

# Islam and The Status of Women: A Revolutionary Change

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## Abstract

Islam is the only incomparable religion in the revolutionary changes it introduced in the status and position of Women. Islam is the only religion that emancipated Women from the bondage of cultural and in human subjugation throughout the history. Women Worldwide demand equal rights. There is no a system of law that preserves, maintain and protect what are truly Women's rights and status as much as Islamic law does, whether in the past or in modern times. This paper intends to examine and deals with each aspect of a Woman's status in Islam with quotations from the Qur'an and Hadiths, the original sources. The study is qualitative in nature in which the researcher focused on textual, prophetic, historical, analytical and comparative analysis. In its findings the study suggests that, throughout history, the reputation, chastity and maternal role of Muslim women were objects of admiration by impartial observers and Society need to be enlightened about the true status of women in Islam.

**Keywords:** Islam, Women, Status, Change

## Introduction

Religion is a way and system of life that governs the spiritual and moral aspects of human activity. Islam is a comprehensive way of life which gives every matter the minutest detail on the spiritual and moral code of conduct at every stage of human endeavour. The importance of religion in respect to achieving socio-political and economic order and positive development cannot be over-emphasized.

Religion is a very helpful instrument in alleviating problems and forging national and international cohesion, peace and unity when objectively and sincerely put into practice, but if otherwise it will be an instrument of destruction and establishing the society.

A woman in Islam is as free as air like man in all spheres of human activity, be it political, religious, social, commercial, economics, intellectual, spiritual and all other walks of life. In all these, Islam assign her roles and functions, thus liberated her and equate her with man, except where different role is needed due to certain constraints of human natural disposition.

Change is inevitable and is part of human life experience in which the whole is going through. In this jet age of modernity with escalation of scientific and technological advancement and change in the socio-economic and political life, the need for women to participate fully with her talents, skills, energy and resources is highly appreciated.

Currently, there is yearnings and calls for "women liberation", or "women emancipation", or "women role in national development" throughout the World. In Islam, all these are just a ruse because a Muslim woman do not need to be liberated and emancipated, but already fifteen centuries ago Islam has salvage and rescue her from man's torture, oppression, suppression and intimidation in all fields of human life.

Nigeria is a multi-religious country; each religion has its beliefs, creeds, doctrine and philosophy of life, as well as code of conduct which the adherents should be followed strictly and seriously.

### **The Status of Women in some parts of the World**

Women during the Jahiliyyah as a period are not considered a first class citizens, they were at the receiving end, having no regard except in social life such as nudity, incest, dancing naked to attract men to evil, temporary marriage was rampant, unlimited polygamy and polyandry were tolerated. Men could marry and divorce at will, women have no share in the deceased husband property, rather, themselves were property passed to the heirs. Infanticide of female daughter was prevalent because they were considered as a source of wrath, curse and shame among the society. The Qur'an says:

"And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dis honour or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision". (Q.16:58-59)

"When the female (infant) buried alive, is questioned for what crime she was killed". (81:8-9)

Undoubtedly, women were in this horrible situation, Islam came and rescued them and redress all the moral laxity, political imbalance and social injustice meted by the powerful upon the weak.

(Badawi 2016:3), has this to say as regard to the position of women in some parts of the World:

Women have been treated little better than slaves, forced to do heavy works for little rewards. In some places women were regarded in law as chattels, (the property of the husband or family), to be inherited on his death along with his other possessions. Some societies have regarded women as playthings, to be passed from man to man for his entertainment. Some have seen women as not only without soul but as an agent of the devil. To mention but a few are the followings:

Describing the status of the Indian woman, Encyclopedia Britannica states:

"In India, subjection was a cardinal principle. day and night most women be held by their protectors in a state of dependence says Manu. The rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is descent traced through males to the exclusion of females".

In Hindu scriptures, the description of a good wife is as follows: "a woman, whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection, acquires high renown in this world, and, in the next, the same abode with her husband."

"In Athens, women were not better off than either the Indian or the Roman women. Athenian women were always minors, subject to some male - to their father, to their brother, or to some of their male kin.

Her consent in marriage was not generally thought to be necessary and "she was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents, and receive from them her husband and her lord, even though he were stranger to her."

A Roman wife was described by a historian as: "a babe, a minor, a ward, a person incapable of doing or acting anything according to her own individual taste, a person continually under the tutelage and guardianship of her husband."

In the Encyclopedia Britannica, we find a summary of the legal status of women in the Roman civilization:

In Roman law a woman was even in historic times completely dependent. If married she and her property passed into the power of her husband... the wife was the purchased property of her husband, and like a slave acquired only for his benefit. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office, she could not be a witness, surety, tutor, or curator; she could not adopt or be adopted, or make will or contract. Among the Scandinavian races, women were under perpetual tutelage, whether married or unmarried. As late as the Code of Christian V, at the end of the 17th Century, it was enacted that if a woman married without the consent of her tutor he might have, if he wished, administration and usufruct of her goods during her life.

