

35) Beware of who you consult with

وَأَيَّاكَ وَمُشَاوَرَةَ النِّسَاءِ فَإِنَّ رَأْيَهُنَّ إِلَى أَفْنٍ وَعَزْمُهُنَّ إِلَى وَهْنٍ وَكَفْفٌ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ بِحِجَابِكَ إِيَّاهُنَّ فَإِنَّ شِدَّةَ الْحِجَابِ أَبْقَى عَلَيْهِنَّ

وَأَيْسَ خُرُوجُهُنَّ بِأَشَدِّ مِنْ إِدْخَالِكَ مَنْ لَا يُوثَقُ بِهِ عَلَيْهِنَّ وَإِنْ اسْتَطَعْتَ أَلَّا يَعْرِفْنَ غَيْرَكَ فَافْعَلْ، وَلَا تُمَلِّكِ الْمَرْأَةَ مِنْ أَمْرِهَا مَا جَاوَزَ نَفْسَهَا، فَإِنَّ الْمَرْأَةَ رِيحَانَةٌ وَلَيْسَتْ بِقَهْرْمَانَةٍ، وَلَا تَعْدُ بِكَرَامَتِهَا نَفْسَهَا، وَلَا تُطْمِعْهَا فِي أَنْ تَشْفَعَ لغيرِهَا، وَأَيَّاكَ وَالتَّغَايُرَ فِي غَيْرِ مَوْضِعٍ غَيْرَةٍ، فَإِنَّ ذَلِكَ يَدْعُو الصَّحِيحَةَ إِلَى السُّقْمِ وَالبَّرِيئَةَ إِلَى الرِّيبِ

"Beware of consulting women, for their opinions are deficient and their resolve is feeble. Restrain their gazes by veiling them, for the severity of veiling is more protective for them. Their going out (of their houses) is not worse than your allowing the entry of one who cannot be trusted into their presence. If you can do so, then let them not know anyone other than you.

Do not put a woman in charge of affairs beyond what concerns herself, for a woman is a fragrant flower and not an administrator. Do not exceed the bounds in honoring her and do not give her hopes of interceding for others. Beware of jealousy where there is no cause for it, for that will lead a woman who is sound (in honor) to unsoundness, and a pure woman to disquieting thoughts (about committing the sin)".

Commentary

Imam 'Ali (as), in this letter, refers to one of the most disturbing issues. If you look at this issue only superficially, then you would see that the enemies of Islam use it as a club over the head of Muslims and would consider it as a weak point of Islam. On the other hand, if this issue is interpreted in the light of other Qur'anic verses and Islamic traditions, it would be a point of strength and honor for Islam. So let us

first hear the explanations on this issue and then judge who is right.

The First Explanation:

Some superficial individuals still savagely assume that women are defective and are only good for reproduction and breast-feeding children and for serving men and are not allowed to take part in political and social tasks!

To reason for their views, these individuals resort to some weak traditions or to some traditions which are presented under certain conditions or to some ambiguous traditions. One of these traditions is this part of Imam 'Ali's letter and the sermon 80 of Nahj al-Balaghah which he offered at the end of al-Jamal war to reproach women.

مَعَاشِرَ النَّاسِ، إِنَّ النِّسَاءَ نَوَاقِصُ الإِيمَانِ، نَوَاقِصُ الحُطُوطِ، نَوَاقِصُ العُقُولِ، فَأَمَّا نَقْصَانُ إِيْمَانِهِنَّ فَفُعُودُهُنَّ عَنِ الصَّلَاةِ وَالصِّيَامِ فِي أَيَّامِ حَيْضِهِنَّ وَأَمَّا نَقْصَانُ عُقُولِهِنَّ فَشَهَادَةُ إِمْرَأَتَيْنِ كَشَهَادَةِ الرَّجُلِ الْوَاحِدِ وَأَمَّا نَقْصَانُ حُطُوطِهِنَّ فَمَوَارِيثُهُنَّ عَلَى الأَنْصَافِ مِنْ مَوَارِيثِ الرِّجَالِ فَاتَّقُوا شِرَارَ النِّسَاءِ وَكُونُوا مِنْ خِيَارِهِنَّ عَلَى حَذَرٍ وَلَا تُطِيعُوهُنَّ فِي المَعْرُوفِ حَتَّى لَا يَطْمَعَنَّ فِي المُنْكَرِ

"O people! Women are deficient in faith, deficient in (their) shares and deficient in intellect. The deficiency in their faith is their refraining from prayer and fasting in the days of their menstruation. The deficiency in their intellect is that the testimony of two women equals the testimony of one man. The deficiency in their shares is their inheritance which is half that of men. Fear evil women and be on guard against the good ones, and do not obey them in what is good so that they may not tempt you to what is reprehensible."

