

TOWARDS AN ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Introduction

It is worth recalling that the globalization of gender equality started quite recently with the United Nation declaring 1975 as the International Women's Year at the world conference held at Mexico City. Sequel to this the decade 1976-1985, was declared the Decade for Women, during which international agencies as well as some governments focused attention on what came to be popularly referred to as 'women issue.'¹ After that the second UN conference on women was held in Copenhagen in 1980. The decade as crowned by Nairobi Conference on Women in 1985. Then, the Cairo International Conference on population and development in 1994 came which seemed to focus on independence and autonomy of women even with a family context. Indeed several conferences, conventions and activities of a host of international agencies took place during the 1985-1994 to prepare the grounds and minds for the famous Beijing Conference in 1995. It was in Beijing, more than anywhere, where the issue of empowerment was focused and made such an indispensable condition for world progress and development.

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1. Zeenath Kausar, *Women Empowerment and Islam: The UN Beijing Document Platform of Action*, (Kualalumpur: Iilmiah Publishers, 2002), pp. 25-26, also see Dr. Usman Muhammad Bugaje, "Women's Empowerment and Islam," <http://www.salaam.co.uk/knowledge.wempower.php>.

However, the objective of this study is to explore the relationship between Islam and women empowerment by looking at the views of Quran, the tradition of the Prophet and Women's activities in the public arena during early Islamic era. Besides it is also important to see the views of Muslim scholars on the issue. In order to come up with a comprehensive understanding of Islam and women empowerment it is necessary to see the western point of view on women empowerment as well.

Definition of Empowerment

The word 'empowerment', seems to be of very recent, it became widely used and popularized by the 'Draft Platform of Action' of the Beijing conference of 1995. The term empowerment is very vague. It means different things to different people. Generally, empowerment suggests the giving of power to someone who has been deprived of it, someone who will remain vulnerable without that power and someone whose hope for justice and fairness seem to hinge on the possession of that power. According to Beck and Stelcner "empowerment is about people - both women and men - taking control over their lives: Setting their own agenda, gaining skills, increasing self-confidence, solving problems, and developing self-reliance. It is both a process and an outcome."² The empowerment of women might be understood by the process stated by Schuler and Hashemi.³ According to them, empowerment is a continuous process comprising a series of conscious steps taken by individuals to gain access to economic, educational and health resources; to better express and defend their rights and in the process, gain greater awareness and control of the self.⁴

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2. See T. Beck and M. Stelcner, *Guide to Gender-sensitive Indicators*, CIDA. 1995:37.
 3. SR Schuler, S M Hashemi, "Empowering Women," Network Family Health International, Vol. 15 No. 1, August 1994, <http://www.ffpam.org/my/conn03.asp>
 4. *Ibid.*

The process of empowering women aims to equip women with knowledge, information and ideas to question and challenge, to gain greater access and control over material, human and intellectual resources. The concept of an empowerment of an individual or a social group presupposes that a state of social oppression exists which has disempowered those in the group, by denying them opportunities or resources and by subjecting them to an ideology and a set of social practices which has defined them as inferior human, thus lowering their self-esteem. As a general goal, empowerment has been described as a political and a material process which increases individual and group power, self-reliance and strength.⁵ However, an empowered woman would be one who is self-confident, critically analyze her environment and who exercises control over decisions that affect her life.

There are four aspects which seem to be generally accepted in the literature on women's empowerment. *Firstly*, to be empowered one must be disempowered. It is relevant to speak of empowering women, for example, because, as a group, they are disempowered relative to men. *Secondly*, empowerment can not be bestowed by third party. They may be able to create conditions favorable to empowerment but they can not make it happen. *Thirdly*, definition of empowerment usually include a sense of people making decisions on matters which are important in their lives and being able to carry them out. Finally, empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense.

Why Women Empowerment?

Development strategies have for long ignored needs of women's empowerment. It is realized for decades, the household, where the man is head of it has been unit of policy reform and women have remained

5. Ann Ferguson, "Can Development Create Empowerment and Women's liberation?" <http://edowman.home.igc.org/AnotherWorld/papers/ferguson.htm>

marginalized. But the expectation was that once income generating projects are utilized by men, the benefits will also “trickle down” to the women. But unfortunately above theory did not work in the case of women. In a poor family women’s needs receive the lowest priority, women sacrifice a lot of basic necessities, such as food and clothing in order to provide enough for their husbands and children. In a traditional Muslim society, women are generally viewed as “dependent” of the family. A woman’s father or husband or, in their absence her son or male relative assumes responsibility for safeguarding her welfare. After marriage, a woman moves to her husband’s household and is transferred to her husband’s family, with her own kin identity changed from her father’s to that of her husband’s. Traditionally, the women’s role in households is restricted to indoors activities only.⁶

Therefore, it is argued that there is a need to focus on education of women and income generating opportunities or giving women chance to work outside home to improve their economic status. Although it is not always true that empowerment is a necessary result of economic strength. Since many rich women suffer domestic abuse. However, the generally accepted view is that women empowerment is possible if you give them education and economic solvency.