According to the English Common Law:

"...all real property which a wife held at the time of a marriage became a possession of her husband. He was entitled to the rent from the land and to any profit, which might be made from operating the estate during the joint life of the spouses. As time passed, the English courts devised means to forbid a husband's transferring real property without the consent of his wife, but he still retained the right to manage it and to receive the money which it produced. As to a wife's personal property, the husband's power was complete. He had the right to spend it as he saw fit.

Only by the late nineteenth Century did the situation start to improve. "By a series of acts starting with the Married women's Property Act in 1870, amended in 1882 and 1887, married women achieved the right to own property and to enter contracts on a par with spinsters, widows, and divorcees." As late as the Nineteenth Century an authority in ancient law, Sir Henry Maine, wrote: "No society which preserves any tincture of Christian institutions is likely to restore to married women the personal liberty conferred on them by the Middle Roman Law."

### **Islam and Women a revolutionary change**

Today, different ideologies, theories and concepts of evolution and revolution have been tested in different parts of the globe. The capitalist, the communist, the socialist approach and the democratic and feudal systems of life were experimented, but the resultant of all these systems failed woefully to establish a just balanced socio-economic as well as political order and right civilization. However, the industrial revolution, capitalist raised issue of woman's ownership not for the sake of depending her but for acquiring a greater labour force for lower wages.

(Nadwei 1975:31) keenly observed that:

"the failure of contemporary western society, disintegration of sexual morality, meaningless of honesty, economic exploitation, mental and emotional insecurity, compromise with higher principle, in short, the worship of the gods of wealth, comfort and expediency has made it obvious to many keen observer that the present civilization is heading its own destruction despite its glorious achievements in the field of science and technology".

(Maygan 1969:50) succinctly put it:

"The basic theme of western civilization has been its revolt against all spiritual and religious values".

Therefore, the so called emancipation of women in modern concept of life all too often means their merciless commercial exploitation.

There is no a system of law that preserves, maintain and protect what are truly Women's rights and status as much as Islamic law does, whether in the past or in modern times. The Prophet of Islam (Peace be upon him) in his lifetime demonstrated the new way that Islam wants women to be treated. The idea of leaving women uneducated and cut off from intellectual life is an anti Islamic one, which is the contrary of what Qur'an and Sunnah have prescribed. Underneath are some of the revolutionary changes that Islam brought to women:

#### **a. Spiritual Status**

The Qur'an affirms in several places the equal spiritual status of men and women, their equal religious duties and their equal rewards for their deeds. "Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds" [Qur'an 74:37]

It also states:

"...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 precede one from another..." [Noble Quran 3:195]

"Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him We will give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their rewards according to their actions." [Noble Quran 16:97}

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 (peace and blessings be upon him) and thereafter attendance at the Friday congregational prayers is optional for them while it is mandatory for men (on Friday).

### **b. Intellectual Status**

Islam as a religion gives much emphasis to understanding at the exercise of the intellect. Numerous Qur'anic verses urged mankind to think, to reason, study and ponder on Allah's creation as a mean of attaining greater consciousness of Allah (taqwa). Every woman is capable of benefiting from intellectual effort and study in the same way as men, and of contributing to human knowledge and enlightenment. As an illustration Aisha, the wife of the Prophet is super intelligent and held high regard as a very important source of Hadith and as a person to be consulted generally about Islam and the affairs of Ummah. Other women also played an important roles as teachers and scholars.

The idea of leaving women uneducated and cut off from intellectual life is an anti Islamic that is contrary of what Qur'an and Sunnah have prescribed.

### **c. Property Owning Status**

Under the Shari'ah, women are recognized as independent individuals and not as the property of their husbands. They can therefore legally own property in their own right, earn and inherit wealth and invest or dispose of it as they wish. Some of these rights were not achieved for women in Europe until the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries A.C.

"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." [Noble Quran 4:7]

### **d. Status in Marriage**

In the Islamic marriage dowry (mahr) is another indicator of the status of the Muslim woman. The old system of "bride-price" still found in some parts of the World, where the bridegroom pays the father of the bride, is replaced in Islam by the mahr (dower) which is free gift to the bride herself, and becomes her property.

In an Islamic marriage, it is the husband's responsibility to provide for the wife and children. The legal rights and duties of the husband and wife, the law prohibiting wife's ill treatment, the wife's access to divorce by khul or by the court, kind treatment of the wife in the event of divorce, wife's right to custody of her children after divorce have all been outline fully in length in Islamic legal system.

"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." [Noble Quran 30:21]

According to Islamic Law, women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent.

Ibn 'Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of Allah, Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), and she reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of Allah gave her the choice... (between accepting the marriage or invalidating it). [Ibn Hanbal No. 2469]

In another version, the girl said:

"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]

Besides all other provisions for her protection at the time of marriage, it was specifically decreed that woman has the full right to her Mahr, a marriage gift, 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. The concept of Mahr in Islam is neither an actual or symbolic price for the woman, as was the case in certain cultures, but rather it is a gift symbolizing love and affection.

