

Gender Equality and Islam

Md. Ataur Rahman Miazi*

[Abstract : Gender equality simply means equality between the two sexes, i.e., between male and female, or men and women. The role of man and woman is equally important in the formation and development of human civilisation. But are men and women really equal in all respects of human life? What is the attitude of Islam towards gender equality? Well, from a material as well as spiritual point of view, Islam recognizes the position of women to be the same as that of men. But after acknowledging a perfectly equal status as human beings for both male and female, and treating them as equals, entitled to equal rights, Islam does, however, differentiate between the two sexes with regard to their special functions in life, a step that has given rise to a great hue and cry by some women organisations supported by certain writers, reformers and young men. To explain the issue elaborately is the main theme of this article.]

Now-a-days, simultaneously the East and the West are simmering with a furor over the rights of women and a demand on behalf of them for an absolute equality with men. Among the feverous champions of the rights of women, the most noteworthy are those persons, men and women, who rave most foolishly in the name of Islam; some are alleging mischievously that in all respects Islam has maintained a perfect equality between the two sexes, while others, for their ignorance or negligence of Islam, claim that Islam is the greatest enemy of women because Islam degrades and lowers their status holding them intellectually deficient and assigning them a position very much akin to that of animals. They are reduced to no more than a mere means of sensual as well as sexual gratification for men and a machine for the propagation of the human species; which is sufficient to show how subservient to men they are in the sight of Islam with the result that men dominate them and enjoy an all-round superiority over them.¹

Now the Question is, are men and women really equal in all respects of human life? What is the attitude of Islam towards gender equality? Well, we shall discuss the issue elaborately. But before discussing the position of women in Islam, we want to touch in brief upon the history of the Movement for women's emancipation in Europe, because it is that very source of mischief whence all the defecting trends in the modern East flow.

The women in Europe and all over the world were looked upon as a mere nonentity. They were the subject of many a discourse of the learned scholars and philosophers who wrangled among themselves over the questions such as : Has woman got a soul or not? If yes, what precisely is the nature of her soul? Is it human or animal? Supposing she does possess a human soul, what social and human position should she occupy in relation to man? Is she born as a slave to man, or does she hold a position slightly superior to that of a slave? etc.²

* Associate Professor, Dept. of Islamic History & Culture, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh.

That very position of women in Europe remained unchanged during the periods of serfdom and feudalism. When the industrial revolution took place in Europe, it brought in its wake the worst possible sufferings for women yet experienced by them throughout the history of mankind. Throughout the ages Europe has exhibited such a rigidity and avarice of nature as lack of both generosity and liberality. It is needless to ask why these all happened as we know that Europe has been ever known for its miserliness, rigidity and ingratitude. It has never been known to respect men as men, nor to render a voluntary act of goodness.

However, there were some conscious and conscientious persons who could not silently forbear the perpetration of these vile inequities against the weaker sections of the population. They struggled to put an end to this cruelty towards the children. The protests against social injustice did not, however, go unnoticed. They bore fruit; but women still remained without anyone to champion or advance their cause, as it required an intellectual refinement which as Europe did not possess. As a result, women pressed on their way through this ordeal overworking in a desperate effort to support themselves but receiving in return wages far less than those given to their male counterparts- for a similar work.

In the first World War tens of millions of European and American young men were killed leaving behind them millions of widowed women. These poor women suffered the worst tribulations and trials of labor. They had none to support and look after them. The war had caused so great a shortage of men that the survivors could hardly supply their place. The factories could not re-start their production nor could the war damages be repaired due to the shortage of working hands. Thus it fell upon women to go out and take the place of men, for if they did not, they as well as their dependents- old women and small children-were threatened by hunger.

To go and work in the factories, however, required that women should ignore their moral temperament as well as their feminine nature which had now become a positive hurdle in earning a living. Moreover, factory-owners did not want working hands only; they wanted to satisfy their lust as well. The helplessness of women now promised them an excellent opportunity of which they fully availed themselves. The women thus had to discharge a two-fold duty : Work in the factories and try their level best to please their employer. The women were not plagued by hunger alone; sex too claimed its share and gratification. Their need for bread and the urge to achieve sexual gratification besides their love for costly clothes, cosmetics etc. were the factors that forced them to this course of life. The factory-owners exploited this weakness of women to their own advantage. They paid them wages far less than those they paid to the male workers doing the same work at the same factory- a gross inequity which neither reason, nor conscience of mankind can ever justify.³

Under these circumstances the stupendous revolution that at last broke out in Europe was but inevitable. It swept away the centuries-old inequity and gross injustice. But what did women get as a result of this revolution? They were over-worked physically, had lost respect as well as womanhood. They did, however, in

place of these at last win the right to have equal wages with men, the only natural right offered them by Europe.

