

## **Women's status and Gender Parity in Islam**

In Pre-Islamic Arabia, women were treated as second class humans. A woman had no rights whatsoever so and could not take any decisions in her life but to follow her master, be it a bondwoman lord or a father or a husband or a brothel's owner. She was treated just like a piece of furniture and a mere sex object, When the woman's husband died she had no rights to inheritance. In fact, she herself was inherited. An inheritor could take as a pleasure woman his father's women even his step mother. When a baby girl was born she was in many cases buried alive for fear of shame. When a man was given the news that he had a baby girl he would be distressed as if it were the end of the world. Polygammy was common and unlimited. Slavery too was a well-entrenched code of practice. Many bondwomen were forced into prostitution for their master's financial gains. This was the case of women in pagan Mecca. Islam came to fight all that, one man Muhammad stood up against a deeply rooted unjust social system and a cruel society. If Muhammad is not to be considered in western views as a prophet at least he should be viewed as a great social reformer and a leader of a humanitarian revolution. Islam came to raise humans males and females alike, to the status intended by God for them as God's viceroys on earth, not mere slaves of pleasure and gold. It holds males and females on equal footing as to the rewards of good deeds. No distinction is made between women and men in opting for Paradise. Islam gave women for the first time rights of their own. No more would a woman be married against her will, or be coerced to continue a marriage she is not happy with. For the first time, she has been given the right to request divorce and get it. She has been given the right to inheritance. Man was considered the bread winner, noting that women in Arabia had no jobs. They were kept, fed and sustained by a male be it a father, a brother, or a husband. In terms of inheritance shares a son is entitled to twice the share of a daughter, who before had no share at all. However, in other cases of inheritance a female could get an equal share, and even in other situations she could get a bigger share than the male. Killing infant baby girls has been absolutely prohibited. The Arabs used to celebrate the birth of male children by sacrificing an animal and

making a feast (Aqiqah). In fact, this tradition continues until today. Muhammad- a father of 4 daughters- celebrated the birth of each by making Aqiqah- uncommon in Arab tradition. He said "Who well brings up daughters is entitled to paradise". Unfortunately, it has been always repeated in the west whenever Islam is mentioned, the issue of polygamy. Islam did not invent polygamy. In fact, polygamy was well known in the old world. Abraham married more than one woman at the same time, so did David (100 women) and Solomon who was said to have had 1000 women. So polygamy was common in Arabia and was unlimited. Islam used a strategy of gradual banning of old habits. It did not endorse shock treatment. Human nature has it that old habits die hard. For example, it did not ban alcoholic beverages and gambling- so widely spread then- all of a sudden but gradually. It also did not ban polygamy but it restricted it up to 4 and made it conditional on equity between wives, again uncommon in Arabs' practice. Yet, it stipulated that injustice is a sin, and that justice in the case of many wives is tantamount to impossible. So, it did not totally ban polygamy, but left the door ajar hinging on the fear of committing the sin of injustice. The reason for not banning it altogether was the continuing wars between the Moslems and the pagans. Many men were killed, and left widows and orphans. Since there was no means of sustenance for women except being sheltered in wedlock or else go into prostitution, there was need to take in widows in marriage. This definitely meant that Moslem men had the obligation to marry women whose husbands died in battle for the cause of Islam. Muhammad himself had to do that. Exceptionally he was permitted to keep his 9 women almost all of them were old widows of Moslems killed in battle. They were called the Mothers of the Believers not ever allowed to marry after Muhammad died. In the early part of Muhammad's life when he was 25 years old he was married to one woman, his only true love Khadija, a two times widow 15 years older than he was She later gave him all the support he needed when he started his mission. He never practiced polygamy for as long as he lived with Khadija. When she died he was 53. In the next 10 years he was involved of in battling the pagans, and many of his close companions and intimate supporters got killed in battle and he had to take their widows in marriage as well as their children to become as his own

out of chivalry and responsibility. Some of those marriages were also concluded for political alliances as the custom was in the old world. His true love remained to Khadija. He also married Aicha who was the daughter of his close friend Abu Bakr. And because she was young she outlived him and narrated many of Hadeeth (sayings) and personal conduct of the prophet. As to slavery, again Islam did not ban it all of a sudden or else a social disorder could have erupted as happened in the civil war in America. But Islam made the freeing of slaves a way of atonement of sins. If one commits a sin the way to repent is to free a slave male or female. It also encouraged marrying bondwomen and prohibited forcing them into adultery. It also acted on drying off the sources of slavery by encouraging the freeing of female bondwomen as soon as they bore sons for their masters, with full rights for the sons and freedom for the mothers. The Quoran the holy book of Islam states that if one commits a sin and he is to free a slave or a bondwoman and he does not find- meaning that there would come a time when slaves would be no more- he should fast to show repentance. Islam gives the right to women to keep their last names not acquire their husbands' family names as is the custom in the west. Islam demands that the man provides, and he is not entitled to lay hands on his wife's property. Islam demands that the husband pay the dower not the woman and that he is obliged to take full responsibility out of his own money for the wife and his children. Islam gives women the right to appear before courts of justice to make testimony but it indicates that two women's testimony should weigh as one man's testimony just in case one woman misses a point or forgets due to her distraction during her menses. Today, women in modern Islamic societies are well educated and are fairly accepted as equal to men. They even hold many jobs in high places as judges, ministers of the cabinet and even prime ministers. Islam looks at women not as sex objects but as full partners to men. Moral upbringing of the new generation is the responsibility of women. Therefore, women in Islam are held in high esteem of virtue, and respect. However, many Islamic extremists do not understand the spirit of Islam and keep women out of the education and out of the civil world. This is our predicament Islam is one thing and its present extremist followers is another.