

Women's Right to Education: An Analysis in Perspective of Islamic Teachings

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Abstract

In today's world almost all societies are aware of the importance of female education. Islam is a complete code of life, where the concept of female education is clear and important. There is no restriction and confinement on female education. The teachings without any discrimination are alike for both genders. Therefore, being a Muslim, it is our responsibility to encourage female education and enhance their role as nation builders. Surprisingly, Islamic teachings regarding women education are either misrepresented or confused. There is lack of clear stance about this important matter. In our glorious many female scholars and women held important positions after gaining higher education but this aspect is mainly ignored. This article will explore this issue in the light of Qurān and Ḥadīth which shall bring clarity towards this issue and the misconception shall be resolved.

Keywords: Women's right to education, Islām, Qurān and Ḥadīth.

Introduction

Before initiating formal debate on women education in Islām, it is important to discuss the pre-Islām era. The emergence and the contribution of Islām to the mankind in general and to women in specific is essential to highlighted. Allah says in the Holy Qurān;

“And Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing. And he gave you hearing, sight and hearts that you might give thanks (to Allah)”¹.

In this verse humans are directed to seek knowledge because of the sentence “knowing nothing and give thanks” and there is no gender direction which means education is important for both according to Islām. In a study by Ikhwān and Iskandar² mentioned that undeniably, in Islāmic education, there are numerous vital concepts that are indispensable elements in the Islāmic

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education system such as the concept of religion (Dīn), the concept of man (human), the concept of knowledge ('ilm and ma'rifah), a draft policy (wisdom), the concept of justice ('adl), the concept of charity ('Amal as manners), and the concept of the University (college) Jāmi'ah.

Indisputably, the sixth century is universally recognized as the darkest era in the history of mankind. It was the time in which the entire mankind stooped to the lowest level of depravation and morality. The ignorance, poverty, social imbalances among the elite and average classes was on peak. The elite and ruling sect of the society were enjoying imperious life at the cost of tumbled posters who were suffering from extreme level of poverty, ignorance and other forms of degradation. The two ruling dynasties i.e. the Romans and Persians were dominating powers across the globe. The lacking spiritual and religious ethos put the entire mankind into the civil war. The entire Europe was falling in deep darkness and they were not yet acquainted with the light of knowledge. To a great extent, the mankind were supine from them and they were unconservant, let alone raise voice.

The East and Central Asian powers were in stark darkness. They lacked a well-established political system that could lead them to the road of development and prosperity. The entire sub-continent had fallen into the darkness of ignorance. Demoralization that dominated the entire mankind, engulfed the sub-continent as well. Those who opted to migrate to tribal areas such as 'Arabs, preminent the others in terms of some ethical values such as; being forthright, truthful and loyal to themselves and others etc. However, they were like others in terms of moral vices, entangled with ethical and concerted evils³.

The status of women in pre-prophetic era was highly degraded and full of humiliation and they were treated like critters. They were sexually assaulted irrespective to the relationship they were in, and treated like cattle. A ruler from Iran named as Yazd'gar-2 married to his own daughter and then killed her in the name of honour and to avoid disrepute. Furthermore, in Iran, which was a part of Roman Empire, any kind of relation with women wasn't considered unlawful rather was considered an act of worship. Similarly, Bihraam another ruler was married to his sibling. These are just a few examples of the widespread mistreatment of women. They were used for sexual gratification by men. The status of women in sub-continent wasn't any different than other empires. Women were considered unfaithful and disloyal.

They were burnt with the deceased. They were not allowed to remarry if their first husband passed away⁴. They were humiliated by the dominant segment of the society i.e. then men⁵. They were stabled from inheritance⁶. Before the emergence of Islām, outlasting the younger females was considered as contravened to honour. Burying of females was much common in ‘Arabs.

Till the emergence of prophetic dictates from the Almighty Allah, the mankind whelmed with vanity, unethical and concrete sins. Irrespective of gender discrimination, the basic rights of masses were cruelly smeared. Men in general and women in specific were always persecuted by dominant segment of the society. They were beaten, kept in darkness of ignorance, and treated harshly.

Statement of the Problem

The central problem is that the Muslim world has been facing is the misconceptions spread against female rights in Islam and specifically women rights to education. This is one of the leading causes of lower rate of female education in the Muslim world.

Objectives of the study

Numerous prior studies expound the constructive role plays by both male and female in promoting social wellbeing of the people⁷ therefore the main objective of this paper is to highlight the importance of women education in Islām. It is a highly controversial issue throughout the history till the modern times and mostly western thinkers (in a deliberate effort to tarnish the image of Islām), stress that Islam denies education rights to women, among many other rights which is not true. The irony is that many so called Islāmic scholars have also preached the same and denied education rights to women. The common folks in such scenario are either following blindly those scholars and left confused. This paper will shed light on this important yet controversial issue with the help of Qurān and sunnah so that nothing is left vague and confusing.

