

Women and Their Status in Islam

By Maulana Shah Muhammad Abdul Aleem Siddique

Spiritual Guide, Hazrat Maulana Shah Abdul Aleem Siddiqui Rehmatullah Alaih is a shining luminary in the family of the first caliph of Islam Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq Radi Allah Taala Anho. He has not only captured the hearts of thousands throughout the world but has also improved the lives of several people. He came from a very distinguished ancestral background who were all very well respected for their faith, piety, purity, sincerity, and intelligence (All praise to Allah). As both scholars and teachers of Tassawuf they were all driven in the same blessed direction: preaching Islam and serving humanity. Their teachings focused on the reconciliation of Shariah (Islamic religious law) and Tariqat (mystical and spiritual teachings). Their high spiritual devotion and their eagerness in the promotion of Tassawuf (Sufism- inward dimension of Islam) made them great Sufis of their time. People by thousands gathered around them, seeking their guidance and spiritual advice. Coming from such a divine lineage, this paved the road for Hazrat Maulana Shah Abdul Aleem Siddiqui Al Quaderi Al Madani Rehmatullah Alaih's spiritual quest.



In this article, the author has demonstrated how Islam has elevated the status of woman.

our Beloved Prophet Mohammad peace be upon him, savior of womanhood, stood up in Arabia and, through the Divine Revelation of the Lord of the Universe who created both the male and the female and who loves them equally, preached to the world that females are just like males, having equal rights, equal honour and equal status in life.

Islam teaches us to treat woman justly and honourably throughout the three stages of her life being (i) a daughter (ii) a wife and (iii) a mother

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

This is a very important subject to deal with. Therefore, I start writing with the help Allah Almighty, I bear witness that there is only one Rabb that we worship and our Beloved Prophet Muhammad **صلى الله عليه وسلم** is his last messenger and to whom we bear allegiance in the form of following his sunnahs. I pray that Allah Almighty continue to show his mercy on us and always guide us to the right path in this world to convey his message to the world

History is silent as to whether there was any distinction in status between the male and the female sexes during the beginnings of human civilization. In later days no doubt the female sex was regarded as inferior to the male and the idea of inferiority developed to such an extent that the male sex not only claimed a complete superiority over the female sex, but further arrogated to itself the right to utilize and employ the female sex as it liked.

Surveying the history of the world on this point we find that in pre-Christian Europe, Greece, which was the centre of light and learning for a long time and which provided philosophical and scientific inspiration to the Europe of later days, regarded woman as something definitely inferior to man. She was a subservient creature who had come into existence solely for the purpose of breeding citizens for the state and soldiers for the army. Their great dramatist Euripedes puts into the mouth of **Medea** the remark, "*Women are impotent for good, but clever contrivers of all evils*". Such degrading conceptions led to a moral degeneration, which ultimately ruined the Greek society. As per Professor Lecky, the names of virtuous women scarcely appear in Greek history." (*History of European Morals, Vol. II p. 307*)

Conditions in Europe did not improve with the advent of Christianity. "Of the woman came the beginning of sin and the wickedness of man and through her we all die. "Consequently, Paul the Premier Saint of Christendom, proclaimed: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed than Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in transgression." Other early Fathers were even more uncharitable and denounced woman as "the lance of the demon," "the gate of the Devil," "the road of iniquity." "the sting of the scorpion," a daughter of falsehood." the sentinel of hell," "the enemy of peace" and "of the wild beast, the most dangerous." Nay, they went still further. The Orthodox Greek Church denied that woman had a soul, and at the Council of Macon, a Bishop vehemently asserted that a woman did not belong to the human species (*Westermarck, p.663*). A council held at Auxierre prohibited women to receive the Eucharist in their naked hands and to come near the altar during the celebration of the Mass on the ground that she was an "unclean thing". "I may define man," says Principal Donaldson (*Woman*, pp. 181, 182), "to be a male human being and woman to be a female human being..... Now what the early Christians did was to strike the 'male' out of the definition of man and 'human being' out of the definition of woman. Man was the human being made for the highest and noblest purpose; woman was a female made to serve only. She was on earth to influence the heart of man with every evil passion. She was a fireship continually striving to get alongside the male man-of-war to blow him up into pieces."

In the Asian cradles of civilization woman was no better off. Hinduism, which is the oldest among the present day religions of the world, laid it down: 'In childhood a female must be subjected her father, in youth to her husband, when her husband is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent'. (*Manu, V 140*). "The legislator Manu", says the celebrated Hindu scholar, **Sir R. G. Bhandarkar**, "is equally hard on woman. It must be acknowledged that the estimate of the old Aryan of womanly nature is not flattering to them generally. They are debarred from reading the Vedas; any religious rite in which they alone are concerned is directed to be performed without Vedic Mantras.

