

# **The Engendered Islamic Culture of Development**

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## **Women, Education, Cultural Development & Social Change**

Inspired by the central message of the 1995 Human Development Report, which explicitly states: “Human development, if not engendered, is endangered,” I assume that no discussion of the Islamic model of culture and values development can be undertaken in ignorance of gender issues. Despite his insistence on the necessity of rethinking women’s issues in Islam (1982a, 203) and despite his vital impact in educating his sister Bint al-Huda as a Muslim woman thinker, Sadr never really had a chance to deal with gender issue in his theory about culture and values development. Relying on my own understanding of Sadr’s model and considering the practical challenges of post-revolutionary Iran, I have elaborated on cultural development and gender in this chapter from an Islamic point of view. Both theoretical and practical dimensions of an engendered Islamic model of cultural development are dealt with respectively.

Since the U.N. decade for women (1975–85) serious attention has been given to the active and multi-faceted role of women in development (Ghosh, in press, 1). The major concern in this movement has been the eradication of various pressures imposed on women and their empowerment. Empowerment aims at providing women with the feeling of a sense of control over their lives (Ghosh, in press, 4). To have an understanding of women’s roles and interests in education and development within an Islamic context, we should study the issue both from theoretical and practical vantage points. Post-revolutionary Iran provides a context where Islamic ideals are being translated into practice, and allows us to consider the issues from both these angles.

In this section, I first try to provide a general portrayal of the Islamic view of women, and then examine it in the current context of post-revolutionary Iran. From a general perspective, I aim to study the role and status of Iranian women in education and development within the framework of the Iranian Islamic state. I also intend to discover what Iranian women have done or can accomplish in education and development, and what they have gained in the process. I assume that issues affecting women cannot be studied in isolation from either the general process of social change or, particularly, the decisive role of men. Women’s issues have always been investigated in sex-laden terms. They have been studied as a specific class of the society, and have been held largely responsible for gender shortcomings and social problems. To solve the problems faced by women we need to consider the complementary role of men.

Most of the scholars who have written about women in Iran during the post-revolutionary era ( see e.g., Higgins & Ghaffari 1994, 20) believe that not only the female education system but the educational system by and large aims at educating citizens with an explicit emphasis on Islamic values. This, they argue, will compromise the possibility of developing highly skilled human resources. Other writers like Erika Friedl (1983) call the Iranian Islamic context a situation which exerts “extraordinary ideological pressure” on women (Moghadam 1988, 223). I argue that the emphasis on Islamic values is characteristic of an Islamic educational model. The reason behind it is to make the system Islamic-value-laden and protect those educated in this fashion from secular consequences. Another message from this commitment is to create a feeling of independence and self-efficiency in students. However, this does not mean that needed skills and expertise are compromised by a commitment to Islamic values. It is vital to build an educational system that encourages both knowledge and commitment. The secular system of education in Iran, like that in other colonized countries, is the legacy of Western colonization. It is reasonable to implement and examine the Islamic model as another alternative.

Western ideas about education entered Iran during the nineteenth century along with the colonial movements of the time. The Western cultural invasion encompassed a combination of positive and negative values. This mixture created pessimistic and optimistic reactions. The exploitation that accompanied these invasions prevented colonized populations from trusting even positive modern values like equality, freedom, human rights, development and social change (Afkhani 1994, 9). This schizophrenic and opaque environment persuaded Shi'i scholars to oppose the modernizing efforts put forward by their own Western-oriented national governments. Women, like other segments of the population, had particular difficulty in keeping up with the modernizing process since it aimed at introducing a stereotyped Western model which was also anti-Islamic. The affordable Islamic model, however, could not be implemented since power was in the hands of those who were pro-West. The situation of women needed improvement in the sphere of Islamic values and sexuality education, in socio-political participation, in family welfare and in other similar aspects. Steps towards improvement would have been had to be inclusive but Islamically value-laden, yet little immediate consideration was given to these matters.

In the political domain, Iranian women won the right to vote in 1963 as an element of the Shah's White Revolution (Afkhani 1994, 11). To what extent this right was translated into practice is a matter of debate. Certainly it was no more effective than similar rights granted after the revolution. Women from higher levels of the society and the elite could exercise their rights. Women from middle and lower middle class urban backgrounds and those from rural areas could not. These rights were furthermore accompanied by other anti-Islamic values which created a negative attitude towards the whole package of reforms offered by the White Revolution. Not only women, but the entire population remained suppressed because of the tension between pre-revolutionary development plans and Islamic ideals. Iran, as a Muslim country, had experienced Islam for centuries. Shi'i scholars, as the protectors of Islam, had played a vital role in mobilizing the people to work for social change. Ignorance of this factor led to the failure of the pre-revolutionary regime and provided the background to the Islamic Revolution of

1979. Post-revolutionary Iran has attracted the attention of those who are looking to see what Islam can provide for women. This is indeed a situation where the Islamic view of women is put into practice. It is therefore important to evaluate the roots of the problems and assess future possibilities.

## Reviewing the Islamic View of Women

Before describing some aspects of the status of women in Islam, it must be noted that the Islamic approach towards women features a number of characteristics. One should remember that this approach may or may not be compatible with other approaches, particularly the Western. The feminist movement within Western culture has a different history altogether. This movement stands opposed even to the metanarratives of Western male-oriented culture, let alone Islamic standards. Although feminists are not in touch with Islamic standards, there would be tension if they confronted Islamic womanology with its distinctive value system. To investigate an important issue like women's status we need varying perspectives. Womanology will be more inclusive if we study it through a comparative perspective. In this section, I aim to provide a general picture of the Islamic approach in order to compare it later with other perspectives. We will be totally confused if we judge Islamic and other non-Western approaches in isolation from their cultural contexts. Islamic standards never function in a Western context as diversely. As I have mentioned in other chapters, Islamic ideology is a complete system. The functionality of each component depends on the functionality of other components of the whole system. However, it is worth bearing in mind various perspectives. In this section I have tried to review the Islamic approach within both theoretical and practical contexts. The perspective gained from a review of the subject will help us to contextualize and then evaluate it.

