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Islamic Concept of Gender Equality: Origins and Signs

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ABSTRACT

Islam is the religion of equality and gave equal rights to women. Its origin and signs started with the Holy verses of Quran, as Surah An-Nisa, Verse;124: states about equality,

﴿وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ نَقِيرًا﴾

“And whoever does good deeds whether male or female and he or she is believer, these shall enter to the paradise and they shall not have dealt with injustice”. Various Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is about equality as Tarmizi, no:113: stated, “Women are equal with men in human rights”. Since, in Islam, there is no holy trinity, no God the Father, nor God the son. The concept of God in Islam is not as gender-specific as it is in Christianity. In the Quran's language, for God, masculine pronouns are used, but grammatically it is a neuter pronoun, which is the sign and origin of equality. Islam, 1400 years back, has given full equality to women. Islam ensures women's equality. Though, some people have rancor against the religion Islam and womanhood. This trap of allurement includes leaving their husbands and children and embracing the so-called slogan of equality. The irony of ironies is that the West, wherein the 1870s women had no right to property, inheritance, where till 1920s women did not have the right to vote, criticize the Islamic way of treatment of women and concept of equality? Right and equality to property and vote in Islam, the first feminist movement (a movement for the rights of women) was launched by the Prophet (PBUH) of Islam in the desert of Arab as stated clearly in the aforementioned Hadiths. The only option with women is ISLAM.

Keywords: Islam, Gender, Feminism, West.

Introduction

The cornerstone of the matriarchal system is goddesses which are famous in Sumerian on Inanna, Astarte in Sa'mi, Isis in Ancient Egyptian, Ishtar in Babylon,



Cybele in Turkish, Aphrodite in Ancient Greece, Frigga in Europe, Anahita in Iran, Asha Laxmi in India, and Shen Shen in China.

When the purpose of survival was only limited to hunting and plucking of fruits, women were treated with great respect. Due to taking care of the children, women were counted as superior to men. When the pike and spear were invented, it affected the status of women. By use of power in these instruments at hunting, men were regarded as superior to women.

With the discovery of 'Farming Art' (in which the credit goes to women), and characteristics of procreation, women got a holy place in society. Even she got the status of goddesses.¹

Four thousand years ago, change in the matriarchal system occurred with the discovery and use of metal. When the plough was invented and started to run by animals, then the monopoly of women over crops ended, due to which the matriarchal system weakened. Men started rooting masculinity in the mind of their children, which was based on the opposition to women. Over time, the distinction between characters took place. The male character became the symbol of violence, hardship, and extremism, while the female character became a sign of life, love, patience, and generosity. The man began to enslave women to associate their children with them.²

When fall in ancient communal system and growth in tribal population occurred, it marked a foundation of a new family system, which was the result of mutual sexual affairs with each other. But when the matriarchal system weakened and the patriarchal system emerged, the institution of marriage was introduced. This institution subordinated women to men. This institution gave birth to "Family". The word family is from the Latin word **Famulus**, which means 'Domestic Servant'. Roman used this term for a social institution, in which a ruler is fully authorized over his wife and slaves, even over their lives³.

Women's Status in Different Civilizations

Before the "Industrial Revolution", there was no open way to women for demonstrating themselves and even no one was ready to hear their voices. The female child was segregated from her life till death and was dealt as inferior to an animal.⁴

Babel/ Babylon Civilization

Women, in Babylon civilization, were the indication of underhandedness. There was no single law for women. There was a colossal gap among people. In the aforementioned, if men were condemned to death, he could pass punishment to his wife. There are instances in history where innocent women were hanged in public.⁵

Greek civilization

Greek, which is viewed as better than all civilizations, likewise kept women denied their fundamental rights. They considered women substandard compared to men, even sub-par compared to creatures. "Pandora" ghost-like woman, in an old Greek Mythology, considered as the indication of shrewdness for people.

It considered women instrument for sexual fulfillment. Slaves and women were in the same category. She was the property of father in adolescence, to husband in youth, and a widow, to her children. Marriage status was purely political. For the creation of energetic children, a sexually powerless person could transfer his wife to another strong man.³

Due to progression in time, the culture of "prostitute" thrived in the general public of Greek. Logicians, writers, historians, and artistic figures, were fascinated by the whore. Prostitution dissolved the foundation of marriage. Even men prided themselves on having extra conjugal affairs. Indeed, even Greek began adoring the prostitute, Devi Aphrodite, which had illicit connection with three different divine beings (devta), from which she brought forth ill-conceived kid cupid. House of ill-repute turned into a position of love and sex turned into a strict and good value in society. Skillful Artists of that time spend their energy in the creation of status for exciting sexual desires.⁴

Roman civilization

This was, likewise, one of the predominant human civilizations. It additionally considered women just as a source of sexual fulfillment. Roman Empire enabled men to execute their spouses, without an ant court trial. In Roman time, women were viewed as just like a machine for "warrior's generation". In Rom, at 7th C, "Council of Wise Men", united that women have "no soul". In that society, the main regard for her was being a mother⁶

With time, in Roman society, the tradition of a marriage slowly became a 'Civil Contract' from 'Social Contract'.