The European men did not, however, easily forego their superiority- their egoism rather with respect to women. They were forced to recognize equal rights for women after a very tough and intense struggle in which all the usual weapons of warfare were fully made use of. In this struggle for their rights the women resorted to strike and non-cooperation; addressed public meetings and employed journalism to advance their causes. Then they realized that in order to set things right women would have to participate in legislation as well, so first they demanded the right to vote and then proceeded to ask for a right to become the member of the parliament. As women had received an education similar to that imparted to men, for both were required to do similar jobs now as logical sequence to it women demanded an equal share in government long with men. Such is the picture of women's struggle in Europe to obtain their rights.⁴

Now we shall discuss the exact status of women in Islam and observe if there is any type of constraint which should force women to take up arms for rights like their counterparts in the West. Or is it merely an inferiority complex and a result of thoughtlessly imitating the West that make these Eastern Champions of their rights declaim so enthusiastically in public meetings?

As a fundamental principle of its system, Islam acknowledges a perfectly equal status as human beings for both men and women⁵ and Islam also holds that the woman has a soul similar to that of a man. Almighty Allah declares : "O people! be careful of (your duty to) your Lord, who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these too many men and women."⁶ Thus men and women are quite equal to each other in their origin, their abode as well as in their palace of return. Islam gives women the right to life, to honour and to property like men.⁷ Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "It is forbidden for a muslim (man or woman) to take the life, honour and property of another muslim (man or woman)."⁸

From a material point of view, woman is recognized as on par with man. She can earn money and own property just as a man can do and therefore she may, if she feels the need, follow any profession. Allah the almighty said, "For men is the benefit of what they earn. And for women is the benefit of what they earn."⁹ She has full control over her property and can dispose of it as she likes. In this respect Allah declares : "But if they (the women) themselves be pleased to give you a portion thereof (i.e., of their property), consume it with enjoyment."¹⁰ Women can also inherit property as men can : "For man is a share of what the parents and the near relatives leave, and for woman a share of what the parents and the near relatives leave."¹¹ We must pause here a while to take note of an important point concerning woman's right to hold property and use or exploit it at will. Even after Islam had granted women these rights, the women in Europe were deprived of them for more than eleven hundred years. Islam had already granted to womenfolk not due to the pressure of some economic circumstances, or as a result of the

conflict going on in the world. It was rather initiated by its desire to implement truth and justice in practice rather than in the world of dreams.

From a spiritual point of view, Islam also recognizes the position of women to be the same as that of men. Good works bring the same reward, whether to a male or a female, as Allah-the Creator of the whole universe says : "I will not suffer the work of a worker among you to be lost, whether male or female, the one of being from the other."¹² Similar sense has been expressed in another verse of the holy Quran.¹³ Paradise and its blessings are equally for both male and female as expressed in the holy Quran : "And who ever does good whether man or woman, and he (or she) is a believer-they shall enter the Garden."¹⁴ Both men and women shall enjoy the glorious as well as higher life, as Allah utters : "Whoever does good, whether male or female, and is a believer, We shall certainly make him or her live a distinguished life."¹⁵

Revelation which is the greatest spiritual gift of the almighty Allah has been granted to men as well as to women, though there is exception.¹⁶ Example may be cited from the holy Quran as : "And when the angel said, O Mary, surely Allah has chosen thee and purified thee."¹⁷ Allah also expresses : "And We revealed to Moses' mother, saying give him (Moses) suck; then when thou farest for him, cast him into the river and fear not, nor grieve."¹⁸

Again it was Islam that at a period when the entire world was lost in ignorance and darkness stressed the importance of knowledge for mankind, not as a special privilege of a particular class but as an essential and unavoidable need for each and every man and woman. Islam made it obligatory upon all the Muslims-male or female-to acquire knowledge as a necessary condition to their being true believers in Allah and Islam. It also goes to the credit of Islam that it was the first religion that acknowledging a separate and independent human status of woman impressed upon her that she could not achieve perfection in life without knowledge. Acquisition of knowledge was as great a duty of women as of men, for Islam wanted the womenfolk to develop their rational faculties along with their physical ones and thus ascend to higher planes of spiritual existence.¹⁹