Literature Review

Ṣāleh (1986) examined the expansion of higher education in Kingdom of Saudi ‘Arabia. The historical roots of education which were based on Islam was explored. Further more philosophical and modern education has also been discussed in this paper. Modern education has been started in 1957 with just 21

students which has been increased to 63,563 total in 1982. This paper also examined the female education in Sa'udi 'Arabia. Hamdan (2005) examined the female situation in Saudi 'Arabia⁸. The main objectives of this paper were to identify the status quo situation of female education in said country and to identify the difference between actual teachings of Qurān and the misleading interpretation of Qurān about females and to identify the changes in the female education, which plays a key role in the economy of a country. It has been observed that matters of female has been associated with Qurānic education misguidedly. Kull (2009) examined the lead of a former male-controlled Islāmic education and women teachers in Indonesia⁹. Data has been collected by visiting to field in five cities of Indonesia, the data showed that men, women, Islāmic scholars and teachers encounter the main gender unfairness in education of Islām. It has been argued that gender awareness are needed to create in Muslims students. To decrease gender bias in Islāmic education, women teachers are needed to be increased with the satisfactory funding.

Abukari (2014) critically examined the female education according to Islām. Islām teaches about the importance of education for both male and female, it is a fundamental requirement of for both according to Islām¹⁰. But unfortunately due to difference interpretation of Qurān sayings led Muslims to the misguided path. In this article it is argued that Islām teaches us about the importance of female education according to Islām. Siddiqa and Ruby (2018) examined the position of female in Islām according to the current Indian situation¹¹. They concluded that female position is better in Islām due to the equality to the male. According to the Qurān men and women are equal in Islām. The main objectives of this paper is to examine the female status in the family, women education, marital status and professional life. Furthermore they concluded that there is a big difference in women status in Qurān teachings and actual women situation in Indian states. They suggested that both the central government and state government should help to increase the standard of education of women. Recently in a study by Bībī, Sharīf and Shafīq (2019) studied the cultural and religious status of female¹². In Pakistan when the girl escape from the home, it is considered as a shameful act for whole family, therefore after this kind of act the girl has to face punishment from the family. The main objective of this study was to discourse the perception of the crime which originate in the name of honor.

1. Emergence of Islām and mankind

The particular dawn in the year of 610 A.D. was the first ever dawn from in-depth darkness of ignorance to the limelight of knowledge, from gender inequality to homogeneity of basic rights, from poverty to wealth and from social imbalance to balance¹³. It is Islām which taught the way of living to the mankind. It is Islām which lifted each segment of society to a status of dignity, prosperity and respect. It is Islām which prohibited 'Arabs from burying their daughters, forbade them from alcohol consumption and motivated them to truthfulness, uprightness and trustworthiness. Before Islam, it was normal thing that different tribes that the 'Arabs were distributed in, would break into wars on petty matters and those wars and fights would continue for generations, sometimes as long as 40 years. It was also a norm that upon the death of the head of the family, i.e. the father, mothers would be also distributed while distributing property and would be sexually assaulted and mistreated. Women had no place or worth in society; whether they were daughters, mothers, sisters or wives. Islām is the first religion in the whole world that elevated the status of women and made it to the same level as men. Islām stressed on treated them as equal beings, having brain, wisdom and piety. Even paradise is placed under the feet of a mother. Islām gave the rights of inheritance to women. The status of mother is so much highlighted that once a companion of prophet saw came to him and asked him who has most rights on him? Prophet saw said thrice about his mother. Upon the 4th time, he said your father.

The emergence of Islām came through knowledge which became fundamental pillar of Islām. The 'Arabs, having all vices, ethical and concerted evils, were enlightened by Wisdom and knowledge through Islām. Islām allocated social status and specified rights for women. The women that were buried alive and treated with degradation and cruelty, were uplifted socially and morally. They were uplifted through knowledge, awareness and wisdom. The very revelation of Almighty Allah to prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the cave of Hira was about knowledge.

أَفْرَأَ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ أَفْرَأَ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ¹⁴

“(O Beloved!) Read (commencing) with the Name of Allah, Who has created (everything). He created man from a hanging mass (clinging) like a leech (to the mother's womb). Read, and your Lord is Most Generous,

Who taught man (reading and writing) by the pen, Who (besides that) taught man (all that) which he did not know".

