

## **WOMEN'S DIGNITY, RIGHTS AND EMPOWERMENT IN ISLAM**

We hear a lot of things about women's position and rights in the society. Some of the words that are expressed about the realization of women's rights are acceptable. Again there is room for difference of opinion on some points. It is imperative to establish the rights of men and women fully, because the society is moving forward everyday. So not only men or women but also the rights of every individual must be established.

The society has made significant progress during the last 50 years. The women like men have come forward though not equally. We have left far behind the society we had during Begum Rokeya's time. She saw that the girls had no opportunity for education. You ladies, perhaps could not have received education if Begum Rokeya was not born at that time & not taken bold initiative for female education. Of course, Almighty Allah would have sent some other woman to this earth who could do the job.

In the whole world especially in our country the oppression that is being unleashed on the people particularly on the women has a foundation. The oppression is not descending from the sky. The ideological foundation for the persecution on women by men and at times by women themselves is: generally the people believe, particularly the men believe that women are inferior to men having low quality & below standard. The belief also exists in the women. This belief originates from some erroneous ideas among the people. And on this belief is standing firmly the whole edifice of oppression, deprivation and disrespect towards women.

If we want to eliminate persecution on women from our country, it cannot be done excluding Islam. I want to make it very clear that in a country like ours where ninety percent people are Muslims, we would not be able to move without Islam. Those who have

revolted against Islam could not last long and are not able to sustain. A woman revolted - I would not name her - her end was not good. She ended in a miserable condition. With all humility I would like to say that if we can move ahead remaining within the framework of Islam then it will be good in all respects. I firmly believe that there is such a framework in Islam, which can ensure the progress of women. I am not in favour of distorting Islam nor I am inclined to giving temporary interpretation of Islam.

In true sense, Islam has empowered women and Islam has upheld respect for women. Islam has ensured rights for women. But before enlarging on this I would mention what could be the basis or "ideological foundation" on which the fundamental equality of men and women depends? God has not created all human beings with similar appearance. Two persons are never equal in every dot or in all respects. One person is different from another in terms of his weight, height, colour, education etc. But basically every human being is equal before Almighty Allah. I would like to present four arguments to prove this:

One, Allah has made this thing very clear that real human being is 'Ruh'. We call it soul or spirit. Real man is not body. The body will perish in the grave. Those of us who believe in Islam know that fundamental element of man is the 'Ruh'. Allah created all human beings and their 'Ruhs' (spirit) at the same time, created them the same way and asked them a single question. All men and women gave the same answer. I quote a verse (172) from Sura A'araf:

When thy Lord drew forth from the children of Adam from their loins - their descendants and made them testify concerning them (saying) "Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)? They said: "Ye! We do testify!

It means all men and women reached an agreement on one point that is, "You are our Lord and we shall obey You". Here no separate agreements were made with men or with women. So, the first word about our ideological foundation is that the real human being is the Ruh (spirit) and all spirits are equal. Any other inequality or dissimilarity if any is insignificant or very small compared to the equality of human soul or spirit.

It means that the spiritual personalities of a human being are the same and so as 'human beings' all are equal. This is the fundamental foundation of equality among men and women.

Two, We, men, boast of our physical structure as superior to that of the women and think that perhaps God has created us better comparatively. But God has made one thing very clear in the Holy Quran that there is, of course, some difference between all human beings but everyone is "the first class" and superb. Those of you who offer prayer regularly know a particular verse from 'Sura Tin' which says:

we have indeed created the human beings in the best of moulds. [Quran, 95:4]

It did not say that the men only were created in the best of moulds. It means there is difference in our appearances and in our structures. But everyone is excellent and first class. So, to establish the fundamental equality of men and women or to launch a new movement for women or the humanity at large the men should not say that the structures of women are bad. Allah would not like that. Those who are believers must not say this. This is the second proof of basic equality among men and women. I say "basic" because there would remain some minor differences between men and women.

Three, Allah clearly says that all people belong to one family - the family of Adam and Eve. In Sura Nisa, Allah says:

O mankind! Revere your guardian - Lord, who created you from a single person, created of like nature his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. (Quran, 4:1)

It proves that we belong to a single family. We are children of Adam. In the Holy Quran, Allah addressed the human beings as "children of Adam" many times. As the children and parents together make a family, similarly all human beings together make a family in the eyes of Islam.

The family of human beings is above of all other families. It means that our fundamental honour and dignity is the same. There may be some differences on minor issues but worldly dignity is not real dignity. As in legal terms, all human beings

are equal in the eyes of the law, so all are equal in the eyes of Allah. The only foundation of respect to Allah is 'Taqwa' (obedience to Him).