Women, who have made up more than half of the human population throughout history and in all nations have, solely on account of their gender, been oppressed, violated and discriminated against. Even within developed countries women have suffered from explicit and hidden types of tyranny. They have not been able to enjoy their rights to education and socio-political participation, within the family, marriage and the like. Women are still victims of poverty, illiteracy, post-war crises, homelessness, social and sexual violence. Companies and commercial institutions in industrialized countries enlarge their interests through female exploitation. The existing discriminative status of women is more or less a norm in Muslim and non-Muslim societies. Aside from the type and form of discrimination, women are discriminated against in all societies. We need to revive or rebuild the status of women even in Islamic countries. One reason for the discriminatory treatment to women in Islamic societies is that Islamic instructions in these societies are misunderstood or mis-translated. Islamic standards usually are mingled with local cultural values and stereotyped expectations in Muslim nations (Fanaei 1998, 21-2).

It is not an easy task to provide even a general picture of the Islamic view of women in a chapter which must necessarily deal with only a few aspects of this topic. However, even a limited investigation can provide the cornerstone of future, more inclusive studies.

To understand fully the Islamic view of women we have always to keep in mind the explicit difference between the revealed doctrine of Islam and the actual practice in Muslim societies. Socio-political, economic, national and global elements often force Muslim societies to mingle pure Islamic tenets with local customs and beliefs. Before looking at the realities of Muslim life in any one aspect, particularly the issue of women, we must first refer to the main sources of Islamic knowledge. The reality is that neither in theory nor in practice can Muslim women ever fully realize their potential, understand themselves or enjoy their rights. The Qur'an and the prophetic tradition, along with the narrated tradition from the infallible Imams (in Shi'i thought), constitute these sources. Although in referring to them we face the problem of conflicting interpretations, we may find a way to avoid misconceptions. As in understanding any text, the most reliable method is to turn to experts, in this case to Muslim scholars, who mostly agree upon the fundamental tenets. The reliance on experts in each branch of knowledge is a commonly accepted norm. Therefore, at the level of theoretical discussion I prefer to turn to the main Islamic references.

According to Islam, value-laden differences between men and women are merely based on the acquired level of piety. Piety is the characteristic which shapes individual and collective behavior to be God-laden. Rejecting any type of superiority claimed by one group over another, the Qur'an addresses all human beings:

***O you people! surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know one another; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most pious... (49:13)***

The core message in this verse is that the characteristics that distinguish one person from the next are only means of knowing one another. Race, sex, class, geographical differences, age and wealth should not provide the bases of superiority or power relationships. The only criterion of honor and superiority is piety, which eradicates any unjust and discriminative hierarchical relationship.

As the main source for the issue of women in Islam, the Qur'an discusses twelve well-known women in religious history and describes their lifestyles. It is also interesting to note that one whole chapter in the Qur'an is entitled the "chapter of women" (Surat al Nisa"), which indicates the attention that the Qur'an paid to women (Bahunar 1990, 39).

## **The Ideal Woman in an Islamic Society**

I would like to quote Jane I. Smith's words on the complexity of the position of women in Islam at both the theoretical and practical levels. She, interestingly enough, maintains:

Like an intricate and complex geometric pattern on a Persian rug or a frieze decorating a mosque, the practices, roles, opportunities, prescriptions, hopes and frustrations of Islamic women are woven together in a whole. The colors are sometimes bold and striking, at other times mute and subtle. (Smith

1987, 248)

A reason for this interrelatedness and complexity is that on the one hand Muslims believe that Islamic law remains divine and immutable, while on the other, society has to find answers for the questions raised by women about their status, roles, and function in the context of a modern, but Islamic state (Haeri 1991, 182). The discussion of the ideal woman in Islam and attempts at defining her model behavior becomes crucial when an Islamic society, like post-revolutionary Iran, undergoes rapid development and encounters the problem of putting theories into practice. The contrast will be more explicit when, on the one hand, the society follows the Islamic values system, whereas on the other it is asked to follow the path towards the goals of development and modernization. Social change cannot be avoided. Muslim scholars therefore, are faced with finding feasible Islamic patterns. These two tasks will cause challenges in developmental and educational plans and policies. It should also be mentioned that the issue of women, education and development in Iran is linked to Shi'i ideology, which has had deep impact on social and individual lives. Since the central value in socio-educational change, as was pointed out earlier, is piety, the educational system aims at creating a pious and committed citizen, whether male or female. Piety, as a core characteristic, influences social and individual attitudes and behavior. The Qur'anic educational teachings, therefore, are piety-centered. A key goal in formal education is accordingly to educate students for a pious life.

Educational teachings are more effective if they are accompanied with concrete, feasible models of piety. An important aspect of the Qur'anic educational teachings, as in other effective educational methods, is that it always provides feasible models. These educational models and ideals are not only masculine. In providing models of good and bad characters, the Qur'an offers examples of both male and female characters. In Q. 66:10 & 11, for instance, it is women who step forward on environmental issues and challenge the motives of those who would try to indoctrinate them. These female models are provided as concrete examples for both men and women. In verse 10, the Qur'an reminds us of the wives of Prophets Lut and Noah who rejected the prophetic instructions and became disbelievers. The Qur'an says:

***Allah sets forth an example to those who disbelieve, the wife of Noah and the wife of Lut: they were both under (the teachings) of two of Our righteous servants, but they acted treacherously towards them so they availed them nothing from Allah... (66: 10)***

The next verse in the same chapter, on the contrary, talks about Pharaoh's wife:

***And Allah sets forth an example to those who believe the wife of Pharaoh when she said: My Lord! build for me a house with you in the garden and deliver me from Pharaoh and his doing and deliver me from the unjust people. (66: 11)***

Hence in verse 10, the Qur'an talks about two women who disregarded the prophetic teachings, who had access to prophetic instructions from within their family but decided instead to disbelieve in the

religion of their times. Verse 11, on the contrary, provides the example of a woman who did not have direct access to the prophetic message. She was the wife of the emperor of ancient Egypt. However, she was able to reach a high level of piety. The Qur'an offers her example as a champion of piety and belief in God (Mutahhari 1980, 117).

It is important to note that Pharaoh's wife and the other two models are provided for all believers, both men and women, as examples of those who acted against or along with the oppressing conditions of their times. Pharaoh's wife furthermore is a model of resistance to absolute power. Although she lived in one of the most secular and oppressive environments, she was faithful in following the prophetic instructions of Moses. The other two, who lived in the most un-secular of environments, nevertheless preferred to adapt a secular lifestyle. The message is that the final choice is in our hands, regardless of our gender.

