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Mutual Rights and Responsibilities of Spouses

According to Islam, the family is a small social unit that makes up the society. This small unit is formed of a woman and a man and is extended by producing children. Members of a family have a close relationship and common goals and interests. The happiness of each member depends on the happiness of the whole family. After marriage, men and women must consider all the members of the family not only their individual selves.

The relationship between a husband and wife is not like that of neighbors or friends; it is much more extreme—on the verge of unity. The Quran expresses this nicely:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“And of His signs is that He has created for you, from yourselves, spouses that you may gain peace through them and He has set among you love and compassion. Surely in this there are signs for thoughtful people.”¹

The statement, ‘He has created for you, from yourselves, spouses’, indicates the intensity of the connection and relationship. In another verse regarding husbands and wives it states:

...هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لَهُنَّ...

“They (women) are a garment for you (men) and you are a garment for them.”²

Portrayal of wives and husbands as one another's clothing reflects their close connection and relationship since clothes are the closest of things to one's body and are greatly needed in order to protect one from heat and cold, to cover imperfections, and confer tranquility and beauty. Husbands and wives are also such in respect with each other and must necessarily be so.

Islam greatly favors fortification of the structure of family and decent relations between spouses, and thus it has designated specific rights and responsibilities for each. These rights and responsibilities may be summarized within two main categories: *common* and *exclusive*. Both of these categories will be elucidated in the succeeding sections.

Common Rights and Responsibilities

The rights and responsibilities that pertain to both husband *and* wife are as follows:

1. Sociability

Wives and husbands must behave properly with one another and observe fine etiquette. The Quran declares:

...وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ...

“And consort with them (your wives) in honor and equity [ma’ruf].”³

The word *ma’ruf*, which has been used in this sentence, is the opposite of *munkar* (meaning wicked) and means behavior that is approved by both reason and religion. Even though this verse is addressed to men, women also hold this obligation.

Husbands and wives must be kind, well-mannered, cordial, cheerful, compassionate, helpful, sympathetic, courteous, just, truthful, supportive, trustworthy, loyal, well-wishing, and polite with one other. Various Hadith also emphasize sociability and geniality between spouses. The Prophet of Islam (S) has stated:

«عن النبيّ (ص)، قال: «أكمل المؤمنين إيماناً، احسنهم خلقاً، و خياركم خياركم لنسائهم»

The most complete persons in faith are those who have the best manners and the good among you are those who are good with their wives.⁴

2. Attracting the Attentions of One’s Spouse

Husbands and wives must observe each other’s desires in cleanliness, clothing, the style of their hair and beard, etc. Islam advises women at home to apply cosmetics and adorn themselves for their husbands, wear their best clothes, be neat and clean, and apply fragrant perfumes. Imam Sadiq (‘a) has declared:

عن أبي عبدالله (ع) قال: «جاءت امرأة إلى رسول الله (ص)، و قالت: يا رسول الله! ما حقّ الزوج على

المرأة؟»— في حديث إلى أن—قال: «و عليها أن تتطيّب بأطيب طيبها، و تلبس أحسن ثيابها، و تتزيّن بأحسن زينتها، و تعرض نفسها عليه غدوة و عشية، و أكثر من ذلك حقوقه عليها».

A woman came to the Prophet of Allah (S) and asked, 'What are the rights of a husband regarding his wife?' He replied, 'Her duty is to perfume herself with the best scenting of her perfumes, and to dress in the nicest of her attires, and adorn herself with the finest of her adornments, and thus offer herself to her husband morning and night; and more than these are his rights regarding her.'⁵

A man also has these responsibilities toward his wife; he must be neat and clean, perfumed and well-dressed, he must style his hair and face regularly, and make himself handsome for his wife. Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad ('a) has cited the Prophet of Allah (S) through his fathers:

جعفر بن محمد، عن أبيه، عن جدّه علي بن الحسين، عن عليّ (ع)، قال: قال رسول الله (ص): «ليتهيأ أحدكم لزوجته كما تتهيأ زوجته له»— قال جعفر بن محمد (ع):— «يعنى يتهيأ بالنظافة».

