

Role of women in Islam

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Introduction

Understanding of the role of woman is a matter pertaining to the discovery of the creation plan of God. Study of the Qur'an and Hadith tells us that one of the laws of nature is that all the things in the world have been created in pairs. The Qur'an states:

And all things We have made in pairs, so that you may give thought. (51:49)

The scientific study of the universe also corroborates this law of nature. As discovered by science, the primary unit of the universe the atom, is composed of negative and positive particles. In the absence of any one of the two, the atom cannot come into existence. Just as human beings are born in the form of males and females, animals are likewise male and female. The whole world is said to exist in pairs. In this way, nature's entire factory has functioned all along on this dual basis.

Position of woman

The position of man and woman is like cogwheels in machinery, each facilitating the movement of the other. There is no divide either in terms of status or superiority; both are equal partners in the divine scheme of things. Both must contribute to take the journey of life forward.

Unfortunately, Europe discovered the idea of equality between man and woman in an unnatural sense. By equating them in every sphere, it developed the notion, '*What a man is, a woman is and what a woman is, a man is.*' Deliberating seriously suffices to make its erroneous foundation clear. If both man and woman are equal in this sense, the sphere of work would become extremely limited. The right concept is, '*What a man is not, woman is and what a woman is not, man is.*' It is this combination, which makes a whole as both then compliment each other's shortcomings. For instance, by their nature, women are kind whereas men are stubborn. Ironically, I once met a lady who told me that she wanted to separate ways from her husband on account of his stubborn nature. I told her that her complaint was not justified because it was her husband's stubbornness which in reality complemented her kindness. This I said was similar to negative and positive particles, which together made a whole. It is the lack of understanding of this fact which leads to mistakes. In fact, both West and East failed to realize the true role of a woman; while East degraded women, West on the contrary equated them to man.

The role of women

West prescribes the formula of "*Ladies first*." In our mission, ladies are doing a heroic role. Recently, we went to a wedding where free copies of the Quran were distributed amongst the people; with women taking the lead in distribution. In giving the Quran to men, women became givers while men became takers. A woman therefore, has to be given her role.

Recently, I received a phone call from Aurangabad (Maharashtra). The caller complained against his wife and said that he was not in favour of her talking to everyone. I wanted to hear the other side of the story so I spoke to the lady as well. She said that her husband does not let her do anything. Listening to both, I reached the conclusion that the man was at fault. I reprimanded him saying that it was his responsibility to ensure that his wife did not stay locked indoors. I explained to him that he must trust her, and not be suspicious because in keeping his wife confined to a closed room, he was going against the law of nature.

In other words the present world proffers more opportunities for women because the spirit of the time is "*Ladies first*". It is therefore unwise to ignore the role of women because both roles are equally required. Just as a flower co-exists with its thorns so stubbornness must co-exist with compassion. This is the creation plan of God.

The example of Hajra

It is said that *there is a woman at the beginning of all great things*. I think the biggest example of this is Hajra, the wife of Prophet Abraham. She offered a great sacrifice, one that only a woman could make.

Since Adam, numerous Prophets were sent to call man towards the path of One God. But as civilizational settlements grew and their inhabitants became conditioned in *shirk* or idol worship, the effect of this call diminished greatly. In order to discontinue this historical tradition and the prevalent culture of *shirk*, a team of individuals was required to support the Prophet. But because no one was devoid of conditioning, this team could not come into existence.

For this purpose a group of companions was required consisting of people endowed with the highest human qualities, fit to assist the Prophet in implementing the divine scheme. Abraham, in bringing his wife Hajra and son Ismail to the uncultivated desert town of ancient Mecca and settling there, was laying the foundations for such a community. There, far from civilization, in simple, natural surroundings, a people would emerge from Abraham's progeny who were imbued with the highest human qualities; who would view things with clear and objective vision; whose actions would conform to their words; who would be ready to lay down their lives and properties for something they knew to be true. A people as firm as the mountains which surrounded them, as boundless as the vast desert in which they roamed. When this "finest community" had been raised from the barrenness of the desert, God sent the messenger among them for whom Abraham had prayed at the time of the construction of the Ka'bah. It was the generation raised in these conditions that became "*a nation of heroes*".