These individuals also base their reasonings on the axioms which Imam 'Ali (as) has used in Hikmah Nahj al-Balaghah No 238:

"المرأة شرُّ كُلِّها وَشَرُّ ما فِيها أَنَّها لا بُدَّ مِنْها"

"A woman is evil, all of her; and worse than it is that she is indispensable."

These individuals, to verify their positions, resort to historical examples. They say as well:

Adam was humiliated in paradise because of a woman,

Phoenix got refuge in the Qaf Mount because of a woman,

Joseph got into the prison in the well because of a woman,

The killing of Aal Imran was because of a woman. [1](#)

The Second Explanation:

Certain scholars contend that due to a series of events which occur at a specific juncture of time, place, individuals, conditions, and their causes become the subject of either admiration or reproach. These admiration or reproach are not innate to those events, rather they depend on the sweet or bitter events in which they occur.

The sentences which, either in this letter or sermons 13, 14 of Nahj al-Balaghah concerning the reproach of women or concerning Basrah and its people issued by Imam 'Ali (as) are based on this basis.

When A'isha (the Prophet's wife), in contrast to God's commandment:

"

وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ

"

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"And stay in your houses", and disregarding the Prophet's prohibition for the vengeance for bloodshed of Uthman, with the cooperation of Talha, Zubayr and others, went to Basrah and created the war of al-Jamal and caused the death of many thousands of Muslims and Siffeen and Nahrawan were its natural offshoots, Imam 'Ali (as) blamed women, Basrah and its people.

Neither women are defective or mean, nor is Basrah a filthy environment, nor are its population away from God's benevolence.

It was that bitter event of al-Jamal war which caused all this reproach. By passing that juncture, all these blames were forgotten since there were great women, like Khadijah, az-Zahra', Zaynab and Sakinah bint al-Husayn and more than three thousand pious and God believing women whose names appear in the book "A'lam al-Nisa'". In our own time, too, history will never forget the martyr Bint al-Huda as-Sadr.3

Thus, Imam 'Ali (as) does not wish to condemn consulting with women; neither does he want women to stay at home. He does not consider all women lacking in faith and wisdom. Rather, because of al-Jamal

war, Imam 'Ali (as) blames any woman who goes beyond her limits and becomes a puppet in the hands of the others for their dirty objectives. As it is proven somewhere, except for certain managerial key-positions, other jobs are good for women. Consulting with learned women is not forbidden by Imam 'Ali (as).

"إِيَّاكَ وَمُشَاوَرَةَ النِّسَاءِ إِلَّا مَنْ جُرِّبَتْ بِكَمَالِ عَقْلِ"

*"Avoid consulting with women, except with a woman whose wisdom is proved"*⁴

The Third Explanation:

Men and women are different in their bodily make-up both physically and mentally. They are created for two different sets of tasks and responsibilities.

Dignity, firmness, strength, pride and wisdom have prepared men for struggle against nature and for providing the family with their needs and their guidance. On the contrary, women's delicacy, and emotions have prepared them for being spouses for pregnancy, breast feeding, nurturing children and managing the house, and the like.

On the basis of this philosophy, Islam considers men and women of the same kind and genre and of equal rights, but would not consider both of them to have identical rights.⁵

It is because of these characteristics that some tasks are on the men's shoulders and jobs such as judgment, society leadership and military commanding are not suggested for women. There are some tasks, however, which are women's responsibilities such as the guardianship of male children up to two years and that of female children up to seven years, the permission to use gold and silk as ornaments, becoming religiously responsible (*mukallaf* i.e. one who has reached the age of maturity) in the ninth year of age; whereas men reach this stage at sixteen years of age.⁶

Based on such issues women are not supposed to partake in holy wars, their expenditures are the responsibility of men; their share of inheritance is half of that of men's, the witness of two of them equals to one man's. Among the moral recommendations given by Imam 'Ali (as) both in this letter and elsewhere are for women to stay home, to implement the Islamic dress code (*hijab*), not to accept women's interference and not to obey them.