Women Empowerment From Western Perspectives

A significant body of literature has been discussed extensively the issue of women empowerment. For instance, Neila Kabeer, who contributed a lot on this issue, demonstrates the socio-cultural base relations, meaning that in third world countries (e.g. Bangladesh) there are unequal resource distribution which in turn determines unequal relations between men and women in different institutions. Kabeer stated, “if women gain access to and control over education and resources then they will be able to gain the power to change these

6. However, in the urban areas of Bangladesh many women work in the government as well as private sector.

existing relations and choose otherwise; and gain the capability to live their lives the way they want, this change process would be seen as empowerment."⁷

But, another prominent scholar Amartya Sen, through his bargaining model⁸ explains the issue differently. His model demonstrates that whether or not women's access to education, loans, participation in NGO programs and involvement in income generating activities will empower them to improve their position, especially relative to men within the household. It depends crucially on the nature of the intra-household decision-making process. Sen suggests that when women can improve their breakdown position, perceived self-interests, and contribute to the household economy, all these can influence and change the nature of intra-household relations between men and women, and women's increased participation in the decision-making process. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of individuals' perceived contribution to the household and their perceived self-interest. According to Sen, though women usually work harder and longer hours, they do not perceive themselves (and are not perceived by others) to be making much contribution since much of their work makes no direct financial contribution to the family. This perception may be unjustified, but so long as the perception exists, women will find themselves in a weak bargaining position and therefore, end up with a lower level of well-being. Similarly, their bargaining position is also weakened by their distorted perception of self-interest. Women do not take their self-interest seriously, because in the process of socialization within the patriarchal culture, they themselves come to internalize the norms of discrimination against them.⁹

7. N. Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change*, Vol. 30, pp. 435-464

8. Amartya K. Sen, "Gender and Cooperative Conflict," in Irene Tinker, *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990

9. Also see Par Lufun N. Khan Osmani, "Impact of Credit on the Relative Well-Being of Women Evidence from the Grameen Bank, <http://www.globenet.org/horizon-local/ada/grameen.html>

Blood and Wolfe see the problem lies to the historical tradition what he called 'patriarchal norms' or 'ascribed power' of husband. They described the issue based on two basic theories – ideological and pragmatic – to explain sources of power in the family.¹⁰ According to the ideological theory, the husband dominates in decision-making because tradition, especially patriarchal norms, ascribes power to the husband. They assert that the ascribed power of husbands may be predominant among farm, immigrant and catholic families as well as older and uneducated couples who may hold on to tradition. Second, the pragmatic point of view, perhaps due to impact of so called the modernization and development Blood and Wolfe argued that as society experiences large scale social change the increased scope for jobs, education and other opportunities leads to an emphasis on competence and achievement. In this context of social change, achieved resources of the spouses become effective in determining their level of power in the family.¹¹ That means if a woman has better education and income she would have better position in the family.

Similarly, Hyman Rodman discusses the issue on the basis of four kinds of societies. In order to explain his thought Rodman developed a typology of four kinds of societies in each of which family norms have distinctive manifestations that uniquely affect marital decision making. At the *patriarchal stage* families in all classes depict strong paternal norms. Rodman speculates that India comes closer to this ideal-type. However, he adds that families in urban areas of India may be experiencing a tradition, where a man's power in the family is determined by pragmatic resources. The characteristic of *modified patriarchy* is that even though the ascribed status of sex legitimizes men's power in society, their authority in marriage may be inversely related to their socioeconomic classes. At the third stage of *transitional equalitarianism*, societies experience a change from patriarchal norms of

10. Ainon Nahar Mizan, *In Quest of Empowerment: The Grameen Bank Impact on Women's Power and Status*, (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1994), 61

11. *Ibid.* 61

egalitarianism norms where families display considerable flexibility about marital; power, as in the case of Germany and USA. In this type of society a man's authority in the home is legitimized by his income-earner role. Consequently achievement through resources like education, occupation and income is also reflected in family relations. Higher status husbands have more voice at home, while lower status husbands have less say in family affairs. In the fourth *stage of egalitarianism* strong democratic norms support greater sharing of husband-wife power. Many European countries the egalitarian norms are reinforced by welfare policies that provide support to the families in all social classes.¹² Cunningham and Green studies decision making status of working wives with comparative survey data from Venezuela and the United States and found significant differences in decision-making among working and non-working wives in Venezuela, with working wives taking on more decisions than non-working wives.¹³

