time, were very active socially and politically. They were allowed and even encouraged to participate in the process of building up the Madinan society and they proved to be up to the task. With the establishment of the Islamic state the role of women in the political affairs of a new society gained momentum, they become part of the nation and effective members of the community, fully involved in public affairs. In addition to *Bayah*, women also participated in *Shura* (Mutual consultation) which is one of the foundations of the Islamic political system. Women were consulted at all levels during the period of the Prophet's rule and that of his companions. They used to seek their advice for before most important decisions were made.

Women were regarded as full-fledged citizens capable of participating in all political activities (including *ba`ya*, *Shura*, granting, asylums taking part in Jihad and holding prominent positions) and indeed they were allowed to deco, this recognition or acknowledgement gained momentum when women become politically conscious or aware of their responsibilities in society. Awareness which Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) under took to raise and promote among all women. Hence, he pushed the process of social change and ensured that the community would accept and regard women's activity in the political sphere as an asset and a valuable contribution to a healthy society.

Prophet and Economic Role of Women

Islam wants women to be able and efficient, so that she may perform good deeds and serve mankind. Hence, she is allowed to go out for the attainment of good cause. The study of history shows that women went for shopping and farm-work

during the early period of Islam. Hazrat Aisha (R.A) relates an incident which took place just after the revelation of commandments of evil. She says, "When Hazrat Umer Farooq (R.A) once saw Hazrat Sauda (R.A) outside her house, and expressed his displeasure on this. She came away quietly and related the matter to the Holy Prophet (S.A.W) Soon after there was revelation upon him (S.A.W) when it was over, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W) told her: "Of course Allah has permitted you to go out of your home for your needs."

CONCLUSION

With the emergence of Islam, the position and status of women has been improved as they deserve. The rights of women in Islam are equal to those of men although not necessarily identical. Women played a very important role in every sphere of life particularly when we see the era of Prophet (S.A.W), there is no field in which women did not show their abilities. Women played a very vital and significant role in every field of life. We see during the Prophet (S.A.W) period women played their role in every sphere like social, Religious, Economic, education etc. Women were given equal opportunity to play their role in the society and become effective members of the society. Women had a great role in building up the Islamic society, Prophet (S.A.W) give equal opportunity both men and women in every sphere of life to show their abilities. Women were mis-understood through the history. In contemporary world women were not allowed to play her role effectively as many orthodox thinkers said that women should stay in their house and it is her field of activity. But when we see in the Prophet's (S.A.W) period ^{xi}women were very courageously fought with enemies in battle fields like Umm Amarah, in educational field like Aisha and Salma, in economic field like Hazrat Khadija, in Medicine like Rufaidah and Umm Aiman etc. A precious and good deal of work and reform is needed literary and practically to highlight the social role and importance of women in world.

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