As time passed, the convention of marriage in Roman's culture gradually and step by step turned into a common agreement from the implicit agreement. Aesthetic standards turned into their custom. A game known Flora was a prevalent game among Romans in which all women would contest nakedly, even elite class would play that game. To avoid this culture, Lord Tiberius (14-37 BC) passed a law.⁷

Egyptian Civilization

This civilization was also barbarous to women. The status of women was very low and was considered as a symbol of evil for humanity. Egyptian civilization was

likewise remorseless to women. In this civilization, they were counted as a sign of evil for mankind⁸

Before Islam: Arab civilization

In Arabian civilization, misogyny was at an extreme. They counted women's handdog because of their condition. In that, if the wife gave birth to a female child, they would kill or divorce her, while girls were buried alive.⁹

Gender Equality: Its Origin

Islam, 1400 years ago, has given complete equality. Islam is the protector of women's rights. West, on the contrary, is opposing the basic doctrine of Islam about women. They do not have the foggiest notion that Islam is the only religion that gave "special status" to women as mother, sister, and wife¹⁰

Equality is the main aim of Islam and gave equivalent rights to women. The following verses stress on equality.

﴿وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ نَقِيرًا﴾

“And whoever does good deeds whether male or female and he or she is believer, these shall enter to the paradise and they shall not be dealt with injustice”. (Surah An-Nisa)¹¹

﴿مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً ۗ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ﴾

“Whoever does good whether male or female and he is believer, we will most certainly live and make him live a happy life, and we will most certainly give them their reward for the best of what they did”. (Surah An-Nahal)¹²

﴿فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَا أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِنْكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ﴾

“So their Lord accepted their prayer; that I will not waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female”. (Surah Al-e-Imran)¹³

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۗ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ﴾

“O, you men! Surely we had created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that may you know each other”. (Surah Al-Hujarat)

Various Hadith is about gender equality, among which the most authentic one is as given;

“Women are the part of men (equal with men in human rights)”
(Tarmizi, no: Volume 1, Hadith no 75)¹⁴

The irony of ironies is that the West, wherein the 1870s women had no right to property, inheritance, where till 1920s women did not have the right to vote, criticizes the Islamic way of treatment of women? In the light of the aforementioned Verses of the Holy Quran and Hadith, flourishes origins and signs of gender equality. Following are some examples of Gender Equality; means Islam gives equal opportunity to women in various fields¹⁵

Gender Equality: Its Concept in Islam

Islam worries over the equity of both genders, yet this never signifies "indistinguishably". From the very first day, Islam stated, “do not kill your female youngsters, they will be asked on domes day”.

﴿وَإِذَا الْمَوْءُودَةُ سُئِلَتْ بِأَيِّ ذَنْبٍ قُتِلَتْ﴾

“And when the girl-child which was buried alive asked, for what sin she was slain” (Chapter-81, Verse 8-9)¹⁶

Spiritual Equality in Islam

Women are equal to men spiritually as in the Quran;
Surah Al-Nisa, Chapter-4, Verse 124, which says;

﴿وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ نَقِيرًا﴾

“Whoever does deeds of righteousness, whether it be male or female and has faith, they shall surely enter to paradise and not the least injustice shall be done to them”.

Also, surah Al-Nahal, Chapter-16, Verse-97, says;

﴿مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيٰوةً طَيِّبَةً وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ﴾

“Whoever performs good deeds, be it a man or a woman and is a believer, we shall give him a good life and we shall reward them for all their good works”.