On the other hand, Momsen distinguishes women needs into two – practical and strategic. *Practical* needs are those such as food and shelter which are required by all the family and are identified as priorities by women and planners alike. They serve to preserve and reinforce the gender division of labor. *Strategic* needs are those which can empower women, challenge the existing gender division of labor and bring about greater equality. They are difficult to meet because of their immediate requirement of seeking the satisfaction of their practical needs.¹⁴

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12. Hyman Rodman, "Marital Power and the Theory of Resources in Cultural Context," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 3 (Spring), 50-70
 13. Isabella C. M. Cuninghame and Robert T. Green, "Working Wives in the United States and Venezuela: A Cross-National Study of Decision Making," in G. Kurian and R. Ghosh, *Women in the Family and the Economy: an International Comparative Survey*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981
 14. Jenet Henshall Momsen, *Women and Development in the Third World*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 102

Apart from the economic development, education also a factor for women's empowerment. Since, women's 'perceived self-interest' would not be the real one until they get the proper education. Therefore, Raunaq Jahan says, within households where women have some education, decision making within the family is more egalitarian.¹⁵ The importance of education was being identified since the 1970's, particularly the education for girls and women in developing countries have been on the agenda of scholars of education and of international development agencies. Multiple policies and programmes have since then been implemented by NGO's, national governments and international development agencies with the aim of increasing women's participation in education. But despite these efforts it revealed that low female enrolment in schooling and illiteracy of women were still widespread when the World Education Forum was held in Thailand in 1990.

In fact, later statistic shows that by year of 2000 the educational goals had not been achieved as well. The World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, was held which culminated in the *Dakar Framework for Action*. The framework was seen as a renewed commitment to achieve Education for All (EFA) by 2015. Furthermore did the Dakar declaration place particular emphasis on the goal of reaching gender equality in education and focused on ensuring *both* girls' and women's full and equal access to and achievement in basic and continuing education of good quality.¹⁶ It also emphasized the need to reform the school curriculum so that it is more gender sensitive and more conducive to gender equality. Since, gender equality seen as one of the necessary elements of women empowerment. Therefore, Momsen says that education and training of people are the main ways to improve their

15. R. Jahan, "Public Policies, Women and Development: Reflections on a few Structural Problems," in R. Jahan and H. Papanek (eds.) *Women in Development in Southeast Asia*, Dhaka: Bangladesh institute of law and International Affairs, 1979)

16. Ibid.

situation and to create gender equity as well as give them incentives to take part in development initiatives in the society.¹⁷

In recent years studies have been examining how the traditional patriarchal gender roles and values are reproduced in the curriculum of educational institutions. Low expectations of girls by girls themselves, and by female and male teachers, parents, students and the society in general are main reasons why gender stereotypes is being reproduced in the educational system. The special attention paid on the education of women and girls in development policies, activities and projects arise out of the knowledge that ensuring basic education for all, especially the education of women and girls and achieving gender equality are important elements in promoting development and advancement in people's life quality as well as a means to empowering women themselves.

In order to improve the poor people particularly women and girls and bring them into the main stream economic development, especially for the women and girls in developing countries, a great deal of resources has been invested during the last couple of decades. Education as a resource for power works in two ways. First, schooling inculcates knowledge and sharpens verbal skills which can be used in decision-making. Second, it facilitates voluntary or paid community participation which may enhance one's position in the community. This may translate into power in family decision-making.¹⁸

However, it is important to look at the set of eight major domains of empowerment as identified by Schuler and Hashemi:

17. Dr. M. Nurul I. Shekh, "Educating Women Through NGO Programmes: Contradictions of Culture and Gender in Rural Bangladesh," ...