While God inspired Prophet Abraham to inhabit both Hajra, and their infant son, Ismael, in the deserts of Arabia, the sacrifice sought was only of Ismael and not Hajra. As I thought about it, I realized that this was yet another manifestation of the different roles both had to play. While Hajra and Ismael had their contributions in the raising of a conditioning- free generation, their roles were different. It is for this reason that Ismael's physical sacrifice was sought.

Hajra took the first, difficult step, which marked a new beginning in the history of Islam. Today, Arabia has all conceivable material comforts but at the time of Hajra, it was only a vast and empty desert. The role performed by her led to the formation of a team that revolutionized the thinking of its times and led the world out of the dark ages ruled by polytheism and superstitions. During the time of all other Prophets, *tauheed* was confined to the level of dawah work but after Hajra's sacrifice, *tauheed* assumed the proportion of a revolution.

The example of Asea

Asea was a descendent of the tribe of Banu Israel. That's why she could easily understand the preaching and teachings of Moses and silently accepted the faith he preached. But when Pharaoh got to know about this, he forced her to relinquish the religion of Moses or face death. In other words, she had to choose between God's reward in the form of paradise or the Pharaoh's palace.

Asea has a great contribution to Moses' mission. She risked her life and proved that Pharaoh's palace was nothing in comparison to the paradise of God. This was the final way of propagating faith to Pharaoh. Upon being tortured at the hands of the Pharaoh, she had prayed

My Lord, build me a house in nearness to You in Paradise (66:11)

The example of Khadijah

In Islamic history, there are many examples of women giving invaluable help to their husbands in critical situations. One of the most notable was Khadijah, the wife of the Prophet of Islam who successfully brought the Prophet back from a state of fear and trembling to a state of normalcy after his receiving the first divine revelation in the solitude of the Cave of Hira from the Archangel Gabriel in the year 610 A.D. Prior to receiving Prophethood, the quest of Prophet Muhammad has been described in the Quran as

Did He not find you wandering, and give you guidance (93:7)

As Gabriel appeared on the horizon, it was a trembling experience for Muhammad. Gabriel said,

**Read in the name of your Lord Who created, created man from clots of congealed blood. Read!
Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know
(96:1)**

Muhammad replied, "*I cannot read.*" But Gabriel repeated the verse. Muhammad reiterated himself yet again to which Gabriel repeated the above verse once again. He then embraced Prophet Muhammad so tightly that Muhammad felt he would die. The Prophet then read

Read! In the name of your Lord, who created man from clots of congealed blood... (96:1)

The Prophet's biographers write that after this extraordinary experience with the Angel Gabriel and the First Revelation of the initial verses, he rushed back home from Hira. Trembling with fear, he said to his wife Khadijah '*Cover me with a cloak, cover me with a cloak.*' After a while, when he had recovered a little from his state of anxiety, he related what he had experienced to his wife and said: '*I feel there is danger to my life.*' She was able to reassure him that his life was not, as he feared, in danger, as she herself was emotionally detached from the incident.

She observed: “*God will surely never forsake you. You are kind to your kin; you always help the weak; you take care of whoever crosses your threshold; you solace the weary; you speak the truth.*” The reassurance that Khadijah gave to the Prophet of Islam on this occasion was one of the most significant contributions to the furtherance of Islam.

Then it occurred to Khadijah that she had best make enquiries of some learned Christians, who, well versed as they were in the scriptures, were bound to have knowledge of revelation and Prophethood. Khadijah hastened to Waraqah ibn Nawfal, a Christian convert who had translated part of the Bible into Arabic. When she had finished telling him of what Muhammad had seen and heard, Waraqah exclaimed, “Holy, holy! By the Master of my soul, if your report be true, O Khadijah, this must be the great spirit who spoke to Moses. This means that Muhammad must be the Prophet of this nation.” On a subsequent visit, Khadijah brought Muhammad to meet Waraqah ibn Nawfal. Muhammad related the events exactly as they had taken place and, when he had finished, Waraqah said, “By the Master of my soul, I swear that you are the same Prophet whose coming was foretold by Jesus, son of Mary.” But then Waraqah sounded a note of warning: “You will be denied and you will be hurt. You will be abused and you will be pursued.” He nevertheless immediately pledged himself to the Prophet: “If I should ever live to see that day, I should surely help you.” (*Seerah ibn Hisham*) In fact, many ulema agree that the first person to bring faith and the first companion of the Prophet Muhammad was Waraqah ibn Nawfal.