The first order presented in these verses tells to 'reading' as a part of an act of gaining of information. This is a miserable reflection upon Muslims and Islamic societies that we have construct, since knowledge is one of the pioneering pillars upon which the edifice of Islam has been uplifted. Within Islām there is no dissenting opinion found on acquisition of knowledge being binding and abjuration. The significance and excellence of knowledge has been highlighted both directly and indirectly in over five hundred places in the Holy Qurān. Indeed, one of the imperative duties and obligations of Prophethood was the proliferation of knowledge and wisdom to all mankind. Though God Almighty and the Holy Prophet (PBUH) use the masculine form of sentence to describe most of the commandments, women are also tied to act and enfilade those principle and regulations. Allah Almighty says in Qurān:

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ¹⁵

“Say: ‘Can those who have knowledge and those who do not be alike?’
So only the wise do receive the admonition.”

إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ¹⁶

“So only those of His servants who have knowledge (of these realities with a vision and outlook) fear Him. Surely, Allah is Almighty, Most Forgiving”

None of these verses specify that only 'wise men' receive admonition or that only 'male servants' who have knowledge fear Him (Allah). A number of Prophetic traditions also talk about knowledge being abjuration and binding in character.

Last messenger of Allah, Ḥaḍrat Muḥammad (PBUH) said:

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ¹⁷

“Acquisition of knowledge is binding on all Muslims (both men and women without any discrimination)”

The last messenger of Allah, Ḥaḍrat Muḥammad (PBUH) said at another place:

مَنْ سَلَكَ طَرِيقًا يَلْتَمِسُ فِيهِ عِلْمًا سَهَّلَ اللَّهُ لَهُ بِهِ طَرِيقًا إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ¹⁸

“Allah Almighty makes the path to paradise easier for him who walks on it for getting knowledge ”

It is disclosed from the Holy Qurān and Ḥadīths that the acquisition of knowledge is abjuratory for women in the same way as in the affair of men. The study of the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) also exhibits that He himself made special arrangements for the education and training of women.

Abū Sa‘id al-Khudari (R.A) said that some women said to the Holy Prophet (PBUH):

يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، وَاللَّهِ مَا نَقْدِرُ عَلَيْكَ فِي مَجْلِسِكَ مِنَ الرَّحَالِ، فَوَاعِدْنَا مِنْكَ يَوْمًا نَأْتِيكَ فِيهِ. قَالَ: "مَوْعِدُكُمْ بَيْتُ فُلَانٍ". وَأَتَاهُمْ فِي ذَلِكَ الْيَوْمِ، وَلِذَلِكَ الْمَوْعِدِ¹⁹

“Men have gone ahead of us (in terms of acquisition of knowledge). Therefore, appoint a special day for our benefit as well. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) specified one day for them. He (PBUH) would meet them on that day, consult them and educate them about commandments of Allah Almighty”

‘Aisha Siddiqa (R.A), mother of the faithful, was a Ḥadīth-narrator, scholar, intellectual and jurist of great standing. She is believed to have compiled 2,210 traditions. Abū Hurayrah, ‘Abdullah bin ‘omar and Anas bin Mālīk (May Allah Be Well Pleased with Them) were the only ones from amongst male Ḥadīth-narrators who had compiled more traditions than she did. These verses of Qurān and Ḥadīth of the companion of Prophet (SAW) exhibits the significances of knowledge for all, irrespective of the gender. The mankind that had fallen into the deep pit of ignorance was ascended by Islam. The example set by Prophet (SAW) and his companions was that of acquisition of knowledge. The life of Khadija (R.A) (the first wife of Prophet) Wife of prophet (SAW) and great trader) and ‘Aishā Siddiqa (R.A) (The youngest wife of Prophet (SAW), A politician, social worker and a scholar) is a sample for all women.

The heroic character of Umme ‘Atiya (R.A) who joined in 06 (six) fights/battles with the sacred Prophet (PBUH) is another example of women empowerment in Islām. The trend still persists after the Prophet-hood, that women/females were part of (Majlis al-Shūrā); a parliamentary board during the Caliph ‘Umar (R.A). Similarly, during period of Caliph ‘Uthmān (R.A) women were designated as ambassadors²⁰. These examples about the role of women in Islam can't be ignored particularly as far as acquisition of knowledge and transfusion to the other, are concerned. It is a matter of great pride and privilege for modern women that Islam is the only religion that inspired the

future generations and changed the whole course of history regarding women empowerment and education to such an extent that the world's oldest university was opened by a Muslim female named Fātima bint Muḥammad Al-Fihriya Al-Qurashiya who was an 'Arab Muslim woman. Few people are aware that she is credited for founding the oldest existing, continually operating and first degree-awarding educational institution in the world, The University of Al Quaraouiyine in Fes, Morocco in 859 CE.

