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THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

The status of woman in Islam constitutes no problem. The attitude of the Qur'an and the early Muslims bears witness to the fact that a woman is, at least, as vital to life as man himself, and that she is not inferior to him nor is she one of the lower species. Had it not been for the impact of foreign cultures and alien influences, this question would never have arisen among the Muslims. It was a matter of course, a matter of fact, and no-one, then, considered it as a problem at all.

The status of woman in Islam is something unique, something novel, something that has no similarity in any other system. If we look to the democratic nations, we find that woman is not really in a happy position. Her status is not enviable. She has to work so hard to live, and sometimes she may be doing the same job that a man does but her wage is less than his. To establish her status as a human being possessing a soul, she paid heavily. Yet in spite of all these costly sacrifices and painful struggles, she has not acquired what Islam has established for the Muslim woman.

The rights of woman of modern times were not granted voluntarily or out of kindness to the female. Modern woman reached her present position by force, and not through natural process or mutual consent. She had to force her way, and various circumstances came to her aid. Shortage of manpower during wars, pressure of economic needs and requirements of industrial developments forced woman to get out of her home—to work, to learn, to struggle for her livelihood, to appear as an equal to man, to run her race in the course of life side by side with him. Most women today exercise the right of freedom to go out independently, to work and earn, to pretend to be equal to man, but this, sadly enough, is at the expense of their families. This is all known and obvious. What is not known is the status of woman in Islam. An attempt will be made in the following passages to sum up the attitude of Islam with regard to woman.

1. Woman is recognized by Islam as a full and equal partner of man in the procreation of human kind. He is the father; she is the mother, and both are essential for life. Her role is no less vital than his. By this partnership she has an equal share in every aspect; she is entitled to equal rights; she undertakes equal responsibilities, and in her there are as many qualities and as much humanity as there are in her partner.

2. She is equal to man in bearing personal and common responsibilities and in receiving rewards for her deeds. She is acknowledged as an independent personality, in possession of human qualities and worthy of spiritual aspiration. Her human nature is neither inferior to nor deviant from that of man. Both are members of one another.

3. She is equal to man in the pursuit of education and knowledge. When Islam enjoins the seeking of knowledge upon Muslims, it makes no distinction between man and woman.

4. She is entitled to freedom of expression as much as man is. Her sound opinions are taken into consideration and cannot be disregarded just because she happens to belong to the female sex.

5. Historical records show that women participated in public life with the early Muslims, especially in times of emergencies. Women used to accompany the Muslim armies engaged in battles to nurse the wounded, prepare supplies, serve the warriors, and so on. They were not shut behind iron bars or considered worthless creatures and deprived of souls.

6. Islam grants woman equal rights to contract, to enterprise, to earn and possess independently. Her life, her property, her honor are as sacred as those of man. If she commits any offence, her penalty is no less or more than a man's in a similar case. If she is wronged or harmed, she gets due compensations equal to what a man in her position would get.

7. Islam does not state these rights in a statistical form and then relax. It has taken all measures to safeguard them and put them into practice as integral articles of Faith. It never tolerates those who are inclined to prejudice against woman or discrimination between man and woman.

8. Apart from recognition of woman as an independent human being acknowledged equally essential for the survival of humanity, Islam has given her a share of inheritance. Before Islam, she was not only deprived of that share but was herself considered as property to be inherited by man. Out of that transferable Islam made an heir, acknowledging the inherent human qualities in woman. Whether she is a wife or mother, a sister or daughter, she receives a certain share of the deceased kin's property, a share which depends on her degree of relationship to the deceased and the number of heirs. This share is hers, and no-one can take it away or disinherit her.

9. Woman enjoys certain privileges of which man is deprived. She is exempt from some religious duties, i.e., prayers and fasting, in her regular periods and at times of confinement. She is exempt from attending the obligatory congregation of Fridays. She is exempt from all financial liabilities. As a mother, she enjoys more recognition and higher honor in the sight of God.

10. The Muslim woman is always associated with an old tradition known as the "veil". It is Islamic that the woman should beautify herself with the veil of honor, dignity, chastity, purity and integrity. She should refrain from all deeds and gestures that might stir the passions of people other than her legitimate husband or cause evil suspicion of her morality. She is warned not to display her charms or expose her physical attractions before strangers. The veil which she must put on is one that can save her soul from weakness, her mind from indulgence, her eyes from lustful looks, and her personality from demoralization. Islam is most concerned with the integrity of woman, with the safeguarding of her morals and morale and with the protection of her character and personality.

By now it is clear that the status of woman in Islam is unprecedently high and realistically suitable to her nature. Her rights and duties are equal to those of man but not necessarily or absolutely identical with them. If she is deprived of one thing in some aspect, she is fully compensated for it with more things in many other aspects. The fact that she belongs to the female sex has no bearing on her human status or independent personality, and it is not basis for justification of prejudice against her or injustice to her person. Islam gives her as much as is required of her. Her rights match beautifully with her duties. The balance between rights and duties is maintained, and no side overweighs the other.