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The Standing of Women in Islam

According to Islam, women and men alike possess the lofty status of humanity because they are both equally human. The Quran identifies humans as "viceroys of God" [*khalifat ullah*] and reveres them greatly:

وَ لَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَ حَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَ الْبَحْرِ وَ رَزَقْنَاهُم مِّنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَ فَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلاً

"And We have surely honored the children of Adam. We have presented them with transport on land and sea, provided them good and pure sustenance, and We have greatly exalted them over many of Our creations."1

Additionally, it states that Adam ('a) had such high rank that the angels bowed to him:

فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَ نَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِي فَقَعُواْ لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ

"So when I shape him and breathe into him of My spirit, fall down, prostrating yourselves unto him."2

All this is due to our humanity. Regarding Adam ('a), the Holy Quran declares:

وَ عَلَّمَ آدَمَ الأَسْمَاء كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلاَئِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاء هَؤُلاء إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ* قَالُواْ سُبْحَانَكَ لاَ عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلاَّ مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ* قَالَ يَا آدَمُ أَنبِئْهُم بِأَسْمَآئِهِمْ فَلَمَّا أَنبَأَهُمْ بِأَسْمَآئِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُل لَّكُمْ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَ الأَرْضِ وَ أَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ

"And He taught Adam all the Names; then He presented them upon the angels and said: 'Explain to Me these names, if thou speak truly.' They said: 'Glory be unto Thee! We have no knowledge

save what Thou hast taught us. Surely Thou art the All-knowing, the All-wise.' He said: 'O Adam! Explain unto them their names.' When he notified them of their names, God said, 'Did I not tell you that I know the invisible things of the heavens and earth and that I know what you reveal and what you hide?'"[3]

The fact that noble Adam ('a) was able to understand the Names and explain them was due to his unique genesis as a human and men and women are equal in this genesis. In general, all extolments in the Quran and Hadith regarding humans encompass both women and men. There is no verse in the Quran that reproaches women for being women.

Therefore, according to Islam and the Quran, men and women are equally human, they are no different in worth, and they possess common responsibilities in managing the society, some of which are enumerated below:

Common Responsibilities of Men and Women

I. Men and women are both equally responsible for reproduction and continuance of the human race.

The Holy Quran states:

> يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ وَ أُنثَى وَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَ قَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

"O Humans! Surely, I have created you as males and females and have made you into [***diverse***] ***races and tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the most noble among you before Allah is the most pious of you. Truly, Allah is All-knowing, All-aware."***[4]

It also declares:

> يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُواْ رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُم مِّن نَّفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَ خَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَ بَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالاً كَثِيرًا وَ نِسَاءً وَ اتَّقُواْ اللّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءلُونَ بِهِ وَ الأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا

"O humans! Fear your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from the pair of them has disseminated many men and women. So be pious toward Allah, in whose name you ask for assistance, and do not cut off from your relatives. Surely, Allah watches over you."[5]

In these verses, women and men are identified as two chief pillars of the society. Additionally, piety is regarded as the criterion for the superiority of men and women.

II. The Quran identifies faith in God, edification [*tahdhib*] and purification of the soul of all evils [*tazkiyah*], piety, and performing good deeds as the only path to human salvation. In this context, it does not differentiate between women and men. In fact, it regards both equally worthy of spiritual advancement, perfection, and proximity to God [*qurb ila allah*].

God, the Sublime, has stated in the Quran:

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَى وَ هُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهُ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً وَ لَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُم بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُواْ يَعْمَلُونَ

"Whosoever performs a good deed, whether man or woman, while having faith in Allah, We shall assuredly restore them with a good and pure life and We shall recompense them with rewards according to the best of what they have done."[6]

Allah also declares:

فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لاَ أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِّنكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَى بَعْضُكُم مِّن بَعْضٍ

"Therefore their Lord granted their prayers. Verily, I shall not suffer the work of any agent among you to be lost, whether man or woman; you are all members of the same race."[7]

The Quran praises righteous and worthy women and men similarly and thus states:

