



MUSLIM WOMEN IN SOCIAL ISSUES AND STRUGGLE

**Editor in Chief Tejas Daily
Vice Chairman, Popular Front Of India**

Prof P Koya

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By 2013 women became more than 50 percent of the total workforce in the world. This is no mean achievement for women have always been a sort of protected/neglected sex. Throughout history their role has been one of subservience and bondage. They played second fiddle to men. Men controlled means of production, natural resources; they shaped culture and civilization. Man's hands have done great damage to the earth. All ideologies, religious and secular, have been interpreted to perpetuate masculine hegemony. Capitalism utilizes women as we saw in the black factory floors of England during the Industrial Revolution and as we see in the sweat shops of china and South East Asian nations. Communism of Stalinist variety has not done much for the actual liberation of women. In the North they are abused, exploited and tortured. It was only in the middle of the 20th century that women could get the right to vote even in some of the so called advanced countries.

Roots of exploitation

The roots of this exploitation could be found in anthropological advantages men enjoyed throughout history. They were hunter gathers, bread winners. Women looked after the children, the hearth and home. This division of labour decided the pecking order in the society. The power structure and social hierarchy: everything was shaped by men. Political and economic systems which preach gender equality at the end of the day burdened women with additional responsibilities and deprived them of creativity and freedom.

Against this depressing back drop, a seminar on women's empowerment is something like a draft of fresh air. Muslims have been portrayed as people who lock up women to attend domestic chores, consider them as sexual objects with out a mind of their own and as a delicate species, pampered but covered up. The cultural practices of Middle Eastern Islam which may be at a remove from what the Prophet preached and practiced has become the standard to decide whether someone is properly Islamic. Women have become a dress code, sort of . The more you cover, the more pious you are. We hear negative reports about Muslim women being denied access to education, the ability to drive or even the right to cast vote or run for political office. Such reports reinforce widely held misconceptions. Examples of empowered Muslim women (particularly those donning the hijab) leading successful life seldom enjoy the same quality media time. Pervasive generalizations about Islam's inherent oppression of Muslim women are not only against historical facts but ultimately unhelpful to the female subjects they purport to describe. Secular Western feminist notions are presented as the cure-all remedy for alleged misogynistic practices in the Muslim world.

A liberating force

Unfortunately this is nothing but a travesty of the Quranic teachings and the Prophetic advice. Quran in fact liberated women and situated them as equal to men, allowed them freedom of thought and liberty of choice. In a society in which women were possessions, taken and put aside like trinkets, often held in conditions approaching bondage, the Qur'an imposed rules and prohibitions that curbed the abuses, ensured women's property rights, and encouraged men to , treat women with kindness and generosity. The Quran's dictates on women's legal status, were quite advanced and Islamic Law gives women rights more liberating than those found in western legal codes .The Quran and Hadith lay down rules ensuring for women the respectable and dignified status that had been denied them.

.I quote some verses from the Quran to highlight this basic truth.

O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women (4:1)

Every human being will be also in pledge for whatever he/ she has brought (74:38)

And does their Sustainer answer their prayer: "I shall not lose sight of the labour of any of you who labours, be it men or women: each of you is an issue of the other. Hence as far those who forsake the domain of evil, and are driven from their homelands, and suffer hurt in My cause, fight and are slain. I shall most certainly efface their bad deeds and shall most certainly bring them into heaven..... (3:195).

"And the believers, men and women are friends of one another. They enjoin good and forbid evil and keep up prayer and pay the poor rate, and obey Allah and His Messenger. As for these Allah will have mercy on them, Surely Allah is Mighty, Wise." (9:71)

Prophet sayings like the ones quoted also stress the gender equality and the nobility of the different roles played by men and women.

The most valuable thing in the world is a virtuous woman."

Once a man came to Prophet Muhammad and asked, "O Messenger of God, which person of all the people is best entitled to kind treatment and good companionship from me?" He answered, "Your mother." The man asked, "And then?" He said, "Your mother."

The man asked again, "And after her?" He said, "Your mother." The man asked for a fourth time, "And after her?" The Prophet said, "Your father" (Al-Bukhari).

The Prophet said, "The world is delightful, and its greatest treasure is a good woman" (Muslim).

These teachings had tremendous impact on the Arabian society. From sexual objects, singers, dancers and chattels they became full fledged human beings, independent enough to help fight the enemies of Islam. There were many women scholars, poets, scientists and administrators who added civility and strength to the vast Islamic empire. Ayisha, the wife of the Prophet was a reputed narrator of Hadith to cite an instance of the influence exercised by women on Islamic jurisprudence. There were many prominent women in history that played significant role in the consolidation and spread of Islam.

Who can ignore Khadīja b. Khuwaylid (d. 620) or for that matter ‘Ā’isha b. Abī Bakr (d. 678)?

Some other glittering names

Nusayba b. Ka‘b al-Anṣārīyya (d. 634). Also known as Umm ‘Ammara As a companion of the Prophet she is most remembered, for taking part in the Battle of Uhud (625), in which she carried sword and shield and fought against the Meccans.

Khawla b. al-Azwar (d. 639). Another contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad. She is best known for her participation in the Battle of Yarmuk (636) against the Byzantines.