18. Ainon Nahar Mizan, *In Quest of Empowerment...* op. cit. 63

- 1) Mobility and visibility - ability to travel outside the home;
- 2) Economic security - ownership of property, cash, savings;
- 3) Ability to make small purchases - ability to make purchases, including household items, food and clothing;
- 4) Ability to make large purchases.
- 5) Status and involvement in major decisions within the household.
- 6) Relative freedom from domination and violence within the family - freedom from domination and violence within the home.
- 7) Political and legal awareness - knowledge of government, marriage and inheritance laws.
- 8) Participation in non-family groups (e.g. public protests and political campaigning).¹⁹

In the above discussion, it is obvious that most of the scholars define empowerment as freedom within family, intra-household relationship, particularly wife and husband as well as women's power of decision making process. However, Sen focuses on women's "perceived self-interest" which means whatever contributions women make to the household they do not perceive themselves or perceived by others that they are making much contribution, since their works

19. Schuler, Sidney R. and Hashmi, Syed M. (1993) *Defining and Studying Empowerment of women: A Research Note form Bangladesh*, John Snow International Working paper No. 3, John Snow International Research and Training Institute, Arlington, VA. Also see SR Schuler, S M Hashemi, "Empowering Women," Network Family Health International, Vol. 15 No. 1, August 1994, <http://www.ffpam.org.my/conn03.asp>

do not make any direct financial contribution. Therefore, there perceived self interest should be changed to the real one. Momsen sees empowerment as strategic needs comes after the practical needs are those food and shelter. For Kabeer, women must gain access to and control over education and resources as well as gain the capacity to live their lives the way they want. However, all the arguments show that women are not getting what they suppose to get.

In the Muslim world due to the impact of modernization and development many women started to involve in public affairs. But, Feminist and other secular organizations always warned that Islamist power sharing would intact reverse the educational and social gains of the post-independent period, remove women from public life and again restrict their roles solely to that of wife and mother. Therefore, it necessary to look at critically the Islamic view of women empowerment and needs to develop an Islamic framework of empowerment as well.

Women Empowerment From Islamic Perspective

For many non-Muslim, in some cases Muslim as well, the subject of women in Islam is characterized by the images of deserts and harems, chadors and *hijabs*, segregation and subordination. Although many Muslim scholars try to counter the argument by saying that Islam has liberated women, but at the same time they often present the argument that are so ideal and fail to convinced others. However, the above perception is in the line with view given by some Muslim scholars, who propagate their idea by saying that men have the primary religious duty to support the family and women have the duty to work at home only, particularly taking care of household, husband and children.

The above group advocates that women have no right to work; it is the obligation particularly for men alone. She generally to go through four stages and each stage she should be in care of an adult male. These stages are:

- 1) while she is in child, she is under the care of her father;
- 2) after she marries, the responsibility falls on her husband;
- 3) if she neither a father nor a husband, the responsibility of her care falls on her brother;
- 4) if she has no male relative, the obligation falls upon the Muslim community.²⁰

Of course, the above view is weak logically in the sense that when a woman is given the charge of the 'Muslim community' it is not clear who they are. In many cases when we see a close relative do not take care of a woman, how can someone expect that a "community" itself will take care of a woman. In fact in most cases, members of this community do not have clear understanding what the community (*Ummah*) means.

According to them, if a woman were charged to work in order to provide for her livelihood in addition to her natural duties of pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding this would be an obligation above what she could bear, would be an injustice to women. Because this work would be at the expense of her natural duties of pregnancy, birth, breast feeding and raising the children. This perception is dominant in west about Muslim women in the east. The above interpretation is based on the Quranic verse 4: 44 and the later portion of verse 2:233. The verses say:

Man shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former (men), thus the latter (women) and with what they may spend out of their possessions. (The Quran, 4: 44)

20. "Islam and Women's Work," *Aljumu'ah*, No. 2 & 3, p. 12

No human being shall be burdened with more than he is well able to bear: neither shall a mother be made to suffer because of her child, nor, because of his child, he who has forgotten it. And the same duty rests upon the [father's] heir. (The Quran, 2: 233)

However, the mainstream Muslim scholars do not agree with above view. They argue that the interpretations of the verses are limited to those verses alone without consideration for the whole Quran. Therefore, according to them this interpretation is not consistent with other verses of the Quran. Most of the scholars look at the following verse in order to explain the women empowerment issue:²¹

The Men is allotted what they earn and to women is also what they earn. (The Quran, 4: 30)

This verse address men and women in equal term that means should be compensated by the work they perform regardless of gender. Al-Tabari says women have the right to work in order to earn money as men do.²² Besides, Ibn Kathir acknowledges the equal economic rights of men and women, he did not say clearly whether women have the right or work or not.²³ The above verse also supported by a popular Bukhari hadith from Kitab al-Hafgat - Asward Bin Yazeed narrates that: I asked Ayesha (ra) what was the norm of the Prohpet (SAAS) at home? She (Ayesha) replied: He used to work for his family at home. Then when he heard the *adhan* (call to prayer) he would step out. It argues that the hadith supported the fact that there is no gender-based division of labor for married couple. The couple mutually decided what in the best for their household.