Even the Bhagvad Gita gives expression to the general belief that it is only a sinful soul that is born as woman, Vaisya or Sudra". (*Collected Works, p. 46 1*). In Buddhism, says the Buddhist scholar, **M May Oung**, "the idea of wedlock and its attendant worldly life is opposed to the ultimate and - the annihilation of Desire - the striving for which must necessarily involve celibacy." (*Buddhist Law, Par. 1, p. 2*). In Buddhist ideology, therefore, according to the historian **Westermarck**, "Woman are, of all the snares which the temper has spread for men, the most dangerous; in women are embodied all the powers of infatuation which blind the mind of the world."

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the general conception of womanhood was of such a degraded type that her very existence was considered humiliating for the family. Female infanticide was, consequently, practiced on a wide scale. Those women, however, who escaped early death could live only on sufferance. For, an Arab woman "had no rights; she could not inherit property; her person formed part of the inheritance which came to the heir of her husband, and he was entitled to marry her against her will. Hence sprung up the impious marriages of their sons with their stepmothers and others of an even worse character... Polygamy was universal and quite unrestricted; equally so was divorce at least as far as man was concerned; (Mohamed and Mohamedanism; Bosworth Smith; p82)

Such was the condition of the female sex in the world when our Beloved Prophet Mohammad **صلى الله عليه وسلم** the Savior of womanhood, stood up in Arabia and, through the Divine Revelation of the Lord of the Universe who created both the male and the female and who loves them equally, preached to the world that females are just like males, having equal rights, equal honour and equal status in life.

They were on account to be treated as the property of the males. They have the right of ownership of property in the same way as the males have, though no doubt under the principle of the division labour the female sex have some specialized duties to perform in life, just as the male sex has its own duties.

There are three stages through which the womenfolk have to pass in life i.e. (a) as daughter, (b) as wife, and (c) as mother.

AS A DAUGHTER

Islam denounces in unequivocal terms the pre-Islamic inhuman custom of female infanticide and commands people to love and cherish their daughters even more than their sons.

The Holy Qur'an says that on the Day of Judgement the female infant, buried alive, will be questioned: "For what crime were they murdered for?" (LXXXI: 8-9) Thus, before the Almighty the victim herself will be able to give evidence against those who killed that innocent creature of Allah simply for the sake of satisfying their vanity.

Allah Almighty again commands humanity:

"Kill not your children for fear of want. We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily, to kill them is a great sin. (XVII: 3 1)

Fatimah was the youngest daughter of the Holy Prophet Mohammad **صلى الله عليه وسلم**. In dealing with her, he set an example of fatherly love which is a model for mankind. "Fatimah," he would say, "is a part of my being; whosoever annoys her annoys me" (Mishkat-ul-Masabih, XLIV:S)

He also emphasized preferential treatment towards the female sex and said **"When you bring anything for your children for distribution, begin with the girls first."**

AS A WIFE

Marriage, in the Islamic law is really a contract just like other civil contracts between two parties. As far as the conditions of the contract are concerned, both the parties, the man and the woman, stand upon the same level. Each party has certain rights and duties. Islam commands justice to be observed in every contract, and so in the contract of marriage too justice should be observed. The Holy Quran says:

"The women have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable."(II:228)

No doubt, under the principle of the distribution of labour, work should be divided between the pair. The womenfolk have naturally to take care of their offspring until they grow up. They must engage themselves in bringing them up and so are not able to pay attention to securing their means of livelihood. The men, therefore, have been made responsible for maintaining the family, including the wife, and have been given the duty of securing all the requirements of the home.

The Holy Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** is reported to have said: **"Woman is the queen of her house."** The Holy Quran describes the position of the wife in a beautiful verse.

He created for you mates from among yourselves that you might find solace in them and he ordained between you love and mercy,"(XX:21)

The Prophet said: *" The most perfect of believers in faith is the best of them in morals and the best of you are those who are kindest to your wives."* In his famous Address at the Farewell Pilgrimage, the Prophet again laid stress on the good treatment on womenfolk. He said: *"O my people, you have certain rights over your wives and so have your wives over you they are Allah's trust in your hand. See that you treat them with all kindness."*

Before this Saviour of the women preached his Message, there was no limit for the males in respect of the number of their wives. Present age, we find that among certain races of the world, there is no limit to the number of wives a man can have, Islam really imposed a limit and allowed plurality of marriage with the idea of abolishing adultery. Polygamy is permitted in place of illegal intercourse in cases where it becomes difficult or rather impossible in the interest of social health to restrict marriage to strict monogamy. There are two definite occasions in the lives of human beings when polygamy becomes necessary. For example, if the marriage proves fruitless the husband can, in most cases, be kept on the path of virtue and uprightness only by allowing a second marriage. Again, when there is a surplus of women, as happens after men have died in wars, human society can be saved from corruption and extinction by the permission of marrying more than one wife.

