

Status of Woman in Various Civilisations and Religions An Overview

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Before the advent of Prophet Muhammad ¹ peace be upon him (PBUH), woman had lost her true status as well as her natural role in society. Woman was dishonoured, degraded and tyrannised in all societies before *Islam*. She was the victim of the tyranny and oppression of man. Women were bought and sold like chattels or the ordinary things of daily life in the market. Men not only used them as a means of gratification of their sexual desire but also got richer by means of forced prostitution. These practices were common in all tribes, regimes and countries at that time. (Naseef, 1987).

Arabia (BEFORE ISLAM)

Before *Islam*, the status of woman in general was very low; she was regarded as a special creation between the human being and the beast. She was meant to serve her master and give birth to children. This is why the birth of a female child was considered a disgrace for the parents and for the family. Some people even buried their female children alive soon after their birth, because they could not bear the disgrace. The *Qur'an*² describes the state of mind of a man who hears of the birth of a daughter, in these words:

"When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on!" (16:58-59). In Surah³ Zukhruf, we read: "When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) what he sets up as a likeness to the Lord, his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief!" (43:17). The *Qur'an* warns of the dire consequences of killing babies in these words concerning the Day of Judgement: "When the female (infant), buried alive, is questioned for what crime she was killed" (81:8-9). The *Qur'an* also refers to the evil practice of the forced prostitution of women in ancient times and forbids it in these words: "But force not your maids to prostitution when they desire chastity, in order that you may make a gain in the goods of this life. (24:33). The position of women in Arabia was so low and degrading that they could even be mortgaged in return for a loan. It is narrated by Muhammad Ibn Maslamah: "When I went to Ka'b ibn Ashraf and asked him to give me some grain as a loan, he was saying to his men, "Give your women as a mortgage to me," but the men replied, "How can we trust women to you as a mortgage when we know fully well that you are the most handsome man in the Arabian peninsula?" (Bukhari)⁴.

The Greeks

The Greeks, the established intellectual leaders of the West, held woman in disgrace and cared little for her modesty and chastity. The Greeks generally regarded woman as inferior creation. If a woman gave birth to a child in an unnatural way (after a shorter than normal period of gestation, etc.), they used to put her to death. In Sparta, the unfortunate woman, who was found incapable of giving the

country a soldier for its defence, was usually put to death. When a woman had delivered her child, she was in the interest of the nation, taken from her husband temporarily and given to someone of insemination and propagation of a race of fighting men for the defence of the country. Greeks, even at the height of their culture, did not have any regard for woman. (Naseef, 1987).

The Hindus

The position of women in Hindu society was worst of all. She was regarded as lower than human and she worshipped her husband as a god, and on his death, she was forced to Sati⁵ with her husband (Perveen, 1975). It was a common custom in ancient India to have a family bride, or a common wife of several brothers. All of them had sexual intercourse with her and she bore children from all of them. In the words of the famous ancient Indian book of law, *Nyog*⁶ is rife among Brahmans. (Naseef, 1987).

However, the position of woman in ancient Hindu society is further illustrated by the following few examples from the Hindu Law. The Hindu Law says: 'Fate, storm, death, hell, poison, the venomous serpent - none of these is so evil as the woman. Naseef (1987) quotes the Law of Manu⁷ as: The woman in her childhood is under the control of the father, in youth under her husband and after him, controlled by her sons, and in their absence by her relatives, since no woman is capable of passing her life independently.

The Romans

The Romans emerged as a civilised nation in history, the man was regarded as the chief of the family and even had the power to take the life of his wife. But as they made

progress and became more civilised, the family unit remained intact, but undue pressure from male domination softened to moderation. Family discipline was maintained and the chastity of woman was highly valued. There was no legitimate relationship between man and woman but through marriage. A woman was highly respected only as a mother of a family. In the words of Maududi (1975) "When the check on public morality became weak, a flood of sexual licentiousness, nudity and promiscuity burst upon Rome. Theatres became the scene of moral perversion and nude performance; dwelling place were decorated with nude and immoral paintings.

Prostitution became so widespread and popular that Caesar Tiberius (14 AD.) had to enforce a law prohibiting women of the Rome nobility from adopting prostitution. Flora became a popular Roman sport in which naked women competed in race contests. Males and females took baths together in public. Roman literature became replete with immoral and immodest themes, with the result that no literary work devoid of such themes could become popular with the common people or the intelligentsia. When the Romans became so overwhelmed by animal passions, their glory completely faded away, leaving not even a trace behind it. (Naseef, 1987).