The madrasa Al-Fihri founded is still in operation today. It is the oldest continually operating educational institution in the world and is sometimes referred to as the world's oldest university, by being the first institution to award degrees indicative of different levels of study. The mosque built with it is also still in operation, and is one of the largest in North Africa. Here, it is interesting to note that the time when East was enlightened and women were being given their rights, respect, education and empowerment, West was treating their women badly, denying them their rights. History reveals that it was merely females from middle classes and who were probable to be knowledgeable during the 10th century. In a study by Coates (1993:28) states that:

“Even Milton, the famous poet, when asked whether his daughters would learn other languages beside English replied “One tongue is sufficient for a woman”. This fact is underlined by Coates (28-29) “who argues that before 19th century, women were denied access to any form of higher education beyond the skills of reading and writing.”

Pakistan is a developing country with a large population where women are in majority as compared to men. As Quaid- e-A'zam once famously said;

“Give me educated mothers and I will give you educated nation.”

But unfortunately, in Pakistan the overall ratio of school going children is very low due to many reasons; the main cause of which is poverty. Many children either don't go at all, or mostly drop out before matric or in primary level. Girls' level of literacy is even lower than boys due to lack of awareness and backward mentality. In Pakistan, a person who is able to write and read his name is considered as literate and still with this eligibility of literacy; the rate is very low. For details, UNESCO has collected and published a set of data highlighting the details of primary, secondary and tertiary education levels of girls and boys from 2008 till 2017 which clearly shows the low level of overall education and lower level of female education.

Concluding Remarks

According to the Holy Qurān, male (men) and female (women) are equal/alike in the eyes of Allah. As in Verse 4:1 of the holy Qurān:

“O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, Who created you from a single person created of like nature his mate and from them twain 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 you²¹.”

According to Islām, the gaining of knowledge and learning is indispensable for all. The Holy Prophet Muhammad said that:

“The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim”²².

There is a two way approach to deal with this issue of female education in Muslim world generally and Pakistan specifically. Qurānic laws and instructions regarding female rights and education should be spread along with Ḥadīths of prophet saw and the masses should be educated and a deliberate effort on governmental level made to enlighten the minds of the common people about women's rights be made. Workshops and seminars by Non Government Organizations (NGO's) and other regulatory bodies can be arranged. Islāmic education with a focus on female rights should be made mandatory in all forms of education to wipe out the web of misinterpretation about Islām and confusions. Spreading Islāmic education is the main solution of this issue as we are still facing the remnants of Hindu and other cultures and mixing up religion with culture and following such practices in the name of religion that have no place in Islām. Spreading the right knowledge is the solution for this dilemma.

Then comes the second step which is establishing more schools and improving the quality and standards of the existing ones. if we as a nation crave to thrive and stir towards sustainable progress and prosperity, we need to follow the golden Islamic principles highlighting women education and empowerment and understand that the women of our society must be given every opportunity to attain knowledge and education which is not only her due, but a right that has been destined to her by Almighty Allah.

In the light of above discussion, it is high time we should deal with this problem on a priority basis and establish organizations to prioritize this issue

of our country. Government should take measure not only to increase number of schools, colleges and universities specifically in rural areas but also should try to improve the current educational standards. There is this disparity between education where rich people are sending their children to private schools having much better standard and poor people can’t even afford government schools many times. If they do, due to extreme poverty, lots of siblings and their responsibility, girls and boys both end up sharing financial burden with parents. Girls mostly are made to sit at home, helping mothers in taking care of younger siblings and doing house chores or sometimes working to earn bread too. While young boys are forced to enter into child labour and earn for their family. Government needs to go to grass root levels to alleviate poverty, educate poverty, bring awareness among rural parents to encourage sending their children to schools etc. The government also needs to improve the current educational standards with the abolishment of ghost schools, making sure the teachers are inducted on merit and they do their jobs honestly as most government schools are notoriously famous not only for low standard, but poor teacher participation in their jobs, lack of honesty and many more evils that are leading to aggravate the already serious conditions of literacy of females in Pakistan.

Policy Recommendations

Concrete steps should be taken. Poverty alleviation should be the prime focus. Number of schools colleges etc should be increased. Strict laws should be implemented on educational institutes so as to not let them become a commercial industry where the main focus is on making money through imposing high fees. There should be rules and regulations regarding fees, syllabus implementations and universality in syllabus, and controlling other related factors. Honest people should be inducted in such regulatory organizations. In this regards, higher education commission of Pakistan is doing a commendable job. Such other organizations should be established for primary and secondary education that work as honestly as Higher Education Commission (HEC) impose laws to improve standards and advise government on establishing new institutes as well. Only then we will able to compete with the world and improve. Organizations following the footsteps of HEC made purely to enhance primary and secondary education and also to improve female input and retention in education will help solve this social dilemma. It’s time we realize the graveness of this social problem and take concrete steps to

eradicate it and improve female literacy rate. This will lead to rapid social and economic progress as well where we can compete with the developed countries and also enlist Pakistan in the list of developed countries.

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