'Each of you must prepare yourselves for your wives; just as your wives prepare themselves for you.' Then Imam Ja'far ('a) stated, 'This means that each of you must be neat and clean.'⁶

The Prophet of Allah has stated:

قال النبيّ (ص): «حقّ المرأة على زوجها أن يسدّ جوعتها، و أن يستر عورتها، و لا يقبح لها وجهاً، فإذا فعل ذلك فقد و الله أدّى حقّها».

The rights of a wife regarding her husband are that he must provide her nourishment and clothing and must not appear to her with an ugly appearance. If he does these, by Allah, surely he has satisfied her rights.⁷

Hasan ibn al-Jahm has said:

حسن بن الجهم، قال: رأيت أبا الحسن (ع) اختضب، فقلت: — جعلت فداك—أختضبت؟ فقال: «نعم، إنّ التهيئة ممّا يزيد في عفة النساء، و لقد ترك النساء العفة بترك أزواجهنّ التهيئة»،—ثمّ قال: — «أيسرّك أن تراها على ما تراها».— «تراها إذا كنت على غير تهيئة؟» قلت: لا. قال: «فهو ذلك».

I saw Imam Musa ibn Ja'far ('a) who had dyed his hair. I said, 'May I be sacrificed for you! You have dyed your hair!?' He replied, 'Yes. Surely the preparations of a husband for his wife increases her modesty [*iffat*]. Truly some women have abandoned their modesty because their spouses abandoned preparation.' Then he asked, 'Do you like to see your wife the way you appear to her when you have not prepared yourself?' I answered, 'No.' He declared, 'She feels the same.'⁸

3. Pleasure and Gratification

Even though seeking pleasure and sexual gratification is not the whole aim of marriage, it is one of the chief goals and initial motivators for marriage and has a considerable effect in strengthening the structure of the family and preserving a good relationship between spouses. Hence, gratification is one of the responsibilities of husbands and wives. Husbands and wives must be prepared to give each other sexual pleasure and gratification. Whenever one party is inclined to sexual acts, the other must prepare themselves and not bring excuses. The Prophet of Islam (S) would instruct women as follows:

«أبو بصير عن أبي جعفر (ع) قال: قال رسول الله (ص) للنساء: «لا تطولن صلاتكن لتمنعن أزواجكن»

Do not lengthen your *Salat* to forestall your husbands (from sexual pleasure).[9](#)

Husbands and wives must not only think about their own pleasure in lovemaking; rather, they must also consider their partner's pleasure and gratification. This is because regular sexual satisfaction has a significant effect on good relations between spouses and bolsters the constitution of their family. Addressing men, Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) has declared:

«عن عليّ (ع) قال: قال رسول الله (ص): «إذا أتى أحدكم امرأته فلا يعجلها

Whenever you approach your wives, do not hurry (in lovemaking).[10](#)

According to a Hadith, Imam Ridha ('a) has stated:

«عن الرضا (ع) — في حديث إلى أن — قال: «و اشتهد منك مثل الذي تشتبه منها»

Your wives expect from you similar to that which you expect from them.[11](#)

4. Rearing and Edifying Children

Caring for children, providing for their health, training their bodies and souls, and educating them in knowledge and morality are shared duties of fathers and mothers. This necessitates their cooperation and mutual deliberation and diligence. A father has a greater responsibility in this matter, but the role of a mother is more sensitive and constructive.

Exclusive Duties of Husbands and Wives

a. Men's Obligations

In addition to their common duties, due to their particular genesis, men have specific responsibilities, some of which are enumerated herein:

1. Supervision of the Family

In Islam, the responsibility of guardianship, supervision, and management of the family have been set on the shoulders of men. Allah, the Exalted, has stated in the Holy Quran:

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَانِتَاتٌ حَافِظَاتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ...

“Men are the protectors and supervisors of women because of the advantage Allah has given some over others and because they support them from their means. Therefore righteous women are those who are humble and who guard (in their husband’s presence and absence) his rights and secrets, which Allah has ordained to be guarded.”¹²

Family affairs must be performed by mutual agreement, consultation, and cooperation of the husband and wife; however, this small society, like any other society, cannot run well without a prudent and influential supervisor and manager. Most families that lack a manager do not have a desirable situation. Hence, either the wife must take on the responsibility of supervising and safeguarding the family or the husband.