The Holy Quran restricts the number of wives to four and orders complete equality and justice between them:

"And if you fear that you will not deal fairly towards the orphans, marry of the women who seem good to you, two or three or four, and if you fear that you cannot do justice between them , then (marry) only one."(IV:3)

The conditions of the marriage contract are to be settled by the parties of the marriage. If, on the one hand according to the Islamic teaching, the husbands are entitled to have the right of divorce, the wives also are entitled to the right of fixing their dowry and maintenance as they like and they may also take the authority of separating themselves from their husbands when they find it necessary to do so. If agreement at a time of marriage is made with complete consideration, the parties stand practically at the same level and there remains no possibility for the womenfolk to suffer.

Islam enjoins justice, equality, and straight forwardness. Therefore, if those who claim to be Muslims do not observe the Islamic principles, it is their fault and Islam can on no account be accused for that. If today people misuse the permission for polygamy and try to hide their lustful actions under the cloak of Islamic legality, it is their fault and they deserve the most severe punishment at the Court of the All-Knowing Allah who knows what is in their hearts.

AS A MOTHER

As a mother the status of woman has been raised by Islam to such an extent that nothing higher is conceivable.

The Holy Quran says:

"Your Lord has commanded that you shall worship none but Him and goodness to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour, And make yourself submissively gentle to them with compassion and say: O my Lord bestow on them compassion even as they cherished me in my childhood." (17:23&24)

It is reported that when the Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** was questioned by a disciple as to who after God Almighty and his Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** should be revered most, the Beloved Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** said "Your mother." When questioned "Who, after the mother?" The Beloved Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** said, "Your mother." He **صلى الله عليه وسلم** was again asked "And, then, who after the mother?" He **صلى الله عليه وسلم** again replied: "Your mother". The man put the question for the fourth time and the Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** then answered: "Your father." This tradition shows that the position of the mother in the eyes of her sons and daughters should be three times higher than that of the father.

It is reported that once a disciple came to the Prophet and said "O Prophet Of Allah, on a hot day in the desert of Arabia, in the sunny noon when the stones and sands were burning like fire, my mother and I were travelling by foot without any shoes. I carried my mother on my shoulders so that she may not suffer the pain of walking barefooted in the hot sands and stones. Could I pay the reward of the pains she had to bear in bringing me up?" The Beloved Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** replied:

"No, not even a fraction of the pain she suffered at the time you were born."

In Islam the best action of worship is the performance of Pilgrimage to Mecca, i.e., the Hajj, and the reward to a person who performs the Hajj properly is that all his past sins are pardoned and he receives a high rank in the estimation of Allah. But in expressing the dignity of the mother, the Holy Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** said:

"One who looks at the face of his mother with sentiments of reverence and love once is rewarded as if he had performed the Pilgrimage." People asked him, what if he looked twice, to which he replied: "It is as if he had performed two Pilgrimages, if thrice, as if he had performed three Pilgrimages and so on.

In this respect, the Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** himself set a model for the world. Once Halimah may Allah be well pleased with here, the lady who nursed him in his childhood came to see him. The Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** was sitting with his disciples. As soon as he **صلى الله عليه وسلم** saw her, he

صلى الله عليه وسلم stood up with reverence and spread his mantle on the floor and requested his foster-mother to take her seat there.

It is quite evident from the above that the respect which a mother receives from her children in Islam is the highest to which no other worldly relationship can aspire.

The doors of spiritual elevation are open to woman in the same way as they are open to men. They are commanded to educate themselves in the same way as the men, and if they attain a high position in learning even the men are expected to learn and benefit from their knowledge and wisdom. It is reported that after the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وسلم death, his disciples used to visit Ayesha (may Allah be well pleased with her), the wife of the Prophet, and seek knowledge from her. Islamic history is resplendent with a long list of the names of the ladies who received the highest honour in society, the highest degree in learning and the highest qualifications in different branches of human activity. It was through the influence of other societies, which were not Muslim, that the idea of the inferiority of the female sex already existing in those societies spread to the uneducated class among the Muslims, who knew very little about the teachings of Islam. If they had known the teachings of Islam, they would have known that in Islam woman deserves the same position, the same respect and the same dignity as the members as man who, in their turn, are not allowed to degrade and insult them and make them their tools. To touch them with a bad intent is considered a sin and even to have a look at them with a bad motive is counted as adultery in Islam. That is why in the Holy Quran the men are commanded in these words:

