

Woman in Islam

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There is a common belief that Islam gives a higher status to men in comparison to women. But this is a misconception. In Islam, a woman enjoys the same status as that of a man.

I would like to give a few references from the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad in this regard. God says in the Quran: I will deny no man or woman among you the reward of their labours. You are members one of another (3:195). In another verse, Muslim men and women are considered together, and it is stressed that both have the same responsibility and status in God's sight (33:35). Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad has said: "Men and women are two equal halves of a single unit" (*Al-Tirmizi*). This statement is the best expression of gender equality.

So, the original sources of Islam make it clear that neither gender is inferior or superior to the other. There is no difference between the two as regards status, rights and blessings both in this world and in the Hereafter.

In ancient times, women were considered inferior to men and were deprived, among other things, of the right to inherit property. Islam for the first time in human history gave women the right to inherit property. As regards the issue of marriage, in Islam, marriage is based on the free will of both parties. A forced marriage is not considered lawful in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad has said, "An unmarried girl should not be married until her permission has been taken." *Al-Bukhari, (Fath al-Bari, 9/157)*

There is a general impression that Islam has restricted women's workplace to doing only household work. But this is not the truth. In the early period of Islam, Muslim women participated in all kinds of religious and worldly activities. They were encouraged to utilise their talents. Islam encouraged them to acquire education. Their homes became centres of learning and they imparted knowledge to the young. The Prophet's wife, Aisha, having gained knowledge of Islam from the Prophet, was able, after the death of the Prophet, to perform the task of teacher and guide to the Muslim community for a period of about fifty years. Abdullah ibn Abbas, a Companion of the Prophet of great stature, and regarded as one of the best commentators of the Qur'an, was one of Aisha's pupils. Aisha's example gives a clear indication of the high status women were accorded within Islam.

As regards the issue of polygamy, I would like to say that monogamy is the rule in Islam and polygamy is only an exception. The commandment in the Qur'an regarding polygamy (4:3) is not of general application, but of temporary application. It applies only to a particular situation when, due to loss of large numbers of men in battle, the number of women exceeds the number of available men. In the absence of such a situation, this commandment of the Qur'an would be inapplicable.

As regards the issue of the veil or 'burqa', the reality is that the burqa is not a part of Islamic teachings but a part of Muslim culture. There is a great difference between

Muslims and Islam. The source of Islam is the Quran whereas Muslim culture is a social phenomenon. The word 'burqa' is not mentioned in the Quran. History shows that the present veil or burqa was prevalent in ancient Persia. Under the influence of Iranian culture burqa was adopted by Muslims. Gradually it was Islamised and became a part of Muslim culture.

The Quran only commands women to dress modestly. It does not ask them to cover their faces in a veil. From this it is clear that the present 'burqa' is a part of Muslim culture and not part of Quranic commandments.

The well-known British-American scholar of Islamic history, Bernard Lewis, has acknowledged Islam's contribution in improving the status of women. He writes, "In general, the advent of Islam brought an enormous improvement in the position of women in ancient Arabia, endowing them with property and some other rights. The killing of female infants, sanctioned by custom in Pagan Arabia, was outlawed by Islam." (*The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2000 Years*)

I would like to conclude by saying that Islam does not hold women inferior to men. Islam considers men and women as equal in every respect.