Again due to the particular genesis of men and women, since most men are generally more rational, as opposed to emotional, than women; are more prepared to manage and supervise the family; and are better equipped to bear hardships, the burden of supervising the family has been set on their shoulders. Conversely, women are more emotional and passionate than men. Therefore, it is in the best interests of the family that women accept the supervision of men and perform important affairs after consulting with their husbands and, in the event of a disagreement, accept their husbands’ judgment.

It must be noted that male supervision does not mean that the man can selfishly manage the family by exploiting his power and do whatever he wants and prohibit other members of the family from expressing their opinions. This is because a prudent manager and supervisor knows very well that no institution, great or small, may be administrated by force and selfishness; especially in view of the fact that the household must be a place of peace, tranquility, and nurturing for the children who are to be the future architects of the society.

In point of fact, the intent of male supervision is that correct planning for administrating the family must be first and foremost and these plans must be made through consultation and an exchange of views of other members of the family; through procuring their cooperation in managing affairs; through coming to

a mutual understanding in decisions and resolving problems; and finally, having the last word in disagreements.

The supervisory duties of men may be summarized in three categories:

1. Providing for the expenses of the family, making plans through consultation, and managing the incomes and expenditures of the family
2. Safeguarding, protecting, and looking after all members of the family
3. Overseeing religious, moral, and cultural issues of family members, guiding them towards improvement and spiritual and physical development, and preventing social and ethical corruption within the family

2. Providing Financial Support [nafaqah]

In Islam, it is a man's duty to provide for all living expenses of the family. Ishaq ibn 'Ammar asked the noble Imam Sadiq ('a):

سأل إسحاق بن عمار أبا عبد الله (ع) عن حق المرأة على زوجها قال: «يشبع بطنها، و يكسوها، و إن جهلت غفر لها.»

'What are the rights of a wife upon her husband?' He replied, 'He must fill her stomach and provide her clothing and if she makes a mistake, he must forgive her.'¹³

3. Honor, Gentleness, and Lenience

A man must be appreciative of his wife and regard her as a blessing from God. He must honor her, be gentle with her, forgive her mistakes, and refrain from strictness and stubbornness. Islam regards this attitude a wife's right and a husband's duty. Imam Sajjad ('a) has stated:

قال عليّ بن الحسين (ع): «و أمّا حق الزوجة: فأَنْ تعلم أنّ الله جعلها سكناً و أنساً، فتعلم أنّ ذلك نعمة من الله عليك فتكرمها و ترفق بها، و إن كان حقك عليها أوجب، فإنّ لها عليك أنّ ترحمها؛ لأنّها أسيرتك، و تطعمها و تكسوها، و إذا جهلت عفوت عنها.»

The rights of a wife are that you must know that Allah has made her (an instrument of) peace and friendship; then you must know that she is a blessing from Allah upon you, so honor her and be lenient and gentle with her. Even though you also have rights upon her, you must be kind and forgiving toward her because she is captivated by you. And you must provide her food and clothing and when she makes a mistake, you must forgive her.¹⁴

4. Religious and Moral Guidance

Men are obligated to make provision for religious, ethical, and belief related issues of their wives. Either they must help them in this matter themselves, or they must provide the instruments for their learning. A man must be careful of his wife's morality and conduct. He must encourage her to virtuous deeds and praiseworthy behavior and dissuade her from evil deeds and indecent behavior. In short, he must free her from the fires of Hell and invite her to Heaven.