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21. See Nawal El-Saadawi, "Women and Islam," in Azizah al-Hibri, *Women and Islam*, UK: Pergamon Press Ltd. 1982, p. 201
 22. Dr. Haji Faisal Bin Haji Othman, *Women, Islam and Nation Building*, (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn. Bhd. 1993), p 20
 23. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al Quran al Azam*, Dar al- Andaluc, 1966, 270-71, cited in Ibid, pp. 20-21

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, in one of his inaugural lecture on women organized by the Women's Institute of management (WIM) has stated that in the Quran, women like the man is elevated to status of vicegerent or *khalifah*. In their exercise of rights and responsibilities as *khalifah*, the Quran makes no distinction between man and women.²⁴ He refers the example of *Surah al-Ahzab, ayah 35* states:

For Muslim man and women, for believing men and women for devout men and women, for true men and women, who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah'a praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.
(The Quran, 33: 35)

Similarly, Shah Abdul Hannan says that the foundation of women empowerment lies with this Khilafah. He says, all empowerment lies with the status as Khalifa. No one can perform one's responsibility without power or authority. In order to perform one's authority as Khalifah each man or women must have some authority. Not only women; in Khilafa lies the foundation of empowerment of all women, men, poor and weak. But if women are deprived now they should be empowered first.²⁵ If any woman freely decides to stay at home, she has rights to do it. It is applicable to men as well. But almighty Allah has never said anything that women will have to stay at home and will not be able to anything outside.²⁶ On the contrary, Hannan says,

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24. Inaugural lecture by YAB Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, The Prime Minister of Malaysia at the Annual Lecture Series, Women's Institute of Management (WIM), 15th January 2005, Westin Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
 25. Shah Abdul Hannan, "Women's Dignity, Rights and Empowerment in Islam," paper presented at the 23rd Animators Training Program for Women, Dhaka, http://www.winess-pioneer.org/vil/Articles/women/women_dignity_right_empowerment.html.
 26. Ibid.

Allah (SWT) has given the same basic responsibility to women as well as men. Since, the 71st verse of Surah Tawba, Allah (SWT) says and all activities including politics and social work fall within this purview:

The believers, men and women, are protector One of another: They uphold What is just and forbid? What is evil: they observe Regular prayers, practice Regular charity and obey Allah and His Messenger. (The Quran, 9: 71)

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi explained his argument by saying that Muslim women in Medina played important leadership roles and worked alongside their men to promote the Islamic state. They attended the mosques to pray and listen to sermons, they took lessons from the prophet (SAW) and sought his advice on public and personal issues. It is significant that out of the four most perfect women in the eyes of Islam – Maryam (the mother of Prophet Isa), Khadijah (the prophet's first wife), Aishah (one of the prophet's wives) and Fatimah (the prophet's daughter and wife of the fourth caliph, Ali Ibn Talib), the last three were all actively involved in economic, political or social affairs.²⁷ Hafsa; the daughter of Caliph Umar (R) was charged with responsibility of collecting the various items on which the Qur'an was written, in readiness for compilation.²⁸

Khadija bint Khuwaylid and Sawdah bint Zamlah [wives of the Prophet (SAAS)] are the example of women who were mothers and nurturers as well as active participants in the economy of their society. Khadijah was a business woman whose wealth and business property gave to Prophet (SAAS) ease of circumstances and freedom from the cares of daily life to accomplish his mission.²⁹ Similarly, Sawdah (RA)

27. Inaugural lecture by YAB Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, op. cit.

28. Bilkisu Yusuf, "Women and empowerment in Islam," <http://www.weeklytrust.com/women13122001.htm>

29. Abdul hamid Siddique, *The life of Muhammad*, (Pakistan: Islamic Publication Ltd. 1989), p. 60

derived her considerable amount of income from her leather work industry.³⁰ There were at least five categories of cottage industries which were performed by Arab women during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras: 1) handicrafts such as weaving and knitting; 2) food processing such as making bread, cheese, shortening and jerked meat; 3) weaving wool and cotton; 4) making dishes, pots, pans etc; 5) making spears and showed, some spares were even known by women's name.