Murtada Mutahhari, the great Islamic scholar, talking about women's observance of hijab and their not mingling with men, writes: Imam 'Ali (as) suggests to his son, Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (as) in the following manner:

وَأَكْفُفْ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ بِحِجَابِكَ إِيَّاهُنَّ فَإِنَّ شِدَّةَ الْحِجَابِ أَبْقَى عَلَيْهِنَّ وَأَلْيَسَ خُرُوجُهُنَّ بِأَشَدَّ مِنْ إِدْخَالِكَ"

"عَلَيْهِنَّ مَنْ لَا يُؤْتَقُ بِهِ عَلَيْهِنَّ وَإِنْ اسْتَطَعْتَ أَنْ لَا يَعْرِفَنَّ غَيْرَكَ فَافْعَلْ"

"Restrain their gazes by veiling them, for the severity of veiling is more protective for them. Their going out (of their houses) is not worse than your allowing the entry of one who cannot be trusted into their presence. If you can do so, then let them not know anyone other than you".

This is just a moral and ethical recommendation, however.

The Islamic scholars look at it just as an ethical suggestion. If it were for the scholars we would interpret this suggestion as the confinement of women to their homes. However, the reason why the jurists have not issued any fatwa or Islamic verdict on this topic is because of other precise reasoning found in the Qur'anic verses, traditions and the behaviors of the Infallible. These sentences, thus, have ethical values, and not jurisprudential significance.

What the jurists understand from such sentences is that these sentences take care of spiritual and mental truth behind the relation of men and women. Undoubtedly these sentences disclose a truth that the relation of a woman and a stranger is a dangerous one. What Islam recommends is that so far as possible, the assembly of men and women should not be mixed. Our society today witnesses the hazards of this mixing of men and women. Why should women carry out their activities shoulder by shoulder with men? The effect of this association is that one ignores the work and concentrates on the partner and sometimes the result of this shoulder by shoulder job is an arm-in-arm relation.⁷

The Last Explanation And The Conclusion:

As the Holy Qur'an teaches us:

"O people! Be Careful of your duty to your Lord, who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same kind". [Qur'an 4:1]

"O you men! Surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful of his duty" [Qur'an 49:13].

"Whoever does good whether male or female and he is a believer, We will most certainly make him live a happy life and we will most certainly give them their reward for the best of what they did." [Qur'an 16:97]

Thus, neither is the nature of a woman evil nor is a man's nature honorable. Both share divine assets; and both have the capacity to be good. It is up to them to them either to do their best in perfecting belief and action or to be the lowest of low and more astray than the beasts!⁸

The wives of Noah and Lut betrayed them, Zuleikha sent Yusuf to prison and Ghottam helped Ibn Muljim

assassinate Imam 'Ali (as). Compared to these crimes, the crimes of Nimrud, Pharaoh, Abi Lahab, Abu Jahl, Chengiz, Nero, Attila, Hajjaj, Saddam and the like were the most vicious ones in the world, more than that of women.

Thus, the first interpretation stems from the era of ignorance and is in contrast with the explicit teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith.⁹

The undoubted fact, however, is this: As it was already said, men and women enjoy their specific body build-up, both physically and mentally. This variation of creation separates them in carrying out their duties: strength, determination, judgement, leadership, decisiveness are of men; while, family guardianship, lactation, house management and child education are that of women. In this division of tasks priority is given to neither side. This is in harmony with the axiom that we expect lions to attack and the deer to run.

The rationale behind some of the interpretations of Imam 'Ali's and other infallible Imams' words is that women are deprived of some material rights compared with men; some of them are agents for temptation. The philosophy behind these interpretations is this: due to her delicate nature, a woman is more deceived than a man; she can express her beliefs less than men.

Because of her charm, heart-stealing nature, she may cause the corruption of her physical and mental differences with men, she has not been able to have similar rights with men: one has become the house keeper, the other one has become the family supervisor; one receives the marriage-portion, the other one becomes the payer of the marriage-portion; one has become the initiator of divorce, the other one lacks such a power.

