

THE ROLE OF WOMEN
IN ISLAM

Women (w)

role.

In many parts of the world today, womanhood is seen with years of repression in a traditional male chauvinistic society where she has been looked down upon only as a child-bearer, sex object and a slave of man. This certainly is not her choice.

She looks at the West and their "democratic system" where women are encouraged to get out of their home. She studies hard and works hard too. Yet she does'nt find the equality or happiness that she is after, and she turns to tranquilizers and pills. She is turned into a sex object and multi-national corporations exploit her sexuality for more benefit in consumerized society. She is beaten by her husband and she beats her children in frustration. She turns to alcohol and cigarettes and starts giving birth to defective children.

She turns round and looks at the so-called Communist block where they have tried to free her, but she is exploited in another form of exploitation. This is all in the name of freedom and equality. She, as other human beings, is just the tool of production and there is not much value other than the materialistic aspect of mankind. Her feminity is wrongly held against her, she is made a mere economic entity for the sake of society, like another machine. First she loses her children to large institutions in order not to lose her economic productivity, because she is told, in order to be free she should not be bothered with the family bonds. After a few years Marxists tried to change her attitude because it was not productive society. The other bloc (chinese) does not experiment with what was tried in Russia but under necessity of time has opened the doors to the West recently. This also cannot be her choice.

Therefore she looks at history and finds out that Islam gave her her rights in such an oppressed society of the pre-Islamic era when she was so oppressed that she was bought and sold like an object and the new-born female child was often buried alive. She was considered something less than a human being until Islamic laws gave her rights equal to that of men.

CHAPTER ON WOMEN
IN THE QURA'N

The Qur'an has a chapter called women's chapter. One would think that the chapter on women would be entirely about issues concerning women, but that is not so. Although it does have many verses about women and children, but they are discussed within the framework of society. The Qur'an does not believe in a single isolated issue as the women's issue, just as it does not have any issues like men's or children's issue. It deals with the liberation of women within the framework of the liberation of oppressed people, and then the issues concerning these people, their inner relations within the society where they live, their relations with the oppressors, and giving them guidance how to overcome the oppressors and establish a just social system where there will not be any injustice toward any member of society, including women and children. The Qur'an's approach is that making an issue of the women's problem is an ignorant or deliberate deviation from the main issue - the oppressed people. This would mean dealing with a superficial contradiction rather than the basic conflict and contradiction.

EQUALITY OF
MEN AND WOMEN

Another factor to keep in mind is defining equality. In Western countries they have confused equality with similarity or sameness of rights. Therefore women are struggling to get same or similar rights with men, and not necessarily equal rights. Although the women's right movement has helped women to get many other rights but it brought them new problems and new forms of oppression.

With the advancement of technology the capitalists started exploiting women and children in the factories because they offered cheap labor. Later on they also started exploiting them sexually for mere profit in their consumerized society. The woman in that new form of oppression sees her femininity as the cause of all her problems and starts developing a negative attitude toward her feminine characteristics. Islam regards the physical differences between men and women as certain characteristics - rather than positive or negative values and believes they are needed for perfection of the cell of the family that is performing in the body of the society. So Islam sees the roles of men and women as completing roles, not competing roles.

THE QUR'AN ON
EQUALITY

How does the Qur'an deal with the question of equality? It emphasizes an important and basic equality of origin. This fact is emphasized in at least five verses throughout the Qur'an as under:

- 1) " Oh Man take shelter in your Lord who has created you from a single self and created from it its pair" (Sura Al-Nisa v1)
- 2) " And God has given you of your own selves" (Sura Al-Bahl v.72)
- 3) " The originator of heavens and the earth, he made for you/ from among your own selves, pairs" (Sura Al-~~xxxxxx~~ Ash Shura v.11)
- 4) " He it is who created you from a single self and from it did he make its mate that he may dwell resting unto her" (Sura Al-Araf v.189)
- 5) " And of His signs is that he created for you/ mates that you may dwell unto them, and caused between you, love and compassion. Verily in this are signs for people who reflects" (Sura Al-Room v.21)

It will be noted that there is no mention of male superiority and the relationship between the two is based on mutual support, love and respect.

"They (women) are your garments and you are their garments"

(Sura Al-Baqara v.187)

As we have seen in previous verses there was equality of their origin. There are two other verses that emphasize their spiritual dimension. One is Al-Hijr v.29 where it talks about the creation of a human being. The verse continues " .. and breathe into him My spirit". Also this fact is emphasized in sura Al-Sajada v.9 " Then shape him and breathe into him, His spirit"

In terms of social and political obligations men and women are both vicegerents of God on earth and they both should recognize the just and the unjust.

" and the believer men and the believer women are guardians to one another, they enjoy good and forbid evil, they establish prayer, pay the zakat and obey God and his apostle. On these people God will bestow his mercy. Verily, God is Almighty and All-wise."

(Sura Al-Barat v.71)

In studying this verse, one should be familiar with the broad meaning of enjoining right and forbidding wrong and evil, which is one of the most basic teachings of involvement in the affairs of society emphasized throughout the Qur'an. Such aware women are involved in the improvement of their society shoulder to shoulder with men.

In recognition of basic equality of men and women, the Qur'an does not give any positive advantages to women either. Giving a positive advantage may mean a basic inequality. For example if a woman commits a crime, she will be equally punished.

" As for the man who steals or the woman who steals, cut ye off their hand" (Sura Al-Maida v.38)

" The fornicator or fornicatress, scourge ye each of them with a hundred stripes" (Sura Al-Noor v.2)

It is within such framework of thought, such understanding of the value system and understanding of the difference between equality and similarity or sameness that one should study the Qur'anic verses in regards to women. For example the woman inherits half as much as the man. This has been the basis of the misunderstanding that women don't have the equal economic rights as men. This misunderstanding is due to the previously mentioned mistake of judging a law away from its system. In case of economic rights of women, a woman is encouraged to take part in the economic well-being of society. She gains and

(4)

keeps the fruits of her labor and is free to invest or spend it anyway she wishes. She pays zakat and gives interest-free loans, meaning she engages in economic activities in society as well as men do. Her work whether inside or outside her house is regarded valuable because she can even charge her husband for nursing her own babies. On the other hand she doesn't have any obligations in regards to supporting another member of the family or the society. It is the duty of man to support his wife and children, even if there is a woman in his family like a mother or a sister who has lost her male supporter, it is the man's duty to support her economically. Therefore at the end men and women will end up with equal savings and earnings. So they have equal economic rights even though they don't have similar economic rights. rfa

In summary Islam does not give positive or negative value to feminine or masculine characteristics.

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