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them." (chapter 24:30)

The ladies too have been commanded in similar terms:

"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and their ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof, that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or those whom their right hands possess, or the male servants not having need (of women), or small children who have not attained knowledge of what is hidden of women; and let them not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden embellishment..." (chapter 24:30)

There is an important point in this connection, which might be elucidated here with advantage. Every human being is endowed with a mind and the more the mental faculty is trained the more is the will power increased. The training of this faculty is done through the exercise of concentration. The student of hypnotism forms an idea and concentrates upon it to such an extent that for a certain moment he forgets other things. Through this training he achieves a strong power, which sometimes enables him to make other persons his objects and influence

them with an idea in his mind. For instance, he forms an idea that X is having a headache. He makes X object and within a few minutes X feels that he is having a headache. Similarly, if he wants to attract Y towards himself, Y is attracted because the hypnotist's will power influences that of Y. This will power varies in its strength from man to man just as we say regarding an engine that it has ten or twenty or a hundred horsepower, similarly we say of a hypnotist that he possesses ten or twenty or a hundred man's will power.

Now it is clear that a human being can influence other human beings through will power and can create in his object ideas in conformity with those existing in his own brain. So. when a male casts a lustful glance at a female, his passions would rise, the sexual idea will come to his brain, and if he possesses any will power, the same idea will be automatically created in the mind of a female object. And if hundreds of such masculine eyes fall upon that lady with the same motive and idea behind them, she is bound to be effected by the poisonous radiations of the sexual idea injected into her brain through the influence of the will power of the males, though she herself may be absolutely pure in heart and blotless in character. In a society, which allows promiscuous intermingling of sexes, the atmosphere must necessarily remain charged with what might be called "sex-idea waves" of which the consequences for womanhood can be nothing else but disastrous.

The importance of a woman in society cannot be over-estimated. She is the mother of humanity. She brings up the child in her womb for nine months, feeds him at her breast for at least two years and is mainly responsible for his training at least up to the age of six or seven.

It is a well-known fact of medical science that mentality of the mother affects the mentality of her children just as, or even more than, her physical qualities influence their physical build. Islam, therefore, commands women to keep themselves away from places where there may be the slightest chance of their being influenced by an evil force or evil idea so that their chastity and purity may be preserved and the mentality of their off springs may be safe from corruption. Therefore, Allah says in the Holy Quran!

"O wives of the Prophet you are not like any other women; if you fear Allah, be not soft in speech lest he in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire; and speak a speech that is just. And stay quietly in your houses and do not make a dazzling display like that of the former times of ignorance: and establish regular prayer and give regular charity and obey Allah and His Apostle. Allah only desires to remove all abomination from you, O people of the household and to purify you a (thorough) purifying." (33:32&33)

"There is no blame on them (the women) (if they appear unveiled) before their fathers, nor their sons, nor their brothers, nor their brothers' sons, nor their sisters' sons, nor their own women, nor of what their right hands possess. And fear Allah; surely Allah is a witness of all things," (33:55)

"O Prophet tell your wives and your daughters and the believing women that they cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): this will be more proper, that they

should be known as such and not molested. And Allah is oft-Forgiving and most-Merciful."
(33:59)

Examples of the way in which the above commandments were interpreted by the Holy Prophet **صلى الله عليه وسلم** can be seen in the Prophet's beloved daughter Fatimah (May Allah be pleased with her), and his beloved wives, Khadijah and Ayesha (May Allah be well pleased with all of them). Nowhere do we find any evidence that the Prophet's wives or his daughters were ever seen with an open face and an open head in front of strangers save at the time of performing acts of worship like prayer or pilgrimage. In the conditions of prayer, it is laid down that the body of the woman must be entirely except the face and hands. There is also an express injunction in the hadith that no woman should put on a veil during the pilgrimage. In the prayer and pilgrimage, men are strictly forbidden from gazing at the faces of the womenfolk and they have been warned to remember that the female servants of Allah are in the presence of their Creator.

Thus, with respect to their position in life, their inherent rights as human beings and their relations with Allah men and women are on a plane of equality in Islam.

This was the teaching of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). And this too is the verdict of the Holy Quran for Allah says,

"...Never will I waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female. You are members, one of another." (3:195)

We thank Allah Almighty to have given us Islam.