This is one of the results and requirements of supervision, which is the responsibility of men. The Quran proclaims:

...يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا قُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ

“O people of faith! Save yourselves and your families from the Fire whose fuel is humans and stones.”¹⁵

b. Women's Obligations

Women also have heavy responsibilities towards their husbands, some of which have been indicated in various Hadith. All these responsibilities can be epitomized in one phrase: taking good care of one's husband. Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) has stated:

«قال عليّ (ع): «جهادُ المرأةِ حُسنُ التَّبَعْلِ»

The jihad of a woman is taking good care of her husband.¹⁶

The phrase حُسنُ التَّبَعْلِ (taking good care of one's husband) in this Hadith is a concise term, however, it has an extensive meaning and encompasses all virtues. Regarding a woman who takes good care of her husband, it can be said:

She accepts the supervision and administration of her husband and defends and supports it. She guards her husband's station in the family and among the children. She consults with him in important issues. She obeys his commands. If in some circumstances he deems it unwise that she leaves the house and does not permit it, she acquiesces.

With good manners, virtuous behavior, and kindness she heartens her husband and turns her home into a focus of serenity and love. In times of trouble and difficulty she aids her husband and consoles and encourages him. She is trustworthy of her husband's property and avoids waste, extravagance, and thriftlessness.

She encourages him to do good deeds. At home she wears her best and most attractive clothes; she

adorns herself and applies cosmetics as her husband wishes, and shows her willingness and inclination openly and at all times. She works hard to manage the household and train the children well. She is faithful in her husband's secrets, trustworthy, loving, compassionate, etc.

It can be said regarding such a woman that she takes good care of her husband and her actions are on the same tier as Holy Jihad.

In Hadith several issues are greatly emphasized:

1. Obeying one's husband in religiously permissible issues
2. Submission to one's husband in sleeping together, sexual pleasure, and lovemaking; except where religiously prohibited
3. Trustworthiness and preservation of the property of one's husband
4. Preserving one's modesty and chastity
5. Getting permission from one's husband in exiting the house

Imam Sadiq ('a) has cited the Prophet of Allah (S) through his fathers:

عن أبي عبدالله (ع) عن آبائه (ع) قال: قال النبي (ص): «ما إستفاد امرئ مسلم فائدة بعد الإسلام أفضل من زوجة مسلمة تسره إذا نظر إليها، و تطيعه إذا أمرها، و تحفظه إذا غاب عنها في نفسها و ماله».

No Muslim man has gained more benefit after becoming Muslim than through a Muslim wife who gives him a feeling of happiness when he looks at her, and obeys him when he gives her a command, and guards herself and his property when he is absent. [17](#)

Imam Muhammad Baqir ('a) has stated:

عن أبي جعفر (ع) قال: جاءت امرأة إلى النبي (ص) فقالت: يا رسول الله! ما حق الزوج على المرأة؟ فقال لها: «أن تطيعه، و لا تعصيه، و لا تصدق من بيته إلا بإذنه، و لا تصوم تطوعاً إلا بإذنه، و لا تمتعه نفسها و إن كانت على ظهر قتب، و لا تخرج من بيتها إلا بإذنه».

A woman came to the Prophet (S) and said, 'O Messenger of Allah! What are the rights of men upon their wives?' He replied, 'She must obey him and not be disobedient. She must not give charity from his house without his permission. She must not perform voluntary fasts without his permission. She must not deny him her body, even if she is on the back of a camel. And she must not exit her home without his permission. [18](#)

- [1.](#) – Surah Rum 30:21.
- [2.](#) – Surah Baqarah 2: 187.
- [3.](#) – Surah Nisa’ 4: 19.
- [4.](#) – Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p. 389.
- [5.](#) – Wasa’il ush-Shi’ah, vol. 20, p. 158.
- [6.](#) – Mustadrak al-Wasa’il, vol. 14, p. 296.
- [7.](#) – Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 103, p. 254.
- [8.](#) – Wasa’il ush-Shi’ah, vol. 20, p. 246.
- [9.](#) – Ibid, vol. 20, p. 164.
- [10.](#) – Mustadrak al-Wasa’il, vol. 14, p. 221.
- [11.](#) – Ibid.
- [12.](#) – Surah Nisa’ 4:34.
- [13.](#) – Makarim al-Akhlaq, vol. 1, p. 248.
- [14.](#) – Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 74, p. 5.
- [15.](#) – Surah Tahrim 66:6
- [16.](#) – Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 103, p. 252.
- [17.](#) – Wasa’il ush-Shi’ah, vol. 20, p. 41.
- [18.](#) – Ibid, p. 158.

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