Women in the early Muslim era also participated in the business and economic life of the society and among the famous merchants of Medina were Quilah Umm-Bani Atmar and Caliph Umar appointed as the supervisor and administrator of the market Shaff bint Abdullahi ibn Abd Shams. The caliph held her in high esteem and consulted her on issues.³¹ Another woman Umm Waraqa, was a prominent scholar of the Quran and was small group of female Imams (prayer leaders).³² Thus it is not Islam, which comes in the way but man's attitude which determine the laws of Muslim countries regarding women. But these men in various Muslim countries invoke name of Islam to stem the tide of women's movement for better rights dubbing it as western feminism.³³ Siddique, Chudhury and Leila Ahmad share the same view of Abdullah Badawi.³⁴ Dr. Haji Faisal gives more elaborated views by saying that women has the right to own, manage and keep or sell property with perfect freedom. He also says that early Muslim

30. Leila Ahmad, *Women and Rights in Islam*, (Delhi: Adam Publications, 1991), p. 133

31. Bilkisu Yusuf, "Women and empowerment..." op. cit.

32. Haddah, J. L. Esposito, "Introduction," p. xiii, cited in

33. Asgar Ali, 4

34. See Abdul hamid Siddique, *The life of Muhammad*, (Pakistan: Islamic Publication Ltd., 1989), p. 60, Leila Ahmad, *Women and gender in Islam*, (Yale University Press, 1992), p. 60 and Muhammad Sharif chudhury, *Women Rights in Islam*, (Delhi: adam Publications, 1991), p. 133

era many women worked to earn money in order to support their families.³⁵

But in the centuries after death of Muhammad (SAAS) religious scholars increasingly cited a variety of reasons, from moral degradation in society to women's tendency to be a source of temptation and social discord, to restrict both her presence in public life and in the mosque.³⁶ Thus it is not Islam, which comes in the way but man's attitude which determine the laws of Muslim countries regarding women. But these men in various Muslim countries invoke in the name of Islam.

Despite the overwhelming and strong position of Muslims that Islam liberated women 1400 years ago, people still find there's a problem. Some thought and practice within Muslim society does not reflect this conviction, giving rise to the accusation that Islam oppresses women, to which the Muslim community reacts emotionally with denial and animosity, without reflecting inwardly and addressing the existing problems. Shamima stated:

And I think the reason for this is the way the Muslim community works. What makes Islam work in a Muslim community is a mixture of Islam, the context, an interpretation of Islamic text – Qur'an and Hadith, culture, tradition, customs and the interests of those who are dominant in the community – those who hold the reigns of power.³⁷

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35. Dr. Haji Faisal B. Haji Othman, *Women, Islam and Nation Building*, Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn. Bhd. 1993), pp. 21, 59, 60.
 36. J. Valerie & Haffiman Ladd, "Woemn's religious Observances," in the John L. Esposito, ed. *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 4, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 327
 37. Shamima, "Women & Islam – The Gender Struggle in South Africa: The Ideological Struggle" A paper Presented MYM Islamic Tarbiyyah Programme 19 – 23 Dec, 1997 As-Salaam, KZN, South Africa, <http://shams.za.org/itppaper.htm>

She also says, these elements that work within the Muslim community often do so at cross-purposes with conflicting agendas and motives. As a result we have conflicting messages. If somebody wants to subjugate women they will come with a different interpretation, they will do a whole host of things. It thus is often difficult to distinguish between these various elements. It is therefore not surprising that people are confused on the issues of women, gender and Islam and articulate and send conflicting messages. As a result, those who have been to empower women by following Islamic principles faces tremendous opposition and criticism for “reinterpreting”, “changing the Qur’an”, “following western feminists”, etc. from the traditional *ulama*, the community and other fellow women. On the other hand, another group accuses them “for insisting on maintaining the link to Islam in the gender struggle.”

According to Asghar, Islam gives equal rights to the women, but the real thing is that such demand of equal rights in some cases hurt male ego. Male domination is not at all Islamic, though it is justified in its name. Men use some selective verses from the Qur’an, ignore their social context and use them to perpetuate their domination. They conveniently ignore the verses empowering women or laying down equality of both the sexes. In fact in verses like 2:219, 2:228 and 33:35 there is clear statement about equality of both the sexes and yet they are totally ignored and instead they quote verses like 4:34 to establish their domination.³⁸ Like Shamima and Leila he argues that it was the alien and non-Islamic influences which promoted restrictions on the public role of women in Islam.³⁹

There are many such incident reported in the books of history which establishes that the women used to work in the days of Prophet (SAAS) to support their families and the Prophet never objected to such

38. Asghar Ali Engineer, “Western Feminism Or Rights Of Women In Islam,” http://www.irfi.org/articlesarticles_151_200/western_feminism_or_rights_of_wo.htm

39. Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Qur’an, Women and Modern Society*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1999), p. 212.

engagements. The traditions of the Prophet of Islam on the subject are quoted in Sahih Muslim states below:

Jabir reported: My maternal aunt was divorced thrice. She then intended to get fruits of her palm trees. A man threatened her for her coming out from home. She came to the Prophet who said: Yes, take your fruits of palm trees. It is perhaps you will make gift or do some good act.⁴⁰

Similarly, Abdullah Ibn Masud, one of the companions of Prophet (SAAS) was mostly engaged in religious work and had no time to earn for the family. Therefore, his wife used to work as artisan to earn livelihood for the family. When Prophet came to know about it, he assured her reward for this in the hereafter.⁴¹ There are many incidents working women reported during the time of Prophet (SAAS) that shows Muslim women can engage themselves in lawful professions to earn income in order to support their families in case of need provided they comply with the instructions of the Qur'an and Sunnah regarding modesty.