Allah has never said that men are more respectful to Him or women are less respectful to Him. He says, only who obeys Him is respectful to Him amongst you.

If this were the foundation of respect to Allah, then does the difference created by men matter at all? Allah says, He never differentiates between person to person except on Taqwa or piety or obedient to Him. So we are children of one family and our fundamental dignity is the same. In Sura Huzurat, Allah says:

O mankind! We created You from a single (pair) of a male and a female, And made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (the person who is) the most righteous of you and Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Quran, 49:13)

Allah says in a verse of Surah Al Nisa:

Fear Allah through whom ye demand your mutual (rights) and (revere) the wombs (that bore you); for Allah ever watches over you. (Quran, 4:1)

Allah says clearly, "revere the wombs". While commenting on this verse a famous religious scholar of Egypt, Syed Qutb writes: These words were never written in any other literature in the world prior to the holy Quran. He said in a detailed commentary of this verse that all human beings are essentially equal. But among them, women are superior in a sense. Because by revering the wombs Allah has in fact asked us to respect mothers and respect the women as a whole. So this proves the equality of our basic social status. This is the third proof of our new ideological foundation. [Sura Nisa - Tafsir: Syed Qutb].

Four, At the time of creation Allah told the human beings that all of us are 'Khalifa' (Caliph - representatives). He said, "I will send into the world my representatives." Allah did not say that He was sending women or men. He did not even say that He was sending human beings. He told that He was sending representatives.

He sent human beings but called them His representatives. He termed human beings as His Khalifa meaning representatives. The entire human race is His representatives irrespective of the sex. But it is true that if we commit sin, commit crime, commit murder, carry out oppression and lose our faith in Him then we will lose our status as Khalifa. But basically we all are the representatives of Allah. [Quran, 2:30; 35:39]

All empowerment lies with this status as Khalifa. No one can perform one's responsibility without power or authority. To perform one's responsibility as Khalifa each man or woman must have some authority. The foundation of woman's empowerment lies with this Khilafat. Not only women, in Khilafat lies the foundation of empowerment of all women, men, poor, and weak. So this is the fourth proof of fundamental equality between a man and a woman. Islam wants that every man, every woman, every person should be empowered. But if the women are deprived now they should be empowered first. If the men are deprived any time they should be empowered. We must think first about anyone who is deprived; at present we must put in efforts for the empowerment of women.

Now the question is what should be real work of a woman and whether they should only stay at home? If any woman freely decides to stay at home, she has rights to do it. It is applicable to a man also. But Almighty Allah has never said anywhere that women will have to stay at home and will not be able to do anything outside. On the contrary, Allah has given the same basic responsibility to women as well as men. In Sura Tawba, Allah says, men and women have six responsibilities:

The believers, men and women, are protectors one of another; they uphold what is just, and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity and obey Allah and His messenger. [Quran, 9:71]

So the six responsibilities are:

1. They uphold what is just.
2. They forbid what is evil.
3. They observe regular prayers.
4. They practice regular charity.

5. They obey Allah.

6. They obey His messenger.

This verse says, men and women are protectors ('Wali' or guardians) of one another. Some people say that women cannot be guardians but Allah says that the women can be guardians. Through these instructions Allah has recognized the participation of women in all good activities. Allah has declared that He will shower blessings on those who will perform these responsibilities. After studying several Tafsirs (commentaries) of the holy Quran and as a person having full faith in the holy Book and the Sunnah of Rasul (the way the prophet lived his life), I express my firm belief that all men and women are equal so far as these six responsibilities are concerned. All activities including politics and social work fall within its purview. I feel that we have made ourselves busy with petty things leaving aside the essence of Islam. We are depending on many books written by men. It seems to me that we are not paying that much importance to the original Book of Allah in comparison to other books.

Lastly, I would like to say that if you learn Islam through others you would not learn the true spirit of Islam. You will have to study a few commentaries of the Quran yourself. Some try to insert their own opinions in the translations. So if you study five or six translations of the Quran, you will be able to understand where people's opinions have found their place in the Quran and what are the words of Allah. Study of several commentaries will help you understand which interpretations are correct. We do not have well known women commentators of the holy Book. It is their failure. There would not have been gender bias if they could play their part effectively. However, there are some commentaries of the holy Quran, which are free from gender bias. For example "The Message of Quran" by Mohammad Asad. I would like to conclude here.