The Jews

Jewish views on the position of woman in society are shown by the following extracts from the Old Testament and the Jewish Law. We find this in the Old Testament: " And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whose pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her. Behold, this have I found, say the preacher, counting

one by one, to find out the account: which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not; one man among a thousand have I found, but a woman among all those have I not found".

And again, " If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go unto her, and take her to wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother unto her. And it shall be that the first born which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother, which is dead, that is name be not put out of Israel. And if the man like not to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the elders, and say, "My husband's brother refuses to raise up unto his brother a name in Israel, he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother." Then the elders of his city shall call him, and speak unto him: and if he stand to it, and say, I like not to take her; then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his boot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother's house. And his name shall be called in Israel. The house of him that hath his shoe loosed" (Naseef, 1987).

The Chinese

In Chinese scripture women been called the "Waters of Woe" that wash away all good fortunes. In Chinese life the woman has always been regarded as inferior to man and she has no right whatsoever. A woman was regarded eternally a minor-her very children not properly belonging to her. A man could whenever he pleased, repudiate his wife, he could sell his wife as a concubine. After widowhood she remained the property of her husband's family and it was almost impossible for her to remarry. (Siddiqi, 1984).

Buddhism

As regards Buddhism, the teaching that *Nirvana*⁸ cannot be attained in the company of woman is sufficiently eloquent to give us a clue to its attitude towards this sex. Siddiqi (1984) quotes Mr. U. May Oung as: "The idea of a wedlock and its attendant worldly life is opposed to the ultimate end of Buddhism annihilation of desire the striving for which must necessarily involve celibacy." To a follower of Buddhism, therefore, according to the celebrated historian Westermarck (1982): "Women are, of all the snares which the tempter has spread for men, the most dangerous: in women are embodied all the powers of infatuation which blind the mind of the world."

The conception of woman in Buddhism is summed up in the words of a renowned Buddhist Scholar recorded by Bettany (1980) in his *World's Religions* in the following words: Unfathomably deep, like a fish's course in the water, is the character of woman, robed with many artifices, with whom truth is hard to find, to whom a lie is like the truth and the truth is like a lie.

The Christians

In the beginning, Christianity very effectively put an end to all immoral ways, rescued corrupt women and dancing girls, endeavoured to eradicate prostitution and purify the various areas of life of immorality, and spread moral education among the people. But it could not penetrate their life-systems, which were engulfed in unnatural ways of life.

Maududi (1975) quotes St. John Chrysostom (C 345-407), one of the Greek Fathers of the Church who described woman as an inevitable evil, an eternal mischief, an attractive calamity, a domestic risk, a charming and decorated misfortune.

The following are the main features of the legal injunctions that were enforced in the West under the influence of Christian Church:

1. Woman was crushed economically and made to depend wholly and permanently on man: she was given limited rights of inheritance, and even more limited rights of acquiring and holding property; she had no control over her own earnings, as these were all seized by the husband with full proprietary rights.
2. Divorce and *khul'a*⁹ were totally prohibited. The man and the wife were compelled to remain together, both by religion and law, though they might be fed up with each other. The maximum that could be done in extreme circumstances was to cause separation between the spouses, and that was all. In such a case, neither the man nor the woman was entitled to remarry. Obviously this measure was even worse, for after separation they were left with no other choice than to become monks and nuns or resort to a life of sin.
3. It was considered vicious, rather sinful, for the spouses to remarry after the death of their life partners. According to the Christian scholars, marrying was nothing but a means of satisfying animal passions and lusts of the flesh. They called it civilised adultery. Remarrying by priests was

particularly looked upon as a crime under the Church law. The law of the land had also prohibited it under certain places, and where it was allowed by law, public opinion, which was a deeply coloured by religious prejudices, did not recognise it as lawful (Naseef, 1987).

The Status of Woman in Islam

Having seen how cruelly woman was treated and mercilessly exploited by different religions and secular cultures of the world, it will now be possible for us to understand correctly the glorious achievements of Islam in this direction.