In other verses, Mary (Jesus' mother) appears as a surprising model. She acts so piously that the prophet of her time is astonished. Verse 37 in the third chapter of the Qur'an quotes the Prophet Zakariya:

***Whenever he (the Prophet Zakariya ) entered the sanctuary to (see) her (Mary), he found with her food! He said: O Mary! whence comes this to you? She said it is from Allah" There, Zakariya asked Allah to grant him such a good offspring. (3:37)***

This and other corresponding verses provide an illustration of the Islamic understanding about the ability of women to reach the sacred levels of perfectness. The female, according to the Qur'an, should be a model and champion of piety among males and other females.

In Islam, the ideal model in female education is Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, the wife of 'Ali, (the first Shi'i Imam), and the mother of the second and the third imams, (Hasan and Husayn), according to Shi'i belief. This conception is the reason why Women's Day in Iran is celebrated on the occasion of Fatima's birthday (Mehran 1991,43). Although Fatima was neither a prophet nor an Imam, her spiritual position is higher than that of her eleven offspring who were imams and also higher than the other prophets with the exception of her father (Mutahhari 1980, 117-18). Khadija the prophet Muhammad's wife and Zaynab the Prophet's granddaughter also played important roles in the socio-political events of their times, more so even than many Muslim men. Therefore, they are regarded as directing and encouraging models in Islam.

Based upon this model, the first and the most important task of women in an Islamic society is to fulfill the sacred role of motherhood in order to preserve the sanctity and stability of the family. This, of course, does not mean that all burdens in the family should be placed on the shoulders of women or that they should be prevented from fulfilling other roles. The above-mentioned examples though played a decisive role in the establishment of Islam. Their family roles never obliged them to disregard their socio-political roles. Moreover, men are also expected to play a complementary role in domestic responsibilities. Pious

mothers and fathers are both the first and the most effective educators in establishing the foundations of a life-long educational process. To play the role of a pious mother should not come at the expense of her socio-political and economic status. A mother, before being a mother or a wife, is herself. The elevated status of Fatima was not merely due to her relation to the Prophet Muhammad or the imams. She was a champion in all aspects of life. Muslims should be proud of her because of her exemplary personality.

It is necessary to provide women with educational opportunities both before and after marriage. If a woman has access to education she is able to invest in herself. This will give her the ability to play a more complete role both in the family and in society. She will be a better educator and mother if she receives more and higher levels of education. Family and social roles will be better conducted if society were to invest more in the education of women. Uneducated mothers not only lose their own rights but also are less likely to be good mothers and wives, as well as being deficient in other complementary roles.

## **1. The Impact of Women's Role on the Stability of Family**

The family in an Islamic society is seen as the core and the key element of the society (Iranian Constitution, article 11). Efforts at an Islamic socialization should begin in the family. Both men and women are expected to play complementary roles based on their different abilities and varying capabilities. Both sexes are endowed with different biological and psychological capabilities which help them fulfill different participatory needs. Explaining the importance of the family unit, the Qur'an maintains that God created humankind as male and female. His wise creation of humankind provided the foundations of the family unit. The Qur'an reveals:

***And among His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He put between you love and compassion. (30:21)***

The implication of this verse is that the Qur'an views the family as a unit which includes both male and female. The Arabic term "azwaj" (mates) in this verse applies to both sexes, men and women. Units with two female or male components are not considered families nor do these entail the expected consequences. Moreover, the family is regarded as a center of love, compassion and relaxation. These strong psychological relationships are the background of a lifelong companionship. This refers to the creation of a human condition that provides interpersonal reliance. Reliance on others, as R. W. Morris states, is a part of the human condition and recognizes that people do rely on one another for understanding, comfort, and love (Morris 1994, 40).

Recent sociological and developmental findings also support the idea that the family unit is the core of the socialization process and of human development for the entire society. Human interrelationships, informal education and socialization begins and is constructed within the family (See e.g., Avison & Kundel 1991, 79 & Woolfolk 1995, 87). I personally never consider the sexual-biological differences

between men and women and the consequent varying roles as discriminative; rather I see them as a way of natural cooperation which joins men to women and maintains the human race on the earth. Sexual differences call men and women to play complementary roles within the extension of the family. Tensions, nonetheless, begin when we do not have a clear definition of “complementary roles”. The main task is to clarify the borderlines of “complementary roles” based on the fundamental differences.

My understanding of the above-mentioned verse is that the family unit begins with mutual love and affection between girls and boys. This key element along with the consequent sexual pleasure and attraction links both sexes, helping them to overcome the pressures of life cooperatively. Yet the sexual role of reproduction is different. While men play an instant role in the reproductive process, women undertake a long-lasting role, aside from their crucial role in the post-natal period, as they feed and rear their infants in their early years.

It is also crucial to understand that the reproductive process is usually preceded, accompanied and followed by pain, pressures and indisposition and possible side-effects. Women need time to pass through this process and regain their normal health (Misbah 1990, 6). In promoting any productive opportunity for women, we have to consider the more vital role of women in reproduction. This is why in Islam men are urged to support women financially and bear more of a burden in productive aspects. This, of course, does not mean to restrict the role of women to reproduction. Rather we have to take into consideration the fact that a long period of pregnancy, the side-effects of delivery and the post-natal recovery are reasons that women play the most essential roles in reproduction.

They must therefore bear a lesser burden on the social level while they are dealing with human development. If within the new proposed concept of development people are located at the center of all development plans (UNDP, The State of Human development 1995, 11), then the reproductive role of women should not be compromised by the value attached to producing goods and commodities. I do not think that a productive role at any level can be compared with the value of women’s crucial role in reproduction. I assume that a significant aspect of social justice is to give the primary value to reproduction for those women who decide to complete their role in this area. Reproduction or human development in its formative period requires experts in education and child psychology. It is therefore especially worthwhile to have skillful women who oversee the early stages of human development. To give more power to women and provide them with financial independence, we first need to reevaluate their reproductive value.

