



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH, IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY

ISSN: 2454-132X

Impact factor: 4.295

(Volume3, Issue3)

Available online at www.ijariit.com

Education and Women: Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: *The very first word of the Quran that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad was, in fact, "Read". Prophet Muhammad once stated that "Seeking knowledge is mandatory for all Muslims." Islam has a very wide focus and it teaches equality. It teaches that men and women are equal before God. It grants women divinely sanctioned inheritance, property, social and educational rights. The attitude of the Qur'an and the early Muslims bear witness to the fact that 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. This paper focuses on the education of women in Islam and their equality.*

Keywords: *Islam, Education, and Women.*

INTRODUCTION

Islam has a very wide focus and it teaches equality. Islam teaches that men and women are equal before God. It grants women divinely sanctioned inheritance, property, social and marriage rights, including the right to reject the terms of a proposal and to initiate divorce. In Islam, there is justice with all the races and gender. The American middle-class trend to include a prenuptial agreement in the marriage contract is completely acceptable in Islamic law. In Islam's early period, women were professionals and property owners, as many are today. This value of equality is not to be mistaken for or confused with identicalness or stereotype. Islam teaches that, in the sight of God, all men are equal, but they are not necessarily identical. When this concept is fully utilized, it will leave no place for prejudice or persecutions. And when this Divine ordinance is fully implemented, there will be no room for oppression or suppression. Concepts of chosen and gentile peoples, words such as privileged and condemned races, expressions such as social castes and second – class citizens will all become meaningless and obsolete.

EDUCATION OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

From the very earliest days of Islam, the issue of education has been at the forefront on the minds of the Muslims. The very first word of the Quran that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad was, in fact, "Read". Prophet Muhammad once stated that "Seeking knowledge is mandatory for all Muslims." With such a direct command to go out and seek knowledge, Muslims have placed a huge emphasis on the educational system in order to fulfill this obligation placed on them by the Prophet.

Islam encouraged religious education of Muslim women. According to a Hadith attributed to Muhammad, he praised the women of ansar because shame did not prevent them from learning Islam. While it was not common for women to enroll as students in formal religious schools, it was common for women to attend informal lectures and study sessions at mosques, madrasat, and other public places. For example, the attendance of women at the Fatimid Caliphate's "sessions of wisdom" (majālis al-ḥikma) was noted by various historians, including Ibn al-Tuwayr, al-Muṣabbiḥī, and Imam.

According to the 12th-century Sunni scholar Ibn 'Asakir, there were various opportunities for female education in what is known as the Islamic Golden Age. He writes that women could study, earn ijazahs (religious degrees) and qualify as ulama and Islamic teachers. Similarly, al-Sakhawi devotes one of the twelve volumes of his biographical dictionary Daw al-Lami to female religious scholars between 700 and 1800 CE, giving information on 1,075 of them. Muslim women in British India, nevertheless, pressed for their rights independent of men; by the 1930s, 2.5 million girls had entered schools of which 0.5 million were Muslims.

After Muhammad's death, Aisha became a main source of information about Muhammad, and on medicine and poetry as well. Aisha's assertion that Muhammad lived the Qur'an became the basis for Muslims ever since to emulate his example. Aishah Binte Abu Bakr, the youngest wife of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), was very talented and possessed an incredible memory. As a Muslim scholar, she is credited with narrating more than two thousand Hadith and was noted for teaching eminent scholars. She had a great love for learning and became known for her intelligence and sharp sense of judgment. Her life also substantiates that a woman can

be a scholar, exert influence over men and women and provide them with inspiration and leadership. The example of Aishah in promoting education, particular education of women in the laws and teachings of Islam, is a hallmark of female education in Islam. Because of the strength of her personality, she was a leader in every field of knowledge, in society and in politics.

Women also played a major role as supporters of education:

The Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid's wife, Zubayda, personally funded many construction projects for mosques, roads, and wells in the Hijaz, which greatly benefit the many students that traveled through these areas.

The wife of Ottoman Sultan Suleyman, Hurrem Sultan, endowed numerous madrasas, in addition to other charitable works such as hospitals, public baths, and soup kitchens.

The princess Fatima Al-Fihri established the first degree-granting university in the world, University of Al Karaouine, in Morocco in 859 CE. And during the Ayyubid dynasty, the regent queen Dafiya Khatun built numerous khanqas (Sufi convents) and madrasas (theological colleges) in Damascus and Aleppo.

On examining some hadith, authentic sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

“Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim.”

“He who has a slave-girl and teaches her good manners and improves her education and then manumits and marries her will get a double reward; and any slave who observes God's right and his master's right will get a double reward.” (Emphasis added)

Three important themes around education are emerging in the above traditions. From the first Hadith, we infer that education is not a right but a responsibility on every Muslim, male or female. In the second Hadith, the emphasis is laid on the quality of education imparted to the girl slave and the latter part deals with the encouragement to free slaves (Islam denounced and later abolished slavery).

WOMEN IN ISLAM: A VIEW

The status of woman in Islam constitutes no problem. The attitude of the Qur'an and the early Muslims bear witness to the fact that 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 have never arisen among the Muslims. The status of woman was taken for granted to be equal to that of man. It was a matter of course, a matter of fact, and no one, then, considered it as a problem at all.

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 aspirations. Her human nature is neither inferior to nor deviant from that of man. Both are members of one another. God says:

And their Lord has accepted (their prayers) and answered them (saying): 'Never will I cause to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female; you are members, one of another (3:195; cf. 9:71; 33:35-36; 66:19-21).

Apart from recognition of woman as an independent human being acknowledged as 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 property, Islam made an heir, acknowledging the inherent human qualities in a woman. Whether she is 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. Even if the deceased wishes to deprive her by making a will to other relations or in favor of any other cause, the Law will not allow him to do so. Any proprietor is permitted to make his will within the limit of one-third of his property, so he may not affect the rights of his heirs, men, and women. In the case of inheritance, the question of equality and sameness is fully applicable. In principle, both man and woman are equally entitled to inherit the property of the deceased relations but the portions they get may vary. In some instances, man receives two shares whereas woman gets one only. This is no sign of giving preference or supremacy to man over woman.

CONCLUSION

Today, Islamic legal and social systems around the world approach and fall short of women's rights by varying degrees. Muslims themselves generally view Islam as progressive in these matters. Many Muslim feminists hold the view that the problems presently hindering Muslim women are those that hinder women of all backgrounds worldwide- oppressive cultural practices, poverty, illiteracy, political repression, and patriarchy. There is a strong, healthy critique of gender oppression among Muslim feminist authors and activists worldwide. It would be anachronistic to claim that Muhammad was a feminist in our modern sense. Yet the same present-day barriers to women's equality prevailed in 7th century Arabia, and he opposed them. Because in his own lifetime Muhammad improved women's position in society.

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