It has already been said before that Islam occupies a unique position in that it recognized an independent economic status of women and gave them the right to own, use and enjoy it in their own right without any intermediary trustee or mediator.²⁰ Not only this but in the most important event of her life, i.e., marriage as well her independent status was established. She could not be given in marriage without her consent as that of a man. No marriage was valid unless she agreed to it. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said : "No widow should be married without consulting her; and no virgin be married without her assent, and her assent is her silence."²¹ Even after the marriage ceremony if she declares that she did not assent to it, the marriage is dissolved. Not content with this, Islam even went a step further giving her the right to propose her marriage to any man she liked to marry. The European women obtained this right only in the eighteenth century.²²

By entering the married state, woman does not lose any of the rights which she possesses as an individual member of the society. She is still free to carry on any

work she likes, to make any contract she desires, to dispose of her property as she wishes; nor is her individuality merged in that of her husband. But she is at the same time recognized as undertaking new responsibilities of life, which carry with them new rights.²³ The holy Quran settles the principle : "And women have rights similar to their obligations, in a just manner."²⁴ These are the rights and responsibilities of the home. The prophet of Islam described her position in the home as that of a ruler : "Every one of you is a ruler and every one shall be questioned about his subjects; the Amir (i.e., the king) is a ruler, and the man is a ruler over the people of his house, and the woman is a ruler over the house of her husband and his children. So every one of you is a ruler and every one shall be questioned about his subjects."²⁵

Thus so far as the home is concerned, the wife has the position of a ruler in it, the home being her territory. By marriage she is at once raised to a higher dignity and acquires new rights, though at the same time she incurs new responsibilities. Her rights as regards her husband are also affirmed in the sayings of the holy Prophet as he said to Adbullah Ibn Umar (R) : "Thy body has a right over thee and thy soul has a right over thee and thy wife has a right over thee."²⁶

About the mutual relation of husband and wife the Almighty Allah declared : "And of His signs is this, that the created mates for you from yourselves that you might find quiet of mind in them, and He put between you love and compassion."²⁷ The Creator of the whole universe also uttered : "He it is Who created you from a single soul, and of the same did He make his mate, that he might find comfort in her."²⁸ The same idea is elsewhere very beautifully described in different words : "They (your wives) are an apparel for you and you are an apparel for them."²⁹ The closest union of two souls could not be described more aptly.

The rights and responsibilities of a husband against his wife and that of a wife against her husband are mainly as well as basically centered in two points. Firstly, The husband is bound to maintain the wife according to his means, as the Almighty Allah declares : "Let him who has abundance spend out of his abundance, and whoever has his means of subsistence straitened to him, let him spend out of that which Allah has given him. Allah lays not on any soul a burden beyond that which He has given it."³⁰ The husband must also provide the wife a lodging as is described in the holy Quran : "Lodge them where you live, according to your means."³¹ Secondly, the wife is also bound to keep company with her husband, to preserve her husband's property from loss or waste, and to refrain from doing anything which should disturb the peace of the family. She is required not to admit any one into the house whom the husband does not like, and not to incur expenditure of which the husband disapproves.³²

The wife is not bound to render personal service such as the cooking of food, but the respective duties of husband and wife are such that each must always be ready to help the other. The wife must help the husband even in the field of labor, if she can do it accordingly and the husband must help the wife in the household duties. Of the Prophet himself, it is related that he used to help his wives in many small works of the household, such as the milking of the goats, patching the

clothes, mending the shoes, cleaning the utensils and so on.³³ In his famous address at the Farewell pilgrimage, the Prophet of Islam laid particular stress on the good treatment of women : "O my people! you have certain rights over your wives and so have your wives over you They are the trust of Allah in your hands. So you must treat them with all kindness."³⁴ The Quran lays the greatest possible stress on good treatment towards the wife. "Keep them in good fellowship"³⁵ and "treat them kindly"³⁶ is the oft-recurring advice of the holy Quran. The Prophet laid equally great stress upon good treatment of a wife. He is reported to have said, "The most excellent of you is he who is best in his treatment of his wife."³⁷

Assigning the woman her natural function of nursing the human race wholeheartedly Islam had an eye to the demands of human nature as well as those of the society. So man was charged with the duty of supporting her and providing for her all her requirements so as to leave her free from all irrelevant worries, besides giving her the highest respect and regard so much that "when a man enquired of the holy Prophet : 'who has the first claim to my good treatment?' He said, 'your mother'. The man said, 'And then who?' the Prophet said, 'Then your mother'. The man asked : 'And then?' Again the prophet replied : 'Then your mother!' The man once again asked : 'And then?' The Prophet said, 'Then your father!'"³⁸

What then is all this uproar by the muslim woman of to-day about? Is there any right or facility that Islam has not already given her so that she should still feel constrained to launch a campaign to win them through means such as suffrage and representation in parliament? Let us see :

Firstly, she demands an equal human status. But Islam has already given this to her in theory as well as in practice before law.