#### **e. The Status of the Mother**

In Islam, appropriate attention is drawn to the special place of honour given to the women as a mother. Her feelings as a mother are considered so important that every child is urged in the strongest terms to treat her with loving kindness.

"And we have enjoined upon man (to be good) to his parents: His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness..." [Noble Quran 31:14]

A man came to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) asking: O Messenger of God, who among the people is the most worthy of my good company? The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, your mother. The man said then who else: The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, your mother. The man asked, Then who else? The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, your mother. The man asked, Then who else? Only then did the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) say, your father. [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

A famous saying of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) is: "Paradise is at the feet of mothers." [In An-Nasa'i, Ibn Majah, and Ahmad]

#### **f. Role of Women towards nation building**

A woman like man, she is part and parcel of human organization and structure of the society, therefore, must have a definite role to play for the betterment and enhancement of peace and stability in the social realm and framework of human activities. In fact history testifies that, no nation or civilization would boast and achieve a meaningful life and development if woman is isolated. She is an integral part of the society, and this is the true dictum of the holy Qur'an:

"O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam), and from him (Adam) He created his wife (Eve), and from them both He created many men and women.....". (Q.4:1)

Ironically, bird flies by two wings, as such society moves to perfection through man and woman, but if one wing is kept as commission, it is hardly difficult or extremely impossible to achieve that perfection. Therefore, man and woman each represent a wing with which the society flies to any height.

#### **g. Moral Training**

A woman natural role in every society is the upbringing of children. She is the moulder and shaper of human personality and destiny. The moral and cultural value orientation within the religious context is the ultimate goal of woman in the upbringing of the children.

Today, children are neglected; morality is almost if not thrown in the dustbin of history, which as a result, "area boys", "drug abuse", "sexual abuse" and "corruption of any kind are in the rampant increase. This trend disturbs the social order, peace and stability of the society.

A woman has positive role to play in that direction, hadith of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) clarify their roles as follows:

"Every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock; ..... a woman is a shepherd over the members of her family and is responsible for them.....". (Bukhari and Muslim)

(Gauhar 1978:60) pointed out that, "The Muslim woman in the home is virtually important one to the happiness of the husband, and the physical and spiritual development of their children. Her endeavour is to make her family life sweet and joyful and the home a place of security and peace. These and her early character of the training the children have a lasting effect on the behaviour and attitudes of the next generation when they reached adolescent and adulthood. There is a well known proverb that says: "the mother is a school", that conveys the importance of this role. Moral training is the foremost role of a woman to discharge at all times.

#### **h. Women role in the educational sector**

Education is the bedrock of civilization, therefore, in Islam, education is very crucial to life existence, development and discovery of the vast natural resources and hidden mysteries that surround us on earth. Islam encourages education for all in all fields like their counterpart men to develop their talents.

Islam does not lock women intentionally; rather it encourages them to look for it, so to improve their talents for the well being of herself, the community and the nation. Allah has not created talent for nothing but for a purpose for human utilization and benefit.

Notable women were held in high esteem and respected for their high learning, intellectual attainment and the role they played in the educational development of Islam. Prominent among them was A'isha, the wife of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) whom sahabah resorted to her verdict on some issues of the hour.

(Ahmad 1976:123) observed that: "with regard to the women right to seek employment, it should be stated first that, Islam regards her role in society as a mother and wife as the most essential one. Neither maids nor baby sitters can possibly take the mothers place as education of an upright, complex free and carefully reared child. Such a noble and vital role which largely shapes the future of nations cannot be regarded as idleness".

Considering the above assertion, women suppose to impart the proper knowledge, shape the behaviour of the child and inculcate good norms and values cherished by the society.

## Conclusion

Religion does not bar a woman from participation in building up a better society in almost all fields of human endeavours. However, she should respect and maintain her chastity and dignity by being modest in appearance and speech.

In Islam a woman should be guided by rules and regulations governing her social interaction which she must observe in all circumstances and situations she find herself. This is for the maintenance of the purity of the social and moral order

A healthy society can get nothing precious than virtuous woman because she is the embodiment of peace, progress, development, custodian of good values and upholder of morality.

It should be done in mind that, religion has its philosophy of life for woman to participate in nation building, the first and foremost step is to create a congenial and conducive religious environment for her, currently, the atmosphere created by secularism is not healthy for a women to effectively contribute her quota towards nation building.

Secularism is antithesis of religion according to Islam, the former is after materialism only, while the later its foundation is spirituality and morality in which political, social and economic order are rest upon.

Few have been mentioned which substantiate the claim of Islam's revolutionary impact on the status of women. They are so numerous that they would require a book to contain them.

The practice in some areas and countries of extreme seclusion, involving depriving women and girls access to broad education and participation in the affairs of the Muslim Ummah, has resulted in unhealthy ignorance among women. This ignorance has led to a lowering of women's status and unawareness of some of their Islamic rights.

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