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَ الْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَ الْقَانِتِينَ وَ الْقَانِتَاتِ وَ الصَّادِقِينَ وَ الصَّادِقَاتِ وَ الصَّابِرِينَ وَ الصَّابِرَاتِ وَ الْخَاشِعِينَ وَ الْخَاشِعَاتِ وَ الْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَ الْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَ الصَّائِمِينَ وَ الصَّائِمَاتِ وَ الْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَ الْحَافِظَاتِ وَ الذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَ الذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُم مَّغْفِرَةً وَ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

"Verily, for Muslim men and women, for faithful men and women, for obedient men and women, for truthful men and women, for patient men and women, for humble men and women, for almsgiving men and women, for fasting men and women, for men and women who guard their private parts, and for men and women who remember God much, Allah has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward."[8]

The Quran has indicated worthy women in history just as it has mentioned such men and has commended them greatly. For example, regarding Saint Maryam (Mary) ('a), the Quran states:

فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ وَ أَنبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا وَ كَفَّلَهَا زَكَرِيَّا كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا الْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِندَهَا رِزْقاً قَالَ يَا مَرْيَمُ أَنَّى لَكِ هَذَا قَالَتْ هُوَ مِنْ عِندِ اللّهِ إِنَّ اللّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَاء بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

"So her Lord accepted her with gracious favor and nurtured her well and appointed Zachariah to foster her. Whenever Zachariah came to her in her sanctuary, he would see that she had (special) food. He said, 'O Maryam! From where does this come to you?' She answered, 'This is from Allah. Verily, Allah provides sustenance to whomever He wills without reckoning.'"[9]

Furthermore, it proclaims:

وَ إِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلاَئِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ إِنَّ اللّهَ اصْطَفَاكِ وَ طَهَّرَكِ وَ اصْطَفَاكِ عَلَى نِسَاء الْعَالَمِينَ

"And (remember) when the angels said, 'O Maryam! Allah has chosen you and made you pure and has preferred you above all women in creation.'"[10]

Regarding Asiyah ('a), Pharaoh's wife, God the Most High has stated:

وَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اِمْرَأَةَ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قَالَتْ رَبِّ ابْنِ لِي عِندَكَ بَيْتًا فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَ نَجِّنِي مِن فِرْعَوْنَ وَ عَمَلِهِ وَ نَجِّنِي مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ

"And Allah cites Pharaoh's wife as an example for the believers when she said, 'O Lord! Build for me, close to Yourself, a home in Paradise and deliver me from Pharaoh and his works and deliver me from evil doing peoples.'"[11]

Virtuous Fatimah ('a), the honorable daughter of the Prophet (S), is also one of these superior women. The Verse of Purification [*ayah tathir*] is about Fatimah ('a), her husband, father, and children. The exalted Lord declares:

إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

"Surely, Allah only wishes to remove from you, People of the House, all uncleanness and purify you thoroughly."[12]

Regarding these lofty women, the Messenger of Allah (S) stated:

قال النبي (ع): سيّدات أهل الجنة أربع: مريم بنت عمران، و فاطمة بنت محمّد، و خديجة بنت خويلد، و آسية بنت مزاحم إمرأة فرعون.

"The great women of paradise are four: Maryam daughter of 'Imran, Fatimah daughter of Muhammad, Khadijah daughter of Khuwaylid, and Asiyah daughter of Muzahim, wife of Pharaoh."[13]

As you can see, the Quran does not regard being a woman an impediment to advancement, elevation, and attaining human perfections [*fadhayil-e insani*]; rather, it regards women to be as worthy as men in attaining perfections.

Of course, some women have been reproached in the Quran, such as Prophet Noah's ('a) wife, Prophet Lot's ('a) wife, and the wife of the idolater, Abu Lahab.[14] In a similar manner, various men have also been reproached due to their contemptible works, such as Pharaoh, Nimrod, and Abu Lahab.