One more point should be added here, which is that the reproductive task is usually misperceived. People always categorize reproduction with the unpaid and invisible productive roles of women in the family. In Islam, the complementary role of the woman in a family is reproduction, which I call human development. Other invisible productive activities like housekeeping, laundry, cooking, cleaning and even child-rearing which are usually conducted by women are remunerable tasks. Women can charge their husbands for performing these tasks. However the Islamic legal system is accompanied by a moral

system which discourages disputes which may disturb the marriage. In its familial instructions, Islam directs Muslims toward mutual love, compassion and cooperation rather than mere economic competition. If, nonetheless, men and women decided to interpret strictly the legal nature of the marriage contract, claiming what each owes to the other, both have something to say about the economic value of their participation (Misbah 1990, 17).

My point is that if a society neglects the value of women's activities within the family then social planners have to find ways to engage them in productive roles. I observe that social change can be effected by women if we reevaluate their reproductive and invisible productive roles. Reformulation of social norms can provide women with a deserved and independent position. However, this emphasis does not mean that women should always stay at home. Reproduction, particularly in the present when societies are confronted with the problem of the exploitation of population, does not cover the whole scope of women's lives. Once the family's foundations have been established and the children provided with stability, both the wife and husband are free to continue their out-of-home activities.

To give a higher value to family stability and to insist on the crucial role of women does not necessarily mean that a woman's role should be confined to domestic responsibilities. Val Moghadam (1988) opposes what she calls "the ideology of domesticity" in post-revolutionary Iran, and provides statistics that reveal a growth trend in Iranian women's participation in various sectors of the work-force (Moghadam 1988). Again she restricts herself to one specific understanding of a particular prophetic tradition. Moghadam quotes this tradition from the women's journal *Zan-i Ruz* where it was written that the Prophet Muhammad said: "domesticity is the woman's holy war" to support her thesis of the ideology of domesticity (Moghadam 1988, 223). I would observe that although this prophetic tradition is reported in various Islamic primary sources (see e.g., Majlisi 1983, vol., 10, 99 & vol., 18, 106), it could have alternative interpretations.

This tradition, with its specific Arabic phrase (*husn al-taba'*ul/a well-established relationship with one's spouse) actually emphasizes the cooperative role that married women should play with their husbands. It never implies the ideology of domesticity that women should be prevented from taking on out-of-home responsibilities. Moreover, the late Ayatullah Muhammad Bihishti, the former vice-president of the Assembly of Experts, who was in charge of establishing the Post-revolutionary constitution, has an interesting explanation for the role of women in the Muslim family. He has stated that the emphasis on the role of the woman at home in raising children and caring for the husband does not imply that women's work is 'maid's work'.

The spirit of Islamic teachings, he points out, accords great importance to the mutual responsibilities of both parents within the family context (Esfandiari 1994, 67). It is incumbent on both of them to divide the responsibilities cooperatively. For me, "maid's work" is an example of wrong translation of a prophetic tradition. I have already mentioned that according to Islamic law domestic work is a kind of hidden productive and remunerable activity. They may be provided by women under the moral values of the

marriage contract. Moreover, the cooperative and complementary roles of men and women are not confined to the family unit. Wives and husbands agree upon cooperation in all aspects of their shared lives.

## **2. Women & Socio-Political Development**

To discuss the equality of men and women in social participation, we have to discover whether their respective social roles go back only to the socialization process or whether they depend sometimes on socialization and occasionally on biological and psychological differences. If we hold the first opinion, the existing labor division based on the male–female criterion will be entirely discriminatory. If we follow the second criterion, we may accept a kind of labor division at the social level between male and female.

It seems that both men and women are capable of performing many social responsibilities. Therefore, the differences do not refer to their potentialities. Social role playing then reflects the better compatibility of men or women for particular tasks. Men and women may have different degrees of ability to perform various social responsibilities (Fanaei 1998, 17–20).

Besides those activities that both men and women are equally able to perform, there are some that are more compatible with one of the sexes. In many societies, both past and present, the harder or more difficult tasks were assigned to men, such as hunting, fighting and mining. Women, on the contrary, were asked to take on softer and more secure social responsibilities. Despite this fact, exceptions can be found all over the world. In some societies women have been asked to perform hard and heavy work, such as construction. This, of course, does not mean that women did not suffer within their own domain of responsibilities. The reproductive process, post–war hardship, drought crises and other examples hurt women more than men. Even when a nation is at war, while men serve on the front women have served as well by remaining at home to rear children and handle household duties. In cases where both men and women participated in national defense, women took care of nursing and support behind the lines. These examples of labor division are not discriminatory; rather they naturally fit with varying abilities of men and women.

I do not think that this labor division is unreasonable. What is most crucial is how and on the basis of which type of criteria we divide labor. Next most important is the way in which we evaluate men's and women's participation. Social credit and financial reward have admittedly always been discriminatory. A solution for such treatment is to reconsider men's and women's capabilities and reevaluate their shares. Although in post–revolutionary Iran women do not face impediments against working outside of their homes, in December 1983 a legislative measure was introduced ostensibly to ease the burdens on working mothers by encouraging part–time rather than full–time work (Moghadam 1988, 227). Such legislation maintains two sides of the coin. It not only provides an opportunity for women to work but also leaves them enough time to look after their families. They can of course work full time when they are free from family responsibilities.

In Islam, reproduction and human development during the early years is a priority task assigned to mothers. Mothers are regarded as the most compatible for this duty. They endure the pains of almost nine months of conception. In the post-natal period they also are endowed with a source of natural nutrition. The Qur'an reveals that these two tasks, bearing and nourishing, will last thirty months if mothers are willing to the fullest. To remind us of the importance of these responsibilities, Q. 31:40 maintains:

***“And We have charged humankind concerning his/her parents- his/her mother bore him/her in weakness upon weakness and his/her weaning occurs in two years...”(31:40)***

The verse in Q. 46:15 reemphasizes the same fact and asks people to treat their parents well, particularly their mothers. It reminds us of the difficulties that mothers suffer during pregnancy and delivery. Although men can also take part in post-natal responsibilities, mothers are regarded in the Qur'an as the most compatible. They are the ones who naturally have the ability to conceive and provide breast-feeding. These responsibilities are not, however, forced upon them. It is, after all, possible to set up day-cares and send women immediately to work or to ask men to stay at home or take the children with them to work, but this makes things difficult if the parents wish to feed their child naturally. Needless to say, breast-feeding has a crucial psychological impact on a child.