Secondly, she wants economic independence and the right to participate in social life directly. Well, Islam was the first religion that gave her this right.

Thirdly, she wants the right to education. Islam not only recognizes it but makes the acquisition of it obligatory on her as well.

Fourthly, does she want the right not to be given in marriage without her permission? Islam has given her this right as well as the right to arrange her own marriage.

Fifthly, does she demand that she should be treated kindly and fairly while performing her functions within the house, and that she should have the right to ask for a separation from her husband if he should fail to treat her in a just and fair manner? Islam does give her all these rights and makes it incumbent upon men to safeguard them.

Sixthly, does she want the right to go and work outside? Islam recognizes this right of her too. They are not forbidden to take part in any activity when necessary, nor is there any injunction in the holy Quran or the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh) shutting them up within the four walls of their houses. On the other hand, the Holy Book speaks of a muslim society in which men and women had often to meet each other : "Say to the believing men that they lower their gaze and restrain their

sexual passions. That is purer for them And say to the believing women that they lower their gaze and restrain their sexual passions and not display their adornment except what appears thereof.”³⁹ Another revelation supports the same spirit : “O Prophet, tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to let down upon themselves their over-garments. This is more proper, so that they may be known, and not be given trouble.”⁴⁰ If women did not to out of their houses, where was the necessity of asking them to wear a distinctive dress, and where was the occasion for their being troubled? According to tradition, the Prophet is reported to have said to women : “It is permitted to you to go out for your needs.”⁴¹

Lastly, does she seek the freedom to indulge in base, degrading and humiliating syberities? Well, Islam can not grant this to her as it does not also allow men to degrade themselves by indulging in such depravities.

The demand for equality between men and women as human beings is a natural and reasonable demand. Men and women are two equally important component parts of a whole humanity, proceeding from the one and the same progenitor. But so far as the demand for treating them as equals in their functions in life and the modes of their actual performance is concerned, can that ever be feasible? That is simply impossible even if all the women around the world should wish it, hold conferences and pass resolutions to that effect. These conferences and their resolutions cannot alter the characters of men and women, nor can they in any way transform their functions making men share those of women in conceive, birth and suckling and vice versa.⁴²

Islam differentiates between men and women where such a differentiation is but natural. Now, let us take two outstanding situations in which Islam differentiates between the sexes : the distribution of inheritance and the headship of the family.

About inheritance Islam says : “To the male the equivalent of the portion of two females,”⁴³ which is quite natural and justified, for it is man alone who is charged with shouldering all the financial obligations. The woman is under no such obligation as to spend money on anyone but her own person and toilet, except ofcourse who she should head her family but such a situation very rarely met within an islamic society, for so long as a woman has got a relation howsoever distant she need not take upon herself the support of her family. Can such an arrangement be termed as injustice towards woman, as the votaries of feminism aver? Leaving aside these vain postulations and prejudiced claims, the problem is just one of a simple reckoning : “On the whole woman gets one-third of the inherited property to spend it on her persons, whereas man is given two-thirds of it”⁴⁴ to discharge his financial obligations, in the first place, towards his wife including the dowry (mahr) which is also the most obligatory on the part of husband,⁴⁵ and secondly, his family and children. As such, speaking in terms of simple mathematics, to whom does the larger portion go-husband or wife? There may be certain men who are wont to spend all their money on themselves and are disinclined to marry or found a family, but such cases are exception. Normally it is the man who sounders the financial burdens of his family including a woman-his wife, not as an act of grace but as a moral obligation. If a woman possesses a

property of her own, her husband cannot take it away from her without her consent, he would even then have to bear her financial burden, as if it were, she had nothing in her possession to support herself with. And if he should refuse her this allowance or should he be miserly in proportion to his income she can lodge a complaint against him in the Court and force him to give her the sustenance allowance or get free from him. There as such no justification to say that in inheritance woman receives a share less than that of man, as in view of his obligations it is but natural that a man should get double the share of a woman⁴⁶ On the other hand, so far as their earnings are concerned, there is no difference between man and woman; nor in their wages for a work, nor in the profit gained in trade, nor in revenues from land etc., for in these matters Islam follows another law, the law treating on a perfectly equal footing man and woman with regard to their labours and the wages thereof. No injustice is to be done to either of them.