Therefore, the mainstream contemporary scholars like, Qaradawi, al-Ghanushi and many other scholars agreed that women's work to earn money is not forbidden by Allah (SWT) in any case, but her work should not affect other duties which can not be neglected, such as her duty towards her children and husband, which in her foremost and basic duty. Qaradawi adds, sometimes it could be the family who needs her work, such as to help her husband, or to care for her children, or young brothers and sisters, of her father in his old age.⁴² In order to

40. Muhammad Sharif Chawdhury, *Women's Rights in Islam*, 9Delhi: Adam Publishers, 1991) pp. 131-32

41. *Ibid*, 133

42. Yusuf al Qaradawi, *The Status of Women in Islam*, http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/Q_W/default.htm [March 2005], also see Yousuf al Qaradawi, *The Status of Women in Islam*, Translated by Sheikh Mohammed Gemea'ah, Egypt: Islamic INC Publishing and Distribution, 1996, pp. 122-25

justify his argument Qaradawi stated the story of the two daughters [Prophet Shuyeb (AS) and his two daughters] and the old man mentioned in Surah Al-Qasas in the Quran, who used to look after their father's sheep. The Almighty says: "And when he arrived at the water of Midian (Madyan) he found there a group of men watering (their flocks) and besides them he found two women who were keeping back (their flocks) and beside them he found two women who were keeping back (their flocks). He said, "What in the matter with you?" They said "We cannot water (our flocks) until the shepherds take (their flocks). And our father is a very old man."⁴³ But her work should not affect other duties which cannot be neglected such as her duty towards her children and husband, which is her foremost and basic duty. Qaradawi added:

What is required of the Muslim community is to organize matters and make arrangements so that the Muslim women can work, if her interest or her family's or her society's requires that without touching her modesty, or contradicting her commitment towards Allah, herself or her home.⁴⁴

In his discussion Qaradawi added that if she goes out of her house, she should adhere to the morals of a Muslim women in her clothing, her talk and movement. Since Allah (SWT) says in the Quran:

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from sexual acts) and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent and let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment.⁴⁵

43. The Quran, *al Qasas*, 28: 23

44. Yousuf al Qaradawi, *Ibid*.

45. The Quran, 24: 31

*Then be not be not soft in speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease (of hypocrisy or evil desire for adultery etc.) should be moved with desire, but speak in an honorable manner.*⁴⁶

According to Qaradawi, as for employment, women are permitted to do it provided that the following conditions are met: first, it should be legal. The Muslim women is not permitted to work in a place where she will be in privacy with non-Mahram (Marriageable) man, or in clubs where she is supported to offer alcohol to people. Second, she should abide by the Islamic morals in dress talk etc. Third, women's employment should not be at the expense of her principal work, namely caring about her children and husband.⁴⁷

Rashid al Ghanushi, a contemporary scholar and activist of Islam has given more clear interpretation of the Islamic role towards women. Ghanushi explains that if women is raised in oppression by the father and the brother and than husband, it installed in her sense of dependency, a lack of confidence and openness to ridicule and above. According to Ghanushi a women in a Muslim society confined to interests in clothing, cosmetic, children and gossip rather than the urgent cultural and political issue in society.

It was a fruit of the secularism which kept her from knowledge and made her into an instrument of reproduction and a cheap thrill to be enjoyed by the man who crushed her and casts her aside.⁴⁸

46. The Quran, 33: 32

47. Yousuf al qaradawi, op. cit. p. 5

48. Al -Ghanushi, "al-Mariah," p. 46, in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Islam and gender: Dilemmas in the Changing in Arab World," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 20

Nothing in Islam says that a women must take care of the house or raise the children. If she chooses to do that she is to be compensated. If she decided that she does not wish to be paid, the gratitude for her must be expressed. Furthermore, the husband must help with the house work. This is the way of the Prophet (SAAS), who used to help his wives.⁴⁹