Holding to the idea that the post-natal responsibilities of child-rearing require male-female cooperation, I cannot see how rearing by only one parent can result in healthy psychological development. Thus it is clear that post-natal responsibilities are addressed to both parents. Fathers should also look out for the child's need for education and affection during the post-natal period.

One might still however argue that Islam has restricted women to performing only reproductive tasks and that they are deprived of other social opportunities. The answer is that reproduction never fills all of a woman's life-span. This is more understandable during the present age when the size of a family is much smaller than in the past. Moreover, women can still be engaged in productive tasks even within the reproductive period as long as they do not compromise the more important task of human development. Women have to participate in the work-force, not only to create economic independence for themselves but also to cope with the economic realities of every day life. This, however, adds to the burden faced by women who have to struggle with maintaining a home along with the pressures of a job.

A dramatic point in Islam is that division of roles and responsibilities between men and women is not a question of higher or lower value. The core of spiritual and social values are piety and full participation in compatible tasks. The social value of each person, male or female, depends on his/her level of cooperative participation and the intentions behind it.

If one returns to the post-revolutionary context, it is clear that teaching at various levels has been an important area for the socio-educational participation of women. Following the return to Islamic values, the Council of the Cultural Revolution encouraged (1989) women to fill all needed teaching positions in

female education. Despite this emphasis, female teachers still constitute only one–eighth of the total work force in the educational sector (Fallahi 1995, 136).

Women also receive military training as members of the female paramilitary forces. Started during the Iraq–Iran war, this program mobilizes women to receive military training on an extra–curricular basis . Women are also allowed to run for Parliament. It is interesting to note that in the present Parliament Fa'izah Hashimi, the previous president's daughter, has been elevated to the first rank among her peers.

### **3. Equality of Men & Women (Difference or Discrimination?)**

The debate over the equality and freedom of human beings in social life has engaged minds for at least three centuries. The equality of men and women was however only recognized internationally for the first time with the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948. As human beings, both men and women enjoy many in–born and undeniable rights. The issue has likewise been debated in post–revolutionary Iran from the outset. Theoretical and practical solutions have been proposed ever since.

In an informative lecture addressed to Iranian women, Ayatollah Khamini'i, the present leader of the Islamic Republic, maintains that women are not weaker than men in terms of mental and intellectual abilities, thinking and emotions. In some cases they are even stronger. However, throughout history men have oppressed women simply because they were taller and physically stronger and had louder voices. The roots of this oppression lie in the lack of a strong and supportive law or the lack of strong psychological parameters like intense love or the lack of a stable and clear religious faith.

Male–female relationships in the Iranian context must therefore be improved, according to Khamini'i. These relationships must be reestablished on the basis of the Islamic standards of justice and love. For him, blind imitation of the Western model, even in support of women's rights, would be nothing more than falling into a new trap. He observes that the Islamic attitude toward women represents a more appropriate path. He states his belief that the majority of ill–treatment of women comes from husbands. What is needed is a change in interrelationship patterns in order to avoid this sort of oppression (Electronic Hamshahri 1996/1375, No. 1113). As a step towards women development in post–revolutionary Iran, new efforts should be made to reform family patterns. Women need more protection and immunity against spousal abuse. Out–of–family limitations, I believe, are partly rooted in family oppression. This explains Khamini'i's emphasis on family–pattern development.

To begin any reform we must have a clear understanding about men's and women's capabilities. Both sexes enjoy various capabilities due to femininity and masculinity. Sex differences dictate the respective potentials that men and women bring to collective life within the family and at the social level. Muslim thinkers insist that to eradicate pressures on and mis–treatment of women we should not place new burdens on women's shoulders in the name of equality. They assert that men and women are equal but not similar in their experience of human rights (Mutahhari 1980, 113). Similar treatment, they argue, is

another kind of tyranny over men and women.

Muslim thinkers believe that Islam does not support the idea of a similarity between men and women, but that this does not lead to any discrimination against women. They insist that Islam is opposed to discrimination both in terms of sex and similarity of the sexes. A woman's nature is not deemed to be inferior to a man's, but neither is it the same. The two complete and complement each other (Ferdows 1985, 18).

As men and women are born with different potentialities, they are different in deserving different rights (Mutahhari 1980, 11). Undeniable differences are, indeed, a tool for linking men to women in the demanding situation of shared and collective life. As women suffer from menstruation, a long period of conception, difficulties with delivering babies and breast-feeding then during the first two years, they need men's protection, fewer responsibilities and more rights (Mutahhari 1980, 167). According to the Qur'an, men and women are looked upon as two complementary members of both the family and society. In an interesting statement, the Qur'an refers to the mutual protective roles of men and women. The Qur'an states:

***“They (women) are an apparel for you (men) and you are an apparel for them.” (2: 187)***

This statement comes in the context of a discussion of lawful sexual intercourse when the family is established under the religious law. As clothes protect us from hot and cold weather and give us beauty, male and female play the same role in a marriage in protecting each other from deviant sexual intercourse. Based on this understanding neither the male nor the female is subordinate in a relationship. They each have a complementary role to play. The Islamic human rights' system for men and women derives from an Islamic view about the creation of humankind. In rejecting all types of dominant-subordinate relationships between men and women, the Qur'an reveals: “

***O People! be careful of (your duty to) your Lord, Who created you from a single being (Adam) and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two, many men and women...”(4: 1)***

In similar verses, the Qur'an explains that men and women, wives and husbands are created from the same, unique being (Q. 16:72, 30:21, 42: 11, 39:6). This sameness necessitates the equality of both sexes inasmuch as it maintains their complementary roles. An oversimplified understanding of this view is to replace equality with similarity and sameness in rights and responsibilities. In his book, *Women's Rights System in Islam* (1980, 113–15), Mutahhari observes that since men and women are the same in creation they have to be treated equally but not similarly. An insistence on similarity in rights and responsibilities fails to take into account the natural endowments of both sexes. This opposition results in the disintegration of their respective roles.