In Islam, color, sex, wealth and cast, have got no criteria. Which is cleared in Surah Al-Imran chapter-3, verse-195;

﴿فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَا أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِّنْكُمْ مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ ۖ بَعْضُكُمْ مِّنْ بَعْضٍ﴾

“And their Lord hath accepted of them, and answered: Never will I suffer to be lost the work any of you, be he male or female”¹⁷

Spiritual equality is stated by the Quran;

﴿إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا.﴾
“For Muslim men and Muslim women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who gives in charity, for men and women who fast and deny themselves, for men and women who guard their chastity, for men and women who engage much in Allah’s praise, that for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and ample of reward”. (Surah Al-Ahzab, Verse 35)¹⁸

This refrain of the Holy Quran demonstrates the profound and good obligations of people. Both genders are obliged to accept, supplicate, and fast and they are entitled to giving ‘Zakat’. In these fundamentals of Islam, Allah Almighty bestowed extraordinary grants to females.

In Islam, a female is more significant than a male. As mentioned in Surah Al-Nisa Chapter-4, Verse 1;

“Respect the womb that bore you”.

Similarly, in surah Luqman, Chapter 31, Verse-14;

﴿وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ وَهْنًا عَلَىٰ وَهْنٍ وَفِصَالُهُ فِي عَامَيْنِ أَنِ اشْكُرْ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيْكَ إِلَيَّ الْمَصِيرُ﴾

“We have enjoined on the human being to be kind to the parents (father and mother) in travail upon travail did his mother bore him and in years twain was his weaning”.

A similar theme is mentioned in Surah-Al-Ahqaf Chapter-46, Verse-15;

﴿وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ إِحْسَانًا﴾

“We have enjoined on the human beings to be kind to the parents (father and mother)”.

Men and women are equal before Almighty Allah, the only distinction between them is on the base of “**piety**”. As Allah Almighty says in Surah-Al-Hujartat, Chapter-49, Verse-13;

﴿إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۗ﴾

“And the most honored in the sight of Allah is the one who is the most righteous”.

Economic Equality

To claim or repudiate property without any consultation, Islam granted full freedom and equality to women. On women, in Islam, there are no budgetary commitments. She is free from any monetary obligations and is on the shoulders of men in a family.

In genuine cases, if there are financial crises, she has the choice of work. No one has the authority to force her for work. In case, if she wouldn't like to work, then her husband, father, and sibling must support her. If they deny, she can go to court. However, the work will be accord "Shariah", means she should keep up her Islamic dress code. She cannot take up employment in which she shows her body, for instance, modeling and film acting.¹⁹

She can work in such places, where there is a different segment for women since Islam has denied the mixing of both genders in such cultural spots. Financial security to women is only given by Islam. It is obligatory on her father or sibling to take on her upkeep before marriage, and after marriage, the husband must give an endowment of dower or conjugal blessing which is classified "Mahar". As in Surah Al-Nisa, Ch.4, Verse 4;

﴿وَأْتُوا النِّسَاءَ صَدُقَاتِهِنَّ نِحْلَةً فَإِن طِبْنَ لَكُمْ عَن شَيْءٍ مِّنْهُ نَفْسًا فَكُلُوهُ هَنِيئًا مَّرِيئًا﴾

"And give unto the women (whom ye marry) gift of their marriage portion (dower)"

Islam gives, additionally, the privilege of legacy to women equally.²⁰

Political Equality

About equality of women, the Quran states that; support your woman politically, means give them political equality, as in Al-Tawba chapter 9, verse 71;

﴿وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ﴾

"The men and women are the supporters of each other"

Islam gave the privilege to cast a vote equally 1400 years prior. On the other hand, in 1918, Women's Rights Activists successfully got this kind of equality. Surah Al-Mumtahana, Ch.60, verse 12 states;

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِذَا جَاءَكَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتُ يُبَايِعَنَّكَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ لَا يُشْرِكْنَ بِاللَّهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَسْرِقْنَ وَلَا يَزْنِينَ وَلَا

يَقْتُلْنَ أَوْلَادَهُنَّ وَلَا يَأْتِينَ بِبُهْتَانٍ يَفْتَرِينَهُ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ وَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ وَلَا يَعْصِينَكَ فِي مَعْرُوفٍ فَبَايِعُهُنَّ

وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُنَّ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ﴾

"O prophet! If believer women come unto thee, taking an oath of allegiance (fealty)"

Bayah (Allegiance), here, is a modern term than our present election system. As the 'Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)' was the head

of the state, women used to come to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and they were recognizing him as the head of the state.²¹

Legal Equality

Islamic Shariah, ensures equality in life and property for both, man and woman. Male has a similar death penalty 'Qisas' as female.