Khadijah therefore played a crucial role at the time when the Prophet most needed support. The role of woman is that she is the “*other part of a man’s life*”. On account of being separated from the helm of affairs that engulf man, she can think independently and in a detached manner.

The example of Ayesha

Ayesha was the daughter of Abu Bakr who got married to the Prophet Muhammad at an early age. Ayesha dedicated her life to the cause of God and became instrumental in transmission of the Prophetic wisdom till many years after the Prophet’s demise. In those days, there existed no means of preservation or recording of events, which was worrisome from the point of view of transmission of the teachings of the Prophet to the future generations. To accomplish this task, God chose two people – *Abu Hurayra* and *Ayesha*.

Abu Hurayra had a very sharp memory, which made him the source of maximum narrations of Hadith. He lived in Masjid-e-Nabvi and spent his time listening to the Prophet and memorizing the Hadith. *Hurayra's* narrations are mostly verbatim and are called *Marwiyat-e-Abu Hurayra* (Narrations of Abu Hurayra).

Ayesha on the other hand, stayed throughout the day with the Prophet. Such companionship was only possible for a wife. Also, since she was younger to the Prophet, she lived almost fifty years after his demise and continued to be the source of Prophetic narrations. Had she been of an equal age, her life expectancy may not have been as much.

Despite the hard times that the family of the Prophet underwent, Ayesha remained patient. She used to live in a hut-like settlement with no amenities where even food supplies were in meager quantities. She cast herself in such a life so that she could transmit the teachings of the Prophet to the next generations. She says,

The family of Muhammad never ate to their fill even for two consecutive days and in such state the Prophet passed away (Muslim)

A unique quality of Ayesha was her strong grasping power, which made her draw accurate inferences from observations. Ayesha's narrations are called *Istimbaataat-e-Ayesha* (Inferences of Ayesha). For instance, according to one of her traditions

**Whenever the Prophet had to choose between the two, he always opted for easier option
(Al Bukhari)**

That is, every problem has two options – easier (peaceful activism) and harder (violent) option. The Prophet always opted for the easier, peaceful course of action. This is not verbatim in Hadith but an inference of Ayesha, which she must have derived after thorough observation and deep introspection of the actions of the Prophet. In this inference, lies the key to all success, whether in personal or international lives. Unfortunately, the present-day Muslims do not know about this teaching of the Prophet. They continue armed struggle even though there exist clear options of carrying out peaceful activism.

Conclusion

Towards the end, I would like to reiterate that matter comes into existence only when both negative and positive particles come together. This is the law of nature. Unfortunately, for a long time in history, women remained neglected as man measured her on his yardstick. Being stubborn in nature, he could not understand the importance of compassion and consequently disrespected woman. The same was the case with women who considered stubbornness as an evil trait.

Hence, both kept complaining about one another – man complained that a woman is too soft and the woman found it difficult to keep with the stubborn nature of man. The wisdom lay in understanding and realizing the respective positions of man and woman in the divine scheme of things.

In other words, both men and women must recognise one another's uniqueness and discover their position in the Creation Plan of God. The reason why most men are unable to understand and appreciate the difference is because they want the women of the household to remain confined to the family. This is considered to be the sole role of a woman but this is not the right practice. Such indulgences disallow a woman from doing the role destined for her. The culture of the modern-day civilization is such that home, children and family have assumed the position of 'god' in the lives of men.

Man must not make his family his sole concern; in fact the whole humanity should be his concern. In view of the qualities possessed by him, a man must accomplish his role and let a woman strive to accomplish hers. A lady is a treasure for a man and is his ideal, intellectual life partner. Man must therefore discover the role of a woman and let her flourish.