Mutahhari continues by pointing out that, aside from undeniable differences, men and women are similar in many other respects. To support this idea, he quotes a part of the story of Adam and Eve in the Qur'an and concludes that the two were similarly influenced by Satan. Despite many Muslim interpreters

who argue that the dismissal of this couple from paradise was the result of Eve's more flexible emotions, Mutahhari maintains that the Qur'an charges the couple with the same responsibility (Mutahhari 1980, 116). In Q. 7:20–22 it is revealed:

***But the Satan made an evil suggestion to them (both) that he might make manifest to them (both) what had been hidden from them (both) of their evil inclinations, and he said: Your Lord has not forbidden for you (both) this tree except that you may not (both) become two angels or that you may (not) become of the immortals. And he swore to them (both): Most surely I am a sincere advisor to you. Then he caused them (both) to fall by deceit.... (7:20–22)***

The repeated use of the specific Arabic pronoun (*huma*) in the three above-mentioned verses, provides a clue. This pronoun in Arabic is usually employed in a context where two persons are involved. It indicates that Satan in his entire approach, including his suggestion, misguidance and oath-swearing, dealt with the couple simultaneously. This shows that both were equally misguided and equally responsible for their dismissal from paradise. To sum up, we may conclude that men and women, according to the Qur'anic point of view, are endowed with the same type of motivational system. What usually separates men and women can generally be traced back to cultural contexts or varying educational environments.

An important aspect of the equality of men and women in Islam is the equal value of their participation. In our value judgments we always assign a higher value to social activities which are conducted by men. It is, nonetheless, narrated that once in the time of the Prophet Muhammad the Muslim women in Medina sent a representative to the Prophet in order to ask him questions as to whether he was only the Prophet of men or of both men and women. They had in mind the fact that the Prophet had mostly handled social and political activities through men. Men participate easily in such matters. The representative of these women talked to the Prophet while he was surrounded by his companions. She reminded him of the significance of their complementary roles in sacred activities, including holy war which was usually waged by men. The Prophet looked around at his companions and stated that he appreciated her points. Then he replied to the woman, emphasizing the fact that value is never assigned to men because of sex differences or the type of activities. The Prophet stressed that value is always assigned where there is full participation, and that women are honored because of their complementary roles. If women did not cooperate, men would not be able to accomplish their tasks in a holy war (Mutahhari 1988, 93–4).

Interestingly, Tabataba'i observes that this story (and other cases where women are said to have appealed directly to the Prophet) reveals that women deserve the right to have direct contact even with the Islamic leader in order to protect their rights (Tabataba'i 1970, Vol. 4, 351).

#### **4. Islamic Womanology according to the Logic of Nature**

To understand the roots of the responsibilities and rights of men and women in Islam, we have to study

them in light of the logic of human nature (in Arabic, *fitrah*) (Misbah 1990, 4). As Mutahhari maintains, the discussion of *fitrah* is revealed for the first time in the Qur'an (1995, 19). *Fitrah* in its particular form, is the foundation of the Islamic humanology (Mutahhari 1995, 13). Terminologically, *fitrah* stands for the particular form of human creation. This implies a certain set of potentialities in human beings, potentialities which belong either to cognitive, emotional or motivational aspects (Mutahhari 1995, 47). For instance, the Qur'an reveals that human beings are created in such a way that they tend to know their creator or to submit themselves to God. The Prophet's instructions were indeed a divine response to the natural and in-born needs of human beings (Mutahhari 1995, 244). Unless outside elements such as parents, educational environments, and peer groups intervene, people tend to admit to the truth of divine religions. This submission is valid for the common outline that all such religions share (Mutahhari 1995, 19–21).

Islamic laws, norms and regulations are compatible with human nature, Misbah argues. Human nature, as revealed in the Qur'an, (30:30), is an unchangeable structure which distinguishes humankind from other species. An overview of all species reveals that they are created differently. Human rights and responsibilities find their real meaning within the logic of humankind's specific nature. Humanity, in all its variety, encompasses different aspects and complexities of life. A comprehensive discussion of men's and women's rights must take into consideration the study of biology, psychology, sociology and other related branches which touch on these aspects (Misbah 1990, 4). Since we lack sufficient enough knowledge of humanology in its various aspects, it is too soon to formulate final judgment regarding men's and women's rights.

As human beings are distinguished from other species by virtue of their unique nature, men and women are naturally endowed with unique characteristics of femininity and masculinity. The question is, however, given that both men and women enjoy similar human characteristics and values, how are they different from one another? Do these differences stem from their natural disparities or from cultural constructions? There is indeed heated controversy over which differences truly derive from the respective *fitrahs* (typical natures) of men and women. Nature usually represents physiological and psychological aspects of human personality. Some Muslim scholars argue that women are naturally more emotional and less intelligent (Tabataba'i 1970, vol. 18, 90; vol. 4, 343, Misbah 1990, 8; Bahonar 1990, 33; Ma'rifat 1997, 49–50).

Misbah alludes to other differences between men and women in terms of sex, nervous system, emotions and anatomical structure and brain function. These differences he attributes to women's typical nature. This typical nature determines her abilities to fulfill certain roles and duties on a social level (Misbah 1990, 5 & 8).

Due to these perceived differences, some Muslim thinkers argue that women are exempt from certain social responsibilities which require a stronger intellect and less emotion. Dangerous and exhausting positions in the armed forces, legal decision making and political leadership are just some examples of

these excluded responsibilities (Tabataba'i 1970, vol. 4, 343 & 347; Ma'rifat 1997, 52–3). In addition to Qur'anic verses (such as Q. 4:34 & 43:18), prophetic traditions are provided as evidence for women's exclusion from rendering judgment in court and serving as political leader (Ma'rifat 1997, 49–51 & Mhrizi 1997, 168–9).

Other Muslim thinkers argue that there is sufficient evidence to prove the legitimacy of women's participation in socio-political activities. The Qur'anic story of Bilqis, the queen of Saba, which contains not a hint of disagreement, is considered a good indicator of divine acceptance of women's suitability for political leadership. The Qur'an portrays this queen as a consulting (Q. 27:32), thoughtful and peace-seeking (Q. 27:33–5) and truth-seeking (Q. 27:44) leader on the occasion of her receiving a letter from Sulayman, the prophet of her time (Mhrizi 1997, 173–4). This letter was addressed to her since she and her people worshipped the sun as a mediating god to the highest God (Q. 27:24 see also Tabataba'i 1970, vol., 15, 358). Some other scholars also argue that the form and nature of the political system in the present day is completely different from the individual tyrannical dictatorship of the past. Both men and women in present democratic political systems play only the role of consultants. Real sovereignty lies in a ruling committee, not in individuals. Women are furthermore better qualified to take on positions of political leadership, Mutahhari maintains (Mhrizi 1997, 171–2).