Asghar and Leila Ahmad disagree with the mainstream Muslim scholars and argue that it is not compulsory to wear the Islamic dress (veil) while going out of their home. Leila points out that "it was nowhere explicitly prescribed in the Qur'an: the verses dealing with women's clothing ... instructed women guard their private parts and throw scarf over their bosoms."⁵⁰ Leila added that the veil was apparently is use in Sasanian society, and segregation of the sexes and use of the veil were heavily in evidence in the Christian Middle East and Mediterranean regions at the time of the rise of Islam. During the Muhammad's lifetime only towards the end of that his wives were the only Muslims a required veil (covering their wholes body except hands and face).⁵¹ Similarly Asghar says:

"Many Muslim women took part in wars and some of them were rulers as well. It is not true that they always observed the veil and stayed at home."⁵²

However, there is no disagreement among the mainstream and majority Muslim scholars regarding the issue of veil. It is agreed that Muslim women have to cover their whole body except face and hands.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 24

50. Sura 24:31-32, See Laila Ahmad, *op. cit.* p. 5

51. *Ibid.*, p. 5

52. Asgher Ali, *op. cit.* p. 212

Regarding the education and women the Prophet of Islam not only said that the search for knowledge was compulsory on every Muslim male and female, but he also said who ever educates a male educates an individual and whoever educates a female educates a nation. The Qur'an and hadiths of the Prophet (SAAS) both obligate Muslim men and women to acquire knowledge and education. It is duty for every Muslim. Allah says in the Quran:

*Those truly fear Allah, among His servants, who have knowledge.*⁵³

Prophet's hadith repeatedly emphasizes the acquirement of education and knowledge for every Muslim male and female. For example, one well known hadith states that, "Seeking knowledge is a duty of every Muslim man or women." Another hadith states, "The father, if he educates his daughter well, will enter paradise." Yet another hadith states that, "A mother is a school. If she is educated, then a whole people are educated."

According to Bukhari, the Prophet (SAAS) was so earnest about female education that he directed his followers to education even their slave girls.⁵⁴ Aisha (R), the wife of the Prophet (SAAS) learnt so much and had wonderful memory that the Prophet told his companions that they could take half of their knowledge of Islam from this 'red girl' referring to Aisha.⁵⁵ Therefore, after the death of the Prophet Aisha transmitted large number of hadith, the fourth largest, corrected numerous others and taught many men and women.

Here not only does the Prophet give priority to the education of the female but also by likening the female with the nation he conferred a special position and by virtue of that positions a special role for the female. The female to this extent symbolizes the human races and the

53. The Quran, 35: 28

54. Haji Faisal, op. cit. p. 40-41

55. Ibid, p. 8

custodian of human values and the conscience of society. Therefore, the Prophet (SAAS) not only made the education of male and female compulsory but he appointed a separate day in which he attended to the educational needs of the women.

In the Muslim world, at the beginning of Islam, there were no restrictions or prohibitions towards women to seek knowledge and education. There were many Muslim scholars in the field of religion, literature, music, education and medicine. For example, a women named nafisa who was related to Ali (R), the fourth caliph, had a vast knowledge of and was an expert on the hadiths of the Prophet (SAAS). Many famous scholars of the time, such as Imam Shafi'i would participate in Nafisa's scholarly discourse and learn from her.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper is to develop a framework of women empowerment. The above discussion shows that there is no doubt that Islam strongly favors towards women empowering. But it does not mean that the empowerment of women is viable alternative to veil (aurah/purdah), which has been propagated by some Muslim as well as non Muslim scholars. It is not necessary for Muslim women to replace the veil with western dresses in order to participate in public life. Based on the discussion above we may identify some basic framework of women empowerment in Islam.

First, according to Islam the status of man and women are equal. *Second*, Muslim women are allowed to work outside home or to participate in the public affairs. *Third*, there is no division of labor between the wife and the husband. It means it is not obligatory for wife to work at home and husband to work outside. Activities at home as well as outside home needs to be shared on the basis of mutual understanding between husband and wife. *Fourth*, it is the women's wish whether she would like to work outside home or not. If she wants to stay at home she can. *Fifth*, certain circumstances women work seems to be necessary, for example if she needs to help her family, such as to help her husband, or to care for her children, or young brothers and

sisters, of her father in his old age. *Sixth*, she should not work in a place where she will be in privacy with non-Mahram (Marriageable) man, or in clubs where she is supported to offer alcohol to people. *Seventh*, she should abide by the Islamic morals in dress talk etc. *Third*, women's employment should not be at the expense of her principal work, namely caring about her children and husband. However, it is an attempt only, scholars should come up with a comprehensive framework of women empowerment.

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