The bright sun of *Islam* rose through dark clouds, illuminating the world, and its piercing rays brought the world, steeped in awful darkness, to a fine bright morning. Humble and oppressed humanity was raised from the dust.

Gone was extremism and *Islam* brought men to the natural practice of moderation. Only those rights were restored to the people which were lawfully their. The cause of the long oppressed weaker sex (woman) was championed by *Islam* with full vigour. This issue of the value of the honour of woman was revived, and in this respect, no connivance was allowed. All possible avenues of corruption and debasement, were closed. The sexual urge was confined to moderation by certain regulations, which provided a comprehensive code of conduct in connection with conjugal relations, and healthy methods of propagation of the human race were enforced. Family life was moulded to form a pleasant atmosphere. Woman, instead of being a symbol of damnation, came to be regarded as a model of peace and a

blessing. And discouraging the acetic view of celibacy, the value of conjugal life was stressed and made compulsory.

The fundamental object of the *Islamic* faith was to bring humanity to one level, where all were equal before their Creator, Lord and Sovereign: poor and rich, beggar and king, ignorant and scholarly, man and woman, black and white, all stand absolutely equal as human beings before Him: "O mankind! Reverence your 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." (4:1). In *Surah Hujurat*, we read: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Surely the most honoured of you in the Sight of *Allah*¹⁰ is he who is the most righteous of you." (49:13). These verses address all mankind and stress the Oneness of humanity on two counts: first that all are servants of *Allah* and in His servitude all stand at one level, without any distinction on the basis of birth, position, nationality or sex; second, that all are children of one set of parents and, as such are equal to one another. All are equal before *Allah*, and that person gets most honour and excellence in His Presence who is most righteous, whether male or female.

With the advent of *Islam*, humanity was brought out of the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge and with this intellectual and spiritual revolution woman was the major beneficiary, though many other low and deprived classes also benefited: "A Book which We have revealed to you, in order that you might lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light, with the permission of their Lord, to the Way of Him, the Exalted in Power, Worthy of all Praise" (14:1). And in *Surah Hadeed*, we read these words: "It is He

Who sends to his servant manifest Signs, that He may lead you from the depths of darkness into the light. And surely, *Allah* is to you Most kind and Merciful" (57:9).

Islam removed the stigma that world has placed upon woman. Man and woman, it proclaimed, had both come from the same essence, and therefore, if woman could be said to be wicked, man also should be regarded as such, or if man had a single spark of nobility in him, woman also should have it. Women, declared the Messenger of *Allah* (PBUH) are the twin-halves of men. The Holy *Qur'an* says: "O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them Twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women. Be careful of your duty towards *Allah* in Whom you claim (your rights) of one another, and towards the wombs (than bear you). Lo! *Allah* hath been a Watcher over you" (4:1) "And *Allah* hath given you wives of your own kind." (16:72);

Islam refuted the Biblical assertion that the woman was first deceived and she was, therefore, responsible for the Fall of Adam. It declared in the most unambiguous terms that Adam and Eve were deceived simultaneously and were, therefore, equally responsible for the deed. The Holy *Qur'an* says: and We said: O' Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden and eat ye (both) freely (of the fruits) thereof where ye will: but come not nigh this tree lest ye become wrong doers. But Satan caused them (both) to deflect therefrom and expelled them from the (happy) state in which they were" (2:35,36).

In contrast to the view of Christianity: "Neither was man created for the woman, nor the woman for the man" *Islam* proclaimed: The women are raiment for you (men) and

ye are raiment for them." (2:187). The concept that man is dominant over woman is retained in *Islam* but the gap between the two sexes has been narrowed. The Holy *Qu'ran* says: "And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and men are a degree above them - *Allah* is Mighty, Wise." (2:228)

The only difference it makes is in the realm of physical conditions, and this difference is based on hard facts. It believes in the principle of the division of Labour. It allots the strenuous work and the rough outdoor life to man and makes him responsible for the maintenance of the family. It regards home as the first concern of woman. It allots the work of managing the home and upbringing and training of children to women, a work which forms the most important item in the task of nation-building. It exhorts her to engage herself in the cultivation of learning and allows her to participate, if necessary, in social uplift and other schemes of national reconstruction. The life of the office and factory, it considers as uncongenial and unnatural for her, and it is emphatic in its demands that woman should in no case step into the shoes of man, nor should man encroach upon her sphere of activity. Both should work in a spirit of harmony, sympathy, and love.