Women's bay'ah (allegiance) to the Prophet Muhammad (Q. 60:12) and afterwards with Imam 'Ali after the Prophet, their immigration as a political statement against the oppressing conditions of the time when Islam emerged, their participation in the Prophet's campaigns (as nurses and health-care workers), and eventually the active participation of the pious and honored women of Islam such as Fatimah (the daughter of the Prophet), Umm-i Salamah (one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives), and Zaynab (the daughter of Imam 'Ali) in the socio-political events of their times provide further evidence of the legitimacy of women's involvement in the socio-political domains (Mhrizi 1997, 174).

In addition to these two opposing groups, some Muslim scholars take a middle way (Mhrizi attributes this idea to the Egyptian group known as the Ikhwan al-Muslimin; see 1997, 174). They distinguish between women's legitimacy as candidates for political office such as the presidency and as candidates for other socio-political activities. They would deny only the former. This attitude is the accepted policy in the post-revolutionary Iranian constitution (article 115).

Yet the unsolved question is: How can one relate these legal discussions to the deeper dialogue revolving the natural differences between men and women. A comprehensive review of the literature regarding differences in terms of the physiological and psychological aspects of gender falls beyond this project. It is an argument that requires independent and narrowly defined studies. I have, nonetheless, consulted a few of them.

Theories of human behavior concerning the natural gender differences go back to the theories of Charles Darwin who believed that "man is more courageous, pugnacious and energetic than woman and has more inventive genius" (Karlekar 1988, 147 quoting Warren, 1980, 104). Havelock Ellis's

(1859–1939) findings are the next commonly accepted. To him women are different from men in terms of conserving or consuming energy. He further maintained that women are more responsive to psychic stimuli, as well as more susceptible to neurosis. According to Ellis, biological differences between men and women lead to substantial variations in behavior and responses to situations (Karlekar 1988, 147 quotes from Warren, 1980, 132–4).

I argue that it is too difficult to determine which categories of differences between men and women stem from their varying built-in typical natures and which ones derive from socialization and socio-cultural elements or from a kind of predisposition (Strongman 1987, 224). Moreover, when one argues that women are emotionally more sensitive than men, the next step is to verify particular dimensions of emotion. Investigators have observed that emotionality is a multidimensional construct. The phenomenal experience of emotion may be expressed through verbal and nonverbal (behavioral) measures. The physiological reaction of males and females to emotional situations is another aspect of this (LaFrance & Banaji 1992, 179–80).

In a study on men's and women's responses to affect-laden materials it was observed that while adult females were more facially expressive and showed significantly less autonomic arousal, adult males expressed little facially but conveyed more physiologically. The major result was that men's suppression of external display (e.g., facial expressions) cause enhanced internal reactivity. Men accordingly show more physiological coincidents of emotion than do women. These two scholars concluded that when one focuses on experiential facet of emotion which is expressed through self-report measures, women appear to be more emotional if they are asked directly, if they are observed by other observers, and if they are reacting against others (interpersonal reactions). It is not, however, evident whether differences in overt expressivity reflect differences in fundamental emotionality (LaFrance & Banaji 1992 194–6).

Another study also demonstrated that women are emotionally more sensitive to other people's emotions than men. They tend to pay more attention to others' emotions and are more affected by them than men (Strongman 1987, 224). This study likewise showed that men and women are affected differently in emotion-evoking situations. Males primarily react through physiological responses but females respond through verbal/cognitive methods (1987, 225). In their studies: "Gender, Coping and Psychosomatic Symptoms," Vingerhoets and Van-Heck (1990) explored why men were more inclined to problem-focused coping, looking at the bright side of life, talking problems down. Women, on the other hand, preferred emotion-focused coping, seeking social support, expressing their emotions and self-blame. Their findings supported results in earlier studies and showed the consistency of some gender differences in emotion-focusing coping and seeking social support (Vingerhoets and Van-Heck 1990).

It is also reported that a gender difference exists in terms of sympathy and personal distress. In their facial and self-report indexes of emotion females indicated greater responsivity. This gender differences appeared to increase with age (Eisenberg et al. 1989). Another study which examined the gender differences in some psychoanalytical states such as narcissism and depression revealed that males

were more inclined to the former and females more prone to the latter (Wright et al. 1989).

Findings of another study which investigated gender differences in adjustment reactions in relation to interparental conflict indicated that the frequency of interparental conflict was the most important predictor of depression, externalizing behavior problems and negative views toward marriage on the part of women. Investigators did not find any significant relationship between these variables in men (Hanson, et al. 1992).

Despite these reported gender differences in various dimensions of emotionality, some scholars are still doubtful as to what constitutes the determining element. Some investigators insist that emotional differences derive from socio-cultural learning ((LaFrance & Banaji 1992, 196). To some scholars these differences might be the result of the degree to which men and women are stereotyped or socialized in terms of gender (Strongman 1987, 225). Scholars, therefore, argue that it is not difficult to identify where differences exist; what is crucial is understanding why they exist (Fennema 1984, 138).

In addition to the extensive literature that exists regarding the gender differences in emotional expression, there is another intense debate concerning gender differences in terms of intelligence and cognitive capabilities. The debate has shifted from structural and autonomic approaches to a functional approach. Scholars want to know the different functions and behaviors of men and women and actual reasons behind them. This domain also incorporates various aspects and is associated with an independent literature. Access, choice, opportunity and achievement for men and women in mathematics and science are controversial issues of gender differences in intelligence and cognition. It is claimed that science, technology, and engineering education are areas in which inequality exists between males and females (Karlekar 1988, 156). The achievement differences in these domains must be evaluated based on this initial difference.

