

Important Points

1. Similarities And Differences Between Men And Women

Many researchers and experts have entered into discussions on the topic that: from the point of view of their physiology and also their privileges, are men and women identical or are there differences between the two genders?

In most cases, the belief that was espoused was that in their physiology, emotional level and intellectual capacity, differences exist between the genders, however they stated that these differences do not take away anything from the character of a woman, nor do they add anything to the character of a man. However undoubtedly, the differences which are present can lead to a differentiation in the responsibilities which exist in society between men and women.

From the societal point of view, many people believe that men have been created to be the leader, and this way of thinking led to an extreme ideology and another group rose up in opposition to them and believed that women were to be the leaders of society. Meanwhile, a third group came forth and rejected both ideologies and came with the notion of 'human leadership' (not based on gender).

What we glean from the Islamic sources and what logic and intellect dictate in this area of discussion is that the human being has three aspects to their character:

- The humanistic and Divine nature;
- The scientific and cultural nature;
- The economic nature.

2. The Humanistic And Divine Nature

At the first level – which makes up the principle values of the human being, there is no difference

between the man and woman and both are equal in the sight of Allah (S.w.T.) and both genders are able to traverse the path towards attaining closeness to Allah (S.w.T.) and continue on this path for perpetuity (until death). In other words, the way towards perfection has been kept open equally for both genders.

Therefore, the Qur'anic address in this area includes both men and women in an equal fashion and in one verse we read:

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

Whoever acts righteously, [whether] male or female, should he be faithful, – We shall revive him with a good life and pay them their reward by the best of what they used to do. 1

In another place in the Qur'an we read:

﴿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﴾

Indeed the muslim men and the muslim women, the faithful men and the faithful women, the obedient men and the obedient women, the truthful men and the truthful women, the patient men and the patient women, the humble men and the humble women, the charitable men and the charitable women, the men who fast and the women who fast, the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, the men who remember God greatly and the women who remember [God greatly] – God holds in store for them forgiveness and a great reward. 2

In addition, this well-known verse of the Qur'an also classifies the spiritual proximity which one can attain to Allah (S.w.T.) as being accessible by anyone regardless of their gender – male or female:

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

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most God-consciousness among you. Indeed God is All-knowing, All-aware. 3

There are also other such verses in the Qur'an which we will not quote here for sake of brevity.

In the Islamic traditions (statements from Prophet Muhammad (S) and his 12 Successors (a.s.)) this reality is also clearly visible.

In a hadith which the late Shaykh al-Kulayni quotes in his book *Al-Kafi*, we read the following:

The sister, by way of suckling with the same wet-nurse who also took care of and fed the Prophet Muhammad (S), came to the Prophet and when she entered into his room and saw him, she became extremely elated and spread her own coverlet on the ground and made him sit on it.

She then began to speak warm words with him and when she was about to leave the Prophet (S), her brother came (this sister and brother were two of the children of Halima Sa'diyah who was the suckling mother of the Prophet (S)), however the Prophet (S) did not treat his sister (by way of suckling) in the same way that he treated her brother (even though he treated them both with respect and love).

Some people asked the Prophet of Allah (S), “The same level of respect which you displayed to your sister you did not extend to your brother (by way of suckling) – is it because he is a man?” The Prophet (S) replied:

لِأَنَّهَا كَانَتْ أُمَّ بَرٍّ بِوَالِدَيْهَا مِنْهُ

“[This was because] she is much nicer to her mother and father than he (the brother) is.”⁴

It is interesting to note that the companions felt that how you treat a person should be based on their gender, however not only did the Prophet (S) not consider that as being a means of distinction (in society), rather he placed a woman – his sister, due to her upholding the Divine values and morals, at a loftier position.

The story of Nusaybah and the bravery which she displayed during the Battle of Uhud is yet another incident that we should ponder upon. During this intense battle, she provided water to the troops with no regard for the dangers involved in what she was doing and even when the enemy forces began to attack her, she defended herself from all angles!

When she finally escaped the battlefield, she had thirteen injuries on her body, and she eventually became a martyr in an area known as Yamama while she was fighting against Musaylama, and this is a well-known historical event.