These factors which led to the disastrous events in the Jamal war forced Imam 'Ali (as) to emphasize these weak points already referred to and warned both men and women that if these factors and philosophies are not used properly, the repetition of the events of Jamal is inevitable. Therefore, care should be taken to properly use these differences between the men's and women's physical and emotional states.

Women should not be used against their creational philosophy. People should be alert not to be slaves in the hands of the coquettishness of certain women. She is created as a sweet-smelling herb, not as a hero for political, military or social struggles.

This explanation can be a synopsis of all the views offered above. If there were not such physical and emotional differences between men and women, then Imam 'Ali (as) would never, only because of the misbehavior of certain women, initiate emphasizing on their differences with men concerning matters such as women's lesser share in wisdom or faith or their lack of capacity in becoming heroes or that their biting is as sweet as spider's biting¹⁰ or that women are the greatest conspirators, or that they should not be consulted because of their lack of capacity, and their weakness in their decision-making, or that they should remain within the home. Rather, it is clear that¹¹ Imam 'Ali (as) is not among those individuals

who revenge just because of the disloyalty of one woman (namely, A'isha).

What he does is to warn women not to be puppets in the hands of others. And what he intends is to warn women not to exceed their limits:

وَلَا تُمَلِّكِ الْمَرْأَةَ مِنْ أَمْرِهَا مَا جَاوَزَ نَفْسَهَا فَإِنَّ الْمَرْأَةَ رِيحَانَةٌ وَليْسَتْ بِقَهْرْمَانَةٍ وَلَا تَعْدُ بِكِرَامَتِهَا نَفْسَهَا وَلَا تُطْمِعِهَا
"فِي أَنْ تَشْفَعَ لِغَيْرِهَا"

“Do not put a woman in charge of affairs beyond what concerns herself, for a woman is a fragrant flower and not an administrator. Do not exceed the bounds in honoring her and do not give her hopes of interceding for others”.

In that case, firstly, you have ruined her magnanimity and her hereafter; secondly, everybody is to suffer and corruption and darkness would be widespread.¹²

Avoid Being Suspicious Towards Women:

One of the factors leading to family feuds is the improper jealousy of men towards their wives. Due to their extreme love towards their wives, some men sometimes will not let their wives leave their homes; they want to imprison their wives; not to have relations even with the relatives. These men are too critical in their wives' ornamentation, clothing, and behavior.

This kind of suspicion makes women rebel. They would erroneously assume that since they are suspects of corruption, in spite of the fact that they are innocent, it is better for them to go astray: this will lead to the disintegration of the family.

That is why Imam 'Ali (as) says:

“Beware of jealousy where there is no cause for it, for that will lead a woman who is sound (in honor) to unsoundness, and a pure woman to disquieting thoughts (about committing the sin)”.

¹. . Al-e-Tayyib's commentary on “Ali's will, p.136; Ibn Abi al-Hadid's commentary, vol. 16, pp.125–126.

². . Qur'an 33:33.

³. . See, in this connection, Jawadi Amuli's book called Zann dar A'ineh Jalal wa Jamal, pp.339–426.

⁴. . Bihar, vol. 103 P 253.

⁵. . When a father allocated his possessions equally among all his children, giving a business firm to one child who has interest in trade, and supplying the second one who has interest in agriculture with a farmland and giving a library or publication tasks to the third child who has cultural inclinations, there is equality in his action but no identity (The System of women's rights in Islam, p.112).

⁶. . Refer to the system of “Women's Rights in Islam” and “Women and Elections”.

⁷. . “The Issue of Hijab,” pp.219–221.

⁸. . “Certainly we created man in the best make” [Surah al-Tin, v.4]; “They are as cattle, nay, they are in worse error” [7:197]

[9.](#) . Some traditions consider Eve's tempting Adam to go astray. But this is in contrast with the Holy Qur'an which says: "But the Shaitan made an evil suggestion" [Qur'an 7:20]. For this matter, see "The system of women's rights in Islam" pp. 114–120.

[10.](#) Ghurar al-Hikam.

[11.](#) . For the differences between men's and women's human values, and political and social rights see Women's Rights in Islam by Mutahhari and Jawadi Amuli's Zann dar A'ineh Jalal wa Jamal.

[12.](#) . For the differences between men's and women's human values, and political and social rights see Women's Rights in Islam by Mutahhari and Jawadi Amuli's Zann dar A'ineh Jalal wa Jamal. .

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