III. Islam regards women and men as two pillars of the society that have a common role in the emergence, formation, and management of the society and have an equal share in all its aspects. Men and women are both part of the community and they uniformly benefit from the virtues of a righteous society and suffer from the destructive effects of its corruption. Consequently, the responsibility of correct management and reformation of the society is charged to both women and men. God most high states in the Quran:

وَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاء بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَ يَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنكَرِ وَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلاَةَ وَ يُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَ يُطِيعُونَ اللّهَ وَ رَسُولَهُ أُوْلَئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللّهُ إِنَّ اللّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

"And male and female believers are protecting friends of each other; they enjoin righteousness and forbid evil, they perform salat[15] and pay their alms-tax, they obey Allah and His Messenger. Upon these, Allah shall have mercy. Truly, Allah is Almighty, All-wise."[16]

It is true that presence in jihad and fighting against enemies is not obligatory [*wajib*] for women. However, they have not been relieved of any other social responsibilities: enjoining virtues [*amr be ma'ruf*] and forbidding evils [*nahi az munkar*]; protecting the religion and its sanctities; propagating Islam; struggling against violation and infringement; defending the rights of the deprived and oppressed; cooperating in good works; aiding the destitute and afflicted; nursing the sick, elderly, and invalids; campaigning against ethical and social corruption; proper fostering and nurturing of the young; augmenting knowledge in the society; fortifying the just government of Islam; upholding Islamic values; contributing to the financial well-being of the family and country; and many other common responsibilities have been given to men and women alike.

IV. Other common duties of women and men are acquisition of knowledge and decipherment of the secrets of the cosmos, and their utilization for increasing welfare. Men and women are both human and thereby responsible and capable in this regard.

Islam greatly emphasizes pursuing knowledge and even identifies it as an obligation. Thus, Imam Sadiq ('a) has quoted from the Messenger of Allah (S) that:

عن أبي عبدالله (ع) قال: قال رسول الله (ص): «طلب العلم فريضة على كلّ مسلم، ألا إنّ الله يحبّ بغاة العلم.

“Obtaining knowledge is obligatory for all Muslims. Know that Allah truly loves seekers of knowledge.”[17]

Moreover, Imam Baqir (‘a) has stated:

«عن أبي جعفر (ع) قال: «عالم ينتفع بعلمه، أفضل من سبعين ألف عابد.»

“A learned person who uses their knowledge is better than seventy thousand devout worshipers [*‘abid*].”[18]

There are hundreds of similar Hadith on this subject and there is no differentiation between men and women in this respect. As Muslims, women are charged with gaining knowledge in order to become self-sufficient; especially regarding sciences that are essential such as therapeutics, dentistry, psychiatry, pharmaceutics, nursing, obstetrics, experimental sciences, education, psychology, biology, chemistry, management, accounting, Islamic sciences, exegesis, religious belief, religious jurisprudence, history, literature, art, linguistics, language, law, economics, etc.

Women comprise around half the society; therefore, they must share in its administration. This is why female scientists and specialists of necessary and relevant sciences must equal the men in these fields in order that they are self-sufficient. Half of all hospitals, clinics, universities, schools, academies, pharmacies, laboratories, academies of religion, and Islamic promotional institutes must be assigned to women. Additionally, all maternity hospitals must be female specific and have only as many male specialists as needed for their male patients, though unfortunately this is not so. This defect or disparity may be for the following two reasons:

a. The selfishness, egocentricity, and injustice of men throughout history, which has prevented women from attaining their lawful rights in independence and has kept women dependent

b. The self-negligence, absence of self-knowledge, opulence-centricity, and aestheticism of women who have not understood the correct manner to vindicate their rights and have fallen astray

Women must understand their true roles and responsibilities. They must endeavor to realize independence, self-reliance, and their lawful rights and must be careful not to deviate from the correct path as many others who have diverged.

1. – Surah Isra’ 17:70.
2. – Surah Hijr 15:29.
3. – Surah Baqarah 2:31-33.
4. – Surah Hujurat 49:13.
5. – Surah Nisa’ 4:1.
6. – Surah Nahl 16:97.
7. – Surah Ali ‘Imran 3:195.
8. – Surah Ahzab 33:35.
9. – Surah Ali ‘Imran 3:37.

10. – Ibid 3:42.
11. – Surah Tahrim 66:11.
12. – Surah Ahzab 33:33.
13. – Kashf ul-Ghummah, vol. 2, p. 76.
14. – Surah Tahrim 66:10; and Surah Masad 111:4.
15. – Salat is the daily ritual prayer of Muslims, which must be performed five times a day in a specific form. [trans.]
16. – Surah Tawbah 9:71.
17. – Kafi, vol. 1, p. 30.
18. – Ibid, p. 33.

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