

Gender equality in the Holy Qur'aan and Sunnah

By Prof Abdur Rahman

There is absolutely no difference in Islam between men and women as far as their relationship to Allah is concerned, as both of them are promised the same reward for good conduct and the same punishment for evil conduct. The Holy Qur'aan says: "And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women." (2:226). The Holy Qur'aan, in addressing the believers, often uses the expression 'believing men and women' to emphasise the equality of men and women in regard to their respective duties, rights, virtues and merits. It says: "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward." (33:35)

This clearly contradicts the claim of the Christian Fathers that women do not possess souls and that they will exist as sexless beings in the next life. The Holy Qur'aan says that women have souls in exactly the same way as men and will enter Paradise if they do good. The Holy Book says: "Enter into Paradise, you and

inherent sin and wickedness and men as being possessed of inherent virtue and nobility, Islam regards men and women as being of the same essence created from a single soul. The Holy Qur'aan declares: "O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, Who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from this pair scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence Allah, through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and reverence the wombs (that bore you); for Allah ever watches over you." (4:1) Prophet Muhammad (Sall Allahu alaihe wasallam) said: "Women are the twin halves of men." The Holy Qur'aan emphasises the essential unity of men and women in a most beautiful simile: "They (your wives) are your garment and you are a garment for them." (2:187)

Just as a garment hides our nakedness, so do husband and wife, by entering into the relationship of marriage, secure each other's chastity. The garment gives comfort to the body; so does the husband find comfort in his wife's company and she in his. "The garment is the grace, the beauty, the embellishment of the body, so too are wives to their husbands as their husbands are to them."

Islam does not consider woman "an instrument of the Devil", but rather the Holy Qur'aan calls her "Muhsana" — a fortress against Satan — because a good woman, by marrying a man, helps him keep to the path of rectitude in his life. It is for this reason that Prophet Muham-

(Sall Allahu alaihe wasallam) said: "The best property a man can have is a remembering tongue (about Allah), a grateful heart and a believing wife who helps him in his faith." And again: "The world, the whole of it, is a commodity and the best of the commodities of the world is a virtuous wife."

Before the advent of Islam, women were often treated worse than animals. The Holy Prophet (Sall Allahu alaihe wasallam) wanted to put a stop to all cruelties to women. He preached kindness towards them. He told the Muslims: "Fear Allah in respect of women." And: "The best of you are they who behave best to their wives." And: "A Muslim must not hate his wife, and if he be displeased with one had quality in her, let him be pleased with one that is good." And: "The more civil and kind a Muslim is to his wife, the more perfect in faith he is." Prophet Muhammad (Sall Allahu alaihe wasallam) was most emphatic in enjoining upon the Muslims to be kind to their women when he delivered his famous sermon on the Mount of Mercy (Jabal-e-Rahmat) at Arafat in the presence of one hundred and twenty-four thousand of his Companions who had gathered there for the Farewell Pilgrimage. In it, he ordered to those who were present and through them all those Muslims who were to come later, to be respectful and kind towards women. He said: "Fear Allah regarding women. Verily you have married them with the trust of Allah, and made their bodies lawful with the word of Allah. You have got (rights) over them, and they have got (rights) over you in respect of their food and clothing according to your means."

In Islam, a woman is a completely independent personality. She can make any contract or bequest in her own name. She is entitled to inherit in her position as mother, as wife, as sister and as daughter. She has perfect liberty to choose her husband. The pagan society of pre-Islamic Arabia had an irrational prejudice against their female children whom they used to bury alive. The Messenger of Allah (Sall Allahu alaihe wasallam) was totally opposed to this practice. He showed them that supporting their female children would not

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your wives, with delight." (43:70). And: "Who so does that which is right, and believes, whether male or female, him or her will We quicken to happy life." (16:97) The Holy Qur'aan admonishes those men who oppress or ill-treat women: "O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dowry you have given them, except when they have become guilty of open lewdness. On the contrary, live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you dislike something and Allah will bring about through it a great deal of good." (4:19). Teachings of the Noble Qur'aan were revolutionary as regard to the fact that before the advent of Islam, the pagan Arabs used to bury their daughters alive, forced women to dance naked in the vicinity of the holy Ka'aba during their annual fairs, and treat them as mere chattels and objects of sexual pleasure, possessing no right or position whatsoever. Unlike other religions, which considered women as being possessed of

mad (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) considered marriage as a most virtuous act. He said: "When a man marries, he has completed one half of his religion." He enjoined matrimony on the Muslims by saying: "Marriage is part of my way and whoever keeps away from my way is not from me (ie is not my follower)."

The Holy Qur'aan says: "And among His signs is this, that He has created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them; and He has put love and mercy between you. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect." (30:21)

Prophet Muhammad (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) was full of praise for virtuous and chaste women. He said: "The world and all things in the world are precious but the most precious thing in the world is a virtuous woman." He once told the future caliph, Umar: "Shall I not inform you about the best treasure a man can hoard? It is a virtuous wife who pleases him whenever he looks towards her, and who guards herself when he is absent from her."

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pletely independent personality. She can make any contract or request in her own name. She is entitled to inherit in her position as mother, as wife, as sister and as daughter. She has perfect liberty to choose her husband. The pagan society of pre-Islamic Arabia had an irrational prejudice against their female children whom they used to bury alive. The Messenger of Allah (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) was totally opposed to this practice. He showed them that supporting their female children would act as a screen for them against the fire of Hell: It is narrated by the Prophet's wife, 'A'isha, that a woman entered her house with two of her daughters. She asked for charity but 'A'isha could not find anything except a date, which was given to her. The woman divided it between her two daughters and did not eat any herself. Then she got up and left. When the Prophet (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) came to the house, 'A'isha told him about what had happened and he declared that when the woman was brought to account (on the Day of Judgment) about her two daughters they would act as a screen for her from the fires of Hell. The worst calamity for a woman is when her husband passes away and, as a widow, the responsibility of maintaining the children falls upon her. In the Eastern World, where a woman does not always go out to earn her living, the problems of widowhood are indescribable.