Now, we shall discuss about the second issue-the headship of the family. Islam is a practical religion and it does not shut its eyes to the hard realities of life. It describes the home as a unit in the greater organization of a nation as a whole, and just as in the vaster national organization there is somebody to exercise the final authority in certain cases, so the smaller organization of the home cannot be maintained without a similar arrangement. Hence the husband is first spoken of as being 'a ruler over the people of the house' and the wife is then described as 'a ruler over the house of her husband and his children.' The home is thus a kingdom in miniature, where authority is exercised by both the husband and the wife. But unless one of them is given the leadership, or a higher authority, there would be chaos in this kingdom. The reason for giving the leadership or the higher authority to the male parent is thus stated in the holy Quran : "Men are the maintainers of women, with what Allah has made some of them to excel others, and with what they spend out of their property."⁴⁷ It is the man who can be entrusted with the maintenance of the family, and therefore it is he who must hold the leadership or the higher authority of the family.

In the concluding remarks, we can say that after acknowledging a perfectly equal status as human beings for both men and women, and treating them as equals, entitled to equal rights, Islam does, however differentiate between men and women with regard to their special functions in life, a step that has given rise to a great hue and cry by some women organisations supported by certain writers, reformers and young men. We have to ask them, do men and women belong in one and the same sex, or are they two distinct sexes? Have they got similar functions in life, or are their functions separate and distinct as men and women? This is infact the knotty point, the crux of the problem. If the women conferences, their supporters, the writers, the reformers and the young men mean to say that there is no difference whatsoever in the physical and intuitional equipment of men and women as well as in their biological functions in life, then we have nothing to say to them. But if they acknowledge that a difference does exist between men and women and their respective functions, then the attitude of Islam to this respect has to be recognized without any hesitation.

References and foot-notes :

1. Mohammad Qutb, Islam : the Misunderstood Religion (An English translation of the sixth edition of the Arabic Text 'Shubhat Haulal Islam' published in Cairo, 1964), Bangaldesh, Dhaka : Adhunik Prokashani, 1978, p.118.
2. Ibid, pp.118-119.
3. Ibid, pp.122-23.
4. For details, please see : Sayyed jalaluddin Ansar Umri, Women in Islamic Society, Bangaldesh, Dhaka : Adhunik Prokashani, 1997, pp.21-36.
5. For details, please see : Muhammad Salahuddin, Human rights in Islam, Bangladesh Dhaka : Adhunik Prokashani, 2001, pp.261-266.
6. The Holy Quran, 4:1.
7. Muhammad Hafizullah, Islami Masawat, Pakistan, Karachi, 1971, p.85.
8. Bukhari and Muslim, Two very authentic Books of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).
9. The Holy Quran, 4:32.
10. Ibid, 4:4.
11. Ibid, 4:7.
12. Ibid, 3:194.
13. Ibid, 3:285.
14. Ibid, 40:40;4:124.
15. Ibid, 16:97.
16. Though revelation is granted to women, they are not the prophets because prophethood belongs to male only and not to female at all- For details, please see : The Sihah al-Sittah-the pure six Books of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).
17. The Holy Quran, 3:41.
18. Ibid, 28:7
19. Mohammad Qutb, op. cit., p.128.
20. Dr. Sayed Sajjad Hussain (ed.), Bhrantir Berazale Islam, Bangaldesh, Dhaka : Adhunik Prokashani, 1994, p.110.
21. Bukhari and Muslim, op. cit.
22. Mohammad Qutb, op. cit. pp.127-28.
23. Maulana Muhammad Ali, The Religion of Islam, Pakistan, Lahore : Ripon Printing Press Ltd. 1973, p.530.
24. The holy Quran. 2:228.
25. Bukhari, 67:91.
26. Bukhari, 67:90.
27. The holy Quran, 30:21.
28. Ibid. 7:189.
29. Ibid. 2:187.
30. Ibid, 65:7.
31. Ibid, 65:6.

32. Bukhari, 67:87; For elaborate discussion, please see : Sayyed Jalaluddin Anasr Umri, op. cit., pp.217-25.
33. Maulana Muhammad Ali, op.cit., p.534.
34. Muslim, 15:19.
35. The holy Qurn, 2:229.
36. Ibid, 4:19.
37. Mishkatul Masabih, 13:11 (II); Bukhari, 67:81.
38. Bukhari and Muslim, Mishkatul Masabih, Ibid.
39. The holy Quran, 24:30,31.
40. Ibid, 33:59.
41. Bukhari, 4:13; 67:116.
42. Mohammad Qutb, Man between Islam and Materialism, Egypt : Cario, 1964, pp.129-30.
43. The holy Quran, 4:11.
44. Ibid, 4:11, 12.
45. Ibid, 4:4; 4:24, 25.
46. Mohammad Qutb, op.cit., pp.133-34.
47. The holy Quran; 4:34.