The Prophet (S) said the following about her and her bravery in the Battle of Uhud:

لَمَقَامُ نُسَيْبَةَ بِنْتِ كَعْبٍ الْيَوْمَ خَيْرٌ مِنْ مَقَامِ فُلَانٍ وَ فُلَانٍ

*Today, the rank and status of Nusaybah bint Ka'b is better than so and so (some of the people who were engaged in fighting in the Battle of Uhud).*⁵

In addition, the story of Shatitah Nishaburi is also one which is well known. During her time, an individual

named Muhammad b. ‘Ali al– Nishaburi had collected a large amount of wealth and gifts for Imam Musa b. Ja’far (a.s.) from the Shi’a of his region. He then proceeded his journey to where the Imam was living and presented all of the cash and gifts to the Imam, after giving the things, the Imam (a.s.) said to him:

From amongst the 30,000 dinar and 50,000 dirham and the pieces of cloth that you have brought me, there is only one dirham and one piece of cloth which belongs to that faithful lady named Shatitah which I accept. You may return everything else back to its owners![6](#)

This historical event also clearly shows us that the value of a person is not based on whether they are male or female; in fact we see that sometimes, women end up with an even greater status than men!

3. Mental And Cultural Similarities And Differences

In this section as well, there are no differences between men and women – meaning that the ways which one can attain knowledge are open to both genders equally – just as the famous Prophetic sentence states:

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ وَ مُسْلِمَةٍ

Seeking knowledge is compulsory upon every Muslim man and Muslim woman.[7](#)

This sentence proves our statement (even if the word **المسلمة** – female Muslim) is not a part of the original saying of the Prophet (S) – however what is established is that this word (**المسلم** – Muslim) refers to the ‘species’ – regardless of gender just as can be seen in other traditions.

Therefore, there are no limitations from Islam (in this regards) and no limitations can be imposed upon women at any stage of their quest for knowledge and they too are able to traverse the road towards attaining perfection and completion in knowledge. In the history of Islam as well we see some great women personalities and some of these women have been mentioned in the books of hadith and have been introduced as women who have narrated traditions (from the Prophet (S) and the Infallible Imams (a.s.)).

4. Economic Similarities And Differences

In addition to the points mentioned above when we examine this third level, we see no difference between women and men – women too are permitted to possess their own wealth, just as men are.

Within the religion of Islam, women have been given true economic freedom which is in complete contrast to what we see in some “Western nations” which until today, do not afford women unfettered economic freedom and do not allow women the independence to spend their wealth as they see fit, except with the permission of their husbands.

In Islam, a woman has complete control over her wealth and is not required to have her husband's permission to spend it, and therefore can spend it in any legitimate (from the religious perspective) place, on anything, anyone or for anything!

However, if we put aside the slogans which are circulated [in terms of the economic status of the genders and look at this issue on a practical level], then we cannot deny the fact that in most instances, men are typically more active in the work place; and this could be due to some reasons:

Men, generally speaking, have more strength and muscle which allows them to accomplish strenuous tasks, and it is for this reason that they have a more prominent role in the economic affairs of the society.

The challenges which women face during pregnancy, delivery and subsequently the nurturing of children (especially for those who breastfeed their babies – even though Islamically this period only lasts for two years which is the maximum that a woman can breastfeed her child) plays a big part in taking away many years from the woman [in which she could have been a productive member of the outside workforce].

In addition, during this period, a woman may also lose some of her physical energy [if she merely sits at home taking care of her child and is not as physically active as she might have been on the job]. If we presume that on average, every woman has three children and spends a minimum of four years bringing up each one of them – from pregnancy until the time when they are able to be semi-mobile and on their own, then this means that twelve years have been spent outside of the workplace.

Perhaps it is for this reason that in almost all of the countries in the world, even in those countries in which there is an apparent equality amongst the sexes in all areas of life and in which religion does not play any role whatsoever in the over-all daily life experience, many jobs are placed on the shoulders of men and the majority of individuals who fill key positions of political, economic and social responsibility happen to be men.

Therefore, if we see that in some areas of life there are differences which are imposed between the responsibilities which exist between men and women – such as in the area of the judicial landscape, or differences in terms of the number of witnesses required based on their gender, or the differences in receiving inheritance, then these are all based on the discussions which we have mentioned above.

We can never state that there is a universal law or principle between these two genders being completely equal at the Divine and humanistic level, or the level of knowledge, culture and economic issues. Rather, we must state that the natural differences which exist between them must be accepted and that the baseless slogans of both genders being completely identical must never be accepted.

[1.](#) Al-Qur'an, Suratul Nahl (16), verse 97

[2.](#) Al-Qur'an, Suratul Ahzab (33), verse 35

[3.](#) Al-Qur'an, Suratul Hujurat (49), verse 13

[4.](#) Al-Kafi, vol. 2, pg. 161

[5.](#) Safinatul Biharul Anwar, under the letter “نسب”

[6.](#) Biharul Anwar, v. 58, pg. 73

[7.](#) This tradition has been mentioned by the late 'Allamah Majlisi in his book, Awali al-Layali from the Noble Prophet of Islam (S) and has also been mentioned in Mizan al-Hikmah from the book Majmu'atul Warram.

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