Prophet Muhammad (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) upheld the cause of widows. Most of his wives were widows. In an age when widows were rarely permitted to remarry, the Prophet encouraged his followers to marry them. He was always ready to help widows and exhorted his followers to do the same. Abu Hurairah reported that the Prophet said: "One who makes efforts (to help) the widow or a poor person is like a mujahid (warrior) in the path of Allah, or like one who stands up for prayers in the night

and fasts in the day." Woman as mother commands great respect in Islam. The Noble Qur'aan speaks of the rights of the mother in a number of verses. It enjoins Muslims to show respect to their mothers and serve them well even if they are still unbelievers. The Prophet states emphatically that the rights of the mother are paramount.

Abu Hurairah reported that a man came to the Messenger of Allah (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) and asked: "O Messenger of Allah, who is the person who has the greatest right on me with regards to kindness and attention?" He replied, "Your mother." "Then who?" He replied, "Your mother." "Then who?" He replied, "Your mother." "Then who?" He replied, "Your father."

In another tradition, the

should be full-fledged partners in making their home a happy and prosperous place, that they should be loyal and faithful to one another, and genuinely interested in each other's welfare and the welfare of their children. A woman is expected to exercise a humanizing influence over her husband and to soften the sternness inherent in his nature. A man is enjoined to educate the women in his care so that they cultivate the qualities in which they, by their very nature, excel.

These aspects were much emphasised by the Prophet (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam), He exhorted men to marry women of piety and women to be faithful to their husbands and kind to their children. He said: "Among my followers the best of men are those who are best to their wives, and the best of women are those who are best to their husbands. To each of such women is set down a reward equivalent to the reward of a thousand martyrs. Among my followers, again, the best of women are those who assist their husbands in their work, and love them dearly for everything, save what is a transgression of Allah's laws."

Once Mu'awiyah asked the Prophet (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam), "What are the rights that a wife has over her husband?" The Prophet replied, "Feed her when you take your food, give her clothes to wear when you wear clothes, refrain from giving her a slap on the face or abusing her, and do not separate from your wife, except within the house."

Once a woman came to the Prophet with a complaint against her husband. He told her: "There is no woman who removes something to replace it in its proper place, with a view to tidying her husband's house,

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Holy Prophet (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) advised a believer not to join the war against the Quraish in defense of Islam, but to look after his mother, saying that his service to his mother would be a cause of his salvation. Mu'awiyah, the son of Jahimah, reported that Jahimah came to the Holy Prophet (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) and said to the Messenger of Allah: "I want to join the

but that Allah sets it down as a virtue for her. Nor is there a man who walks with his wife hand-in-hand, but that Allah sets it down as a virtue for him; and if he puts his arm round her shoulder in love, his virtue is increased tenfold."

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The Prophet's followers accepted his teachings and brought about a revolution in their social attitude towards women. They no longer considered women as mere chattels, but as an integral part of society. For the first time, women were given the right to have a share in inheritance. In the new social climate, women rediscovered themselves and became highly active members of society rendering useful service during the wars, which the pagan Arabs forced on the emerging Muslim Ummah. They carried provisions for the soldiers, nursed them, and even fought alongside them if it was necessary. It became a common sight to see women helping their husbands in the fields, carrying on trade and business independently, and going out of their homes to satisfy their needs.

Hadhrat Aisha (Radhi Allaho anha) reported that Hadhrat Saudah (Radhi Allaho anha) went out one night. Hadhrat Umar saw her and recognized her and said, "By God, O Saudah, why do you not hide yourself from us?" She went back to the Prophet (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam) and told him about it while he was having supper in her room, and he said, "It is permitted by Allah for you to go out for your needs." The predominant idea in the teachings of Islam with regard to men and women is that a husband and wife

but that Allah sets it down as a virtue for her. Nor is there a man who walks with his wife hand-in-hand, but that Allah sets it down as a virtue for him; and if he puts his arm round her shoulder in love, his virtue is increased tenfold."

Once he was heard praising the women of the tribe of Quraish, "...because they are the kindest to their children while they are infants and because they keep a careful watch over the belongings of their husbands." The Shari'ah regards women as the spiritual and intellectual equals of men. The main distinction it makes between them is in the physical realm based on the equitable principle of fair division of labour. It allots the more strenuous work to the man and makes him responsible for the maintenance of the family. It allots the work of managing the home and the upbringing and training of children to the woman, work which has the greatest importance in the task of building a healthy and prosperous society. It is a fact that sound administration within the domestic field is impossible without a unified policy. For this reason the Shari'ah requires a man, as head of the family, to consult with his family and then to have the final say in decisions concerning it. In doing so he must not abuse his prerogative to cause any injury to his wife. Any transgression of this principle involves for him the risk of losing the favor of Allah, because his wife is not his subordinate but she is, to use the words of the Prophet (Sall Allaho alaihe wasallam), 'the queen of her house', and this is the position a true believer is expected to give his wife. In contrast to these enlightened teachings of Islam in respect of women, Western talk of women's liberation or emancipation is actually a disguised form of exploitation of her body, deprivation of her honour, and degradation of her soul!