Further, there is the problem of vesting the ultimate authority in the administration of the affairs of the family. In a Muslim family, so far as honour is concerned, *Islam* has ordered to honour the mother more than the father, the sister more than the brother and the daughter more than the son. But, as regards administration, that is, in the case of the husband and wife, the final authority is vested in the husband who is also held responsible for looking after the comfort of the wife, and who cannot use his power for doing any injury to her. It is a fact that sound administration is

impossible without the risk of losing the favours of *Allah*, because the wife is not his subordinate but in the words of the Messenger of *Allah* (PBUH), "the queen of her home".

Through *Islam* woman gained legal rights she did not formerly possess in pre-Islamic Arabia and which women in the West acquired only many centuries later. Crabitees (1927), an American Judge who was familiar with Muslim Law, wrote: "Muhammad was probably the greatest Champion of women's rights the world has ever seen. *Islam* conferred upon the Muslim wife property rights exactly the same as her husband. She is free to dispose and manage her financial assets as she pleases without let or hindrance from her husband." Women were given a share of inheritance from parents and near kindred. The Holy *Qur'an* says: "Unto the men (of a family) belongeth a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, and unto the women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be little or much - a legal share." (4:7).

In pre-*Islam* days a step son or brother took possession of a dead man's widow or widows along with his goods and chattels. This practice was condemned by *Islam*. The Holy *Qur'an* says: "O ye who believe! It is not lawful for you forcibly to inherit the women" (4:19). Some concept of *Islamic* attitudes towards women may be gained from the following verses of the Holy *Qur'an*. It is stated: "He has put love and mercy between your (hearts)" (30:21).

According to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), woman was not "an organ of the devil" but *Muhasnah*¹¹. He gave the most honourable position to mothers when he said: "Paradise lies under the feet of the mother." As regards daughters, "Whoever befriendeth three daughter, or three sisters and teacheth them manners, and is affectionate to

them, till they come of age, may *Allah* apportion Paradise for him. With regards to wives, "A virtuous wife is a man's best treasure", and "the most perfect of the believers in faith is the best of them in moral excellence and the best of you are the kindest of you to their wives." Thus *Islam* improved women's lot immeasurably and conferred upon her in rights and privileges not enjoyed by her contemporary Christian counterpart.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) enjoined the acquisition of knowledge equally on women and men by his order: "The acquisition of knowledge equally on women and men by his order: "The acquisition of knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim woman" (Ibn Majah)¹².

The matrimonial union of man and woman had been viewed with disapproval and had been regarded as derogatory to man in certain religions. But the Messenger of *Allah* (PBUH) laid it down once for all: "Marriage is of my way and whoever disinclines from my ways is not from me (i.e. not my follower)." (Bukhari, Muslim)¹³.

"When man has married, he has completed one - half of his faith," (Baihaqi)¹⁴. He inculcated respect for women in these words: "*Allah* commands us to treat women gently, for they are our mothers, daughters and aunts". "The world and all things in the world are precious but the most precious thing in the world is a virtuous woman" (Muslim).

He bade his followers to behave most humanely towards their wives: "The best of you are they who behave best to their wives: "A Muslim must not hate his wife, and if he be displeased with one bad quality in her, then let him be pleased with one that is good," "The more civil and kind a

Muslim is to his wife, the more perfect of faith he is.”
(Tirmzi)¹⁵.

References:

1. Last Prophet of God
2. The Holy Book of the Muslims, series of revelations made by God to Muhammad (PBUH) during his career as a Prophet in Makkah and Madinah, in the first decade of 7th century.
3. Chapter of Qur'an, each known by a different title. Qur'an is divided into 114 Surahs.
4. One of six canonical collections of Hadith in which some 7275 traditions were compiled.
5. To burn ones ownself
6. Practice through which a childless woman can have children at will by the younger brother of the husband or some other relative with the permission of father-in-law or some other authority.
7. One of the Hindu laws related to women
8. Salvation
9. Right of divorce to the women given by Islam
10. God, and has never been applied to any thing other than the Unimaginable Being.
11. A fortress against Satan

12. One of six canonical collections of Hadith
13. One of six canonical collections of Hadith
14. A book comprising of Hadith but not included in six most authentic canonical collections of Hadith
15. One of six canonical collections of Hadith

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