A study done in 1978 in California secondary schools to evaluate gender differences in math achievement came up with the conclusion that “girls scored higher in computational or lower cognitive levels tasks while boys tended to score higher on higher cognitive level tasks.” A similar survey was conducted internationally by the International Association for the Evaluation of Academic Achievement (IEA) and it concluded that a higher performance by boys over girls was found to be persistent internationally. The superiority of boys over girls at the 14-year-old and Grade 12 levels has been persistent since 1970 (Fagerlind & Saha 1995, 175).

The main conclusion, however, reached by those who have reviewed these studies is that differences in both selection and achievement are very school specific (Fennema 1984, 141). To gain a comprehensive understanding of the sex-related differences in mathematics and science, one has to be aware of the variables involved. In addition to the factor of cognitive acquisition ability in mathematics among females, there is the significant impact of attitudes or affective beliefs held by females themselves, their parents, male peers and educators regarding how well and to what extent they are capable of learning mathematics. The implication is that cognitive and affective components must be studied in the social

matrix (Fennema 1984, 142).

Variables such as the opportunity to learn, the support system (encouragement and actual assistance) for learning and the absence of appropriate role models are among the reasons given for gender differences in academic achievement (Fagerlind & Saha 1995, 176). It is also crucial to realize the impact that affective variables such as feelings, beliefs and attitudes of self-confidence have in learning math, and on perceptions of its usefulness.

Affective variables, unlike cognitive ones, are difficult to define, measure and understand. No one knows why most females report more anxiety and develop less confidence in math than males do (Fennema 1984, 148–9). Both internal (cognitive ability) and external factors along with the individual's effort are involved. Here, as in the case of emotion, society's stereotyping of math as a male domain is a partial cause (Fennema 1984, 150–52). The class environment may create a process of social interaction among male and female students and also between students and teachers to motivate students to become autonomous or dependent learners. While we see a better performance of males in more difficult and complex tasks we can hardly attribute the difference to one specific cause. Affective variables, classroom environment, schools' concern about enrollment and achievement are elements which should be considered along with individual ability (Fennema 1984, 160–1).

Although there is no doubt about the fundamental biological differences between women and men, there is controversy over whether these differences are related to some metabolic differences that influence other behaviors and abilities (Fagerlind & Saha 1995, 168). Therefore, the ways in which biological differences between women and men are seen and evaluated do determine their roles in society.

Therefore, although a combination of natural and socio-cultural elements can explain the gender differences in cognition and emotion, one can hardly distinguish the borderlines. The ambiguity is more crucial if we note that many of the hypotheses and even theories about natural differences have been questioned or disproved in the late twentieth century (Karlekar 1988, 162). Recent studies have showed that gender-related characteristics are multidimensional in nature (Golombok & Fivush 1995, 8). Socio-cultural stereotypes, formal education and informal processes of socialization all definitely intervene in their formation. Sometimes the cultural matrix celebrates certain qualities and denigrates others. Some roles or spheres of knowledge are introduced as male-fitted domains. It is interesting to note that a British investigator in the mid-seventies worked out that if entry to engineering programs depended on special ability alone, then the ratio of women to men would have been 2:3. In actual fact it was more like 1:100 (Griffith and Saraga 1979).

Job selection may rely on social and cultural expectations and patriarchal labor division. Our definition of femininity is another factor. In an ideology where femininity is identical with non-assertiveness, obedience and submission, females will be directed to options that maintain that ideology (Karlekar 1988, 157–8). It is also crucial to be aware of the difference in masculinity-femininity scales of children and adults. While in the latter the focus is usually on personality traits, in children attention is paid to

some indicators of sex stereotyping such as toys, games and activities (Golombok & Fivush 1995, 9). Despite the explicit impact of socio-cultural elements, one must note that biology plays an important role in how cultures come to define gender.

In Islamic womanology, views and regulations which are derived from the Qur'an and authentic traditions are claimed to be consistent with the typical nature of women. The reason is that this picture is provided by God, the Creator, who has the most precise and comprehensive knowledge about His creatures. An important parameter in Islamic womanology is the decisive impact of moral values. The Islamic moral system like an umbrella which encompasses the entire legal system, not only in gender issues but also in all other legal subsystems. It is understandable, therefore, that some attitudes, social roles or labor divisions, which are considered as the normal or necessary rights of women in other cultures, are challenged in Islam. This is partly due to the contradiction of some gender codes with the Islamic values of motherhood, wifehood, family values, Islamic modesty ('iffat) and the Islamic dress-code. Islamic methods of gender development, I believe, necessitate a solution which combines womanhood with Islamic values and moral codes.

The remaining factor is the impact of the process of *ijtihad* (interpreting and applying God's rules) as a tool for uncovering the message of the traditional Islamic sources. The most trustworthy source of information and knowledge in the area of women's rights and roles in Islam is the holy Qur'an.

Rafsanjani observes that to approach this source we have to keep in mind certain parameters. Since the Qur'an, according to Muslims, is the word of God, its norms in any domain are the most inclusive. This is because it was revealed from God and hence contains absolute and comprehensive knowledge.

Secondly, we must be aware that according to the Qur'anic point of view men's and women's rights are related to their obligations and responsibilities. In an Islamic society women deserve a balanced level of domestic and social rights which is compatible with their responsibilities. Here, *ijtihad* (expertise in finding answers in the Islamic sources to newly emerging problems) plays a decisive role. It is not easy to understand the correlation between rights and obligations. A dynamic exercise of *ijtihad* can help Muslim scholars extract the Islamic norms from major sources.

Thirdly, he points out, we must note that cultural and local customs are always mixed with pure Islamic standards. It is vital to distinguish between revealed laws and man-made customs. To help Muslim women obtain their just position in society, it will be necessary to change the customs and culturally created norms and rights. The changing conditions of every era demand that we change unfair and incompatible norms (Rafsanjani 1996, 4). More challenging, in my view, is the task of interpreting the revealed law. Complexities appear when Muslim scholars try to refer the changing and demanding conditions of daily life to a correct understanding of revealed laws. To ensure the Islamic-ness of women's rights (such as the right to socio-political participation, rights within the family and marriage contract, the right to an education, and so on) the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran emphasizes that all women's rights should correspond with the Islamic standards (Article 21). This is the responsibility of a group of Muslim scholars in the Iranian Assembly of Guardians (*shuvruy-i nigahbun*).

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