Zaynab b. ‘Alī (d. 681) She was the grand-daughter of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fāṭima (d. 633) and her husband ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661). She was among the most illustrious and admirable figures of the Ahl al-Bayt and played a central role both during and after the Massacre at Karbala (680), where her brother al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī, and 72 of her nephews and other brothers were killed by the Umayyada.

Rabi‘a al-‘Adawīyya (d. 801). One of the most important mystics in the Muslim tradition, Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīyya spent much of her early life as a slave in southern Iraq before attaining her freedom.

Lubna of Cordoba (d. 984). Originally a slave-girl of Spanish origin, Lubna rose to become one of the most important figures in the Umayyad palace in Cordoba.

Al-Malika al-Ḥurra Arwa al-Sulayhi (d. 1138). Her full name was Arwa b. Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Sulayhī. From 1067 to 1138, she ruled as the queen of Yemen in her own right. She well-versed in various religious sciences, Qur’an, hadith, as well as poetry and history.

Fāṭima b. Abī al-Qāsim ‘Abd al- Rahmān b. Muhammad b. Ghālib al-Ansārī al-Sharrāṭ (d. 1216). She was one of the most learned women in al-Andalus during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

Razia Sultan (d. 1240). She was the ruler of the Sultanate of Delhi between 1236 and 1240.

Shajar al-Durr (d. 1257). She was the widow of the Ayyubid sultan al -Sālih Ayyūb (r. 1240-1249) and played an important role in Egyptian politics following her husband's death.

Zaynab b. Ahmad (d. 1339). She was perhaps one of the most eminent Islamic scholars of the fourteenth century. Zaynab belonged to the Ḥanbalī school of jurisprudence and resided in Damascus

Sayyida al-Hurra (d. 1542). With a name literally meaning “the Free Woman,” Sayyida al-Hurra was one of the most interesting Muslim figures of the sixteenth century. She was originally from the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, but was forced to flee following its conquest by Christian Spain in 1492. Like many Andalusī Muslims, she settled in Morocco and, along with her husband, fortified and ruled the town of Tetouan on the northern coast. Following the death of her husband in 1515, she became the sole ruler of the city, which grew in strength and population as more Andalusī Muslims were exiled or driven out of Iberia in the early sixteenth century.

Parī Khān Khānum (d. 1578). A Safavid princess and daughter of Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524-1576) by a Circassian mother, she was one of the most influential Iranian women in the sixteenth century.

Kösem Sultan (d. 1651). Many English-speaking audiences are quite familiar with Roxelana or Hürrem Sultan, the queen-consort of Suleyman I (r. 1520-1566).

Return of old norms

It is true that when autocracy toppled Islam and the priesthood staged a comeback the jahili social practices returned to have a stranglehold on the illiterate masses. The old elite with hegemonistic notions reinterpreted the Islamic teachings about gender justice and equality. Then we witness the suppression of rights of women. Only with the advent of modern age, which itself is problematic, that we see the rising demand for equal rights.

In the light of dissemination of more egalitarian concepts, the role of women in the struggle for economic and political justice has become crucial to the real deliverance.

We have witnessed popular struggles in many parts of the Muslim world and everywhere women played very important role not only in street demonstration but in policy planning and debates as well. In Egypt it was a young woman who used social media to gather thousands of people in Tahrir Square to protest against the autocratic Mubarak regime. In Iran they joined their compatriots to drive out the lackeys of US imperialism in 1979. Women played a very important role in

establishing a govt: of the people there .In the field of scholarship we can see many women coming forward to present their views as regards the Quran and Sunnah.

In India it is imperative that women get involved in struggle for equality and justice. Their struggle is both internal and external. It can be a struggle against the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teachings, against illiteracy and backwardness, against superstitions, against exclusion of women from the social space and also against over burdening of women.

It is to be emphasized that Indian women, especially Muslims and Dalits face threats to their identity and culture. Muslim women have become targets of fascists and communalists as we have seen in Modi's Gujarat. On the other hand some secular groups want to make women available as consumers and sex objects or models to market consumer products.

Pivotal role

Muslim women have a pivotal role to play in the popular struggle against neo-liberal economic policies , imperialist incursions and Hindutwa fascism.

Abuses against Muslim and Dalit women are numerous and take many different forms. They include socio- economic discrimination, beatings, and other forms of torture, arson and burning, rape, gang rape and the parading of women through the streets naked as a form of punishment, bonded labour and police abuses.

The reason for these is both economic and social. And the struggle against the abuses gains momentum only when a radical women's group takes over as happened in the case NBA in central India. Whether it is a struggle for drinking water or against corruption if women organize themselves it will have greater impact.

There are many ways to intervene in social issues

We can increase the familiarity of the Muslim women on the issues of human rights. Advise and assist individuals, institutions, and organizations on social and political and economic issues.

Assist women, on matters adversely affecting the free exercise of their religion, freedom of expression, and other constitutional rights in the country.

Provide educational materials on legal and human rights issues to women. Mobilize women for political struggles.

Help build up network of women activists at state and national level.

Out reach is very important for the success of any programme.