Surah Al-Baqarah Chapter-2, Verse 178-179, says;

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِصَاصُ فِي الْقَتْلِ الْحُرُّ بِالْحُرِّ وَالْعَبْدُ بِالْعَبْدِ وَالْأُنثَىٰ بِالْأُنثَىٰ﴾

"O ye who believe! Retaliation is prescribed for you in the matter of murdered; the freeman for the freeman, and slave for the slave, and female for the female, will be killed".

In the 'Islamic law of Qisas', men and women, independent of their sexual orientation, will get equivalent punishment in case of damage. Similarly, if the guardian of the killed, maybe a lady, pardons the killer and acknowledges blood money "deyath", her choice cannot be dismissed.²²

Similarly, female burglar and male looter are same in the punishment, as in Surah Maida, Chapter-5, Verse-38;

﴿وَالسَّارِقُ وَالسَّارِقَةُ فَاقْطَعُوا أَيْدِيَهُمَا جِزَاءً بِمَا كَسَبَا تَعْلَامًا مِنَ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ﴾

"As to the thief, either by man or woman, cut off his or her hand as punishment for their crime, an example for Allah Almighty".

Same is the case in fornication, a sin, surah Al-Noor chapter-24, Verse-2;

﴿الزَّانِيَةُ وَالزَّانِي فَاجْلِدُوا كُلَّ وَاحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا مِائَةَ جَلْدَةٍ﴾

"The adulterer and the adulteress, scourge ye each one of them with a hundred stripes".

Islam is the only religion and system which gives the utmost importance to equality.

Educational Equality

About education, Islam is more concerned and give equal opportunity. The first revelation was about education, irrespective of gender. Islam gives stress on the education of women because they play the role of mothers in society

Because of women's role in society as a mother, Islam emphasizes the education of female. About education, Surah Al-Alaq, Chapter-96, Verse, 1-5 states;

﴿اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ - خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ - اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ - الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ - عَلَّمَ

الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ﴾

“Read; In the name of thy Lord Who created, Creath man from a clot, Read: And thy Lord is the Most bounteous, Who teacheth by the pen, Teacheth man that which he knew not”²³.

Hadith of Prophet states;

“Seeking of knowledge is compulsory on every Muslim (male and female)” (Al-Tirmidhi, Hathith No, 222.)

According to Sahih Bukhari, women, who were excited about learning, came to Prophet ﷺ and asked him that he was always encompassed by men. And asked if he can give one separate day, for asking questions, Prophet agreed”.²⁴

Conclusion

Islam has always bestowed the men and women with the paramount principles of equity and equality in its ways. Rights have been granted to both the genders indiscriminately with defined domains and applicability. There isn't a single norm of life which hasn't been addressed by Islam with detailed understanding and logic. As far as women's equality is concerned, Islam has given them full equality which couldn't be granted by any other religion. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights told women about their equality whereas Islam told the same and even more before 1400 years ago. From exercising her right to hold property to find the mate for her life has been granted to a female before any declaration or any convention even existed and the history before Magna Carta is self-explanatory in this regard. Islam acknowledged Women as an important factor of the society as Men indiscriminately of any regard. The examples of Hazrat Khadijah RA as an exemplary businesswoman and the example of Hazrat Ayesha (RA) as a jurist, shows how much importance Islam has extended to the female gender. The issue gets worse when modified with the personal whims of the classes. In the contemporary world, feminism has been manipulated to alter its true meaning and extend incorrect meanings and interpretations of the term. Islam desires the female to be the queen of the house whereas the contemporary slogans of feminism desire the female to suffer by all means. Islam desires the women to hold the houses and let the men take care of them and their dignity whereas the present slogans desire the women to stand on the roads, raise their voices for ills and suffer from disrespect. If asking a woman to the queen of the house, immune from the labor and empowered with decision-making is deprivation of a woman from her rights, then there is a dire need of awareness to the feminists and their supporters.

Almighty Allah has created a balanced universe by creating everything in pairs. Verse 49 Chapter 51 of the Holy Quran, wherein Allah has revealed "and everything we have created pairs that you may receive instructions"

The human pair is the most influential in nature. It is the balanced complementariness of this pair which plays an important role in maintaining the

balance of all other components of nature to keep peace on the planet. The impurity or the level of unnaturalness has weakened the natural bond of pair-hood. The axle between the human wheels between men and women is nothing else but to obey the norms of universal complementariness which requires love towards each other, to their children and all other components of the universe. The stronger this axle is the smoother and safer speed the vehicle of life will have towards program, prosperity, and peace. A man should work as a man, and similarly a woman also. If this complementariness is disturbed, it will lead to destruction.

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