

Women Empowerment in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study is to expound on the concept of 'empowerment' in the light of the Qur'an and Sunnah. The study consists of six sections describing first, the status of women in ancient civilizations; second, the mission of Islam; third, the necessity of understanding the male-female relationship; fourth, the meanings of empowerment; fifth, the reasons why women empowerment is vital with supporting evidence from the Qur'an; and lastly, women empowerment through institutions namely, family, education, economy, religion, and government. This paper is written based on primary and secondary sources. The former comprises selected verses from the Qur'an and their exegesis (tafsir). The latter consists of books, journals, proceedings of seminars, and other materials. The selected verses' English translation is based on Abdullah Yusuf's The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an unless stated otherwise.

The Status of Women in the Ancient Civilizations

In ancient civilizations, patriarchy was one of the prime obstacles to women's advancement and development.

Male domination and women subordination were some of the common features of those civilizations.

Women faced discrimination regarding inheritance or property rights.

Girls were seen as burdens for their families. Sons were preferred to daughters because they would earn and look after their parents.

What is marginalization and why is it a problem?

The predominant patriarchal culture in the ancient civilizations fostered the subordination of women and placed them on the margins of society.

Marginalization happens when a person or a group of people is treated as invisible; that is as if it is not there

Negative impacts resulting from the marginalization of women are:

- (1) Deprivation of access to all opportunities and benefits.
- (2) Powerlessness.
- (3) Discrimination.
- (3) Low self-esteem.
- (4) Limited self-confidence.
- (5) Depression.

The Mission of Islam

One of the missions of Islam is to raise women's position by breaking the shackles of patriarchy – the system which keeps women dominated by and subordinate to men both in public and private spheres-

In Islam women are not subordinates of men – they are neither created as inferior beings nor are they created to work for men.

Islamic civilization is the result of the joint action of men and women – they both coordinated in space and time in order to bring about progress.

As a matter of fact, there is no progress without the help of women.

Men and women are equally empowered to play the role of Khalifah, that is, maintaining proper order in society.

The Necessity of understanding the male-female relationship

Without understanding the relationship between men and women it is not possible to break the shackles of patriarchy.

The Qur'an describes men and women as *awliya'* (mutual protectors, helpers):

وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ أُولَئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

The believers men and women are protectors one of another: they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers practice regular charity and obey Allah and His apostle. On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power Wise(9:71).

No human society can be good and successful where there is no equity and balance in the growth and development of both genders.

The genders are different and each has its own significant role in society but they are also partners and they complement each other.

Some factors that hinder or affect women empowerment or development

The following are some of the impediments to women's empowerment:

Atychiphobia: Fear of failure or avoidance of things one finds challenging. People with atychiphobia may avoid any situation where they see a potential for failure, such as a job interview.

Powerlessness: Lack of decision-making power, lack of self-esteem or confidence. Low self-esteem is when someone lacks confidence about who they are and what they can do.

Discrimination and inequality: Denial of opportunities to learn or acquire skills, earn, etc.

Denial of rights, such as a right to education, employment, freedom to make decisions, etc.

Concept of 'Women Empowerment'

What does it mean to be empowered?

The word 'empowerment' literally means enablement, and authorization.

Technically, there is still no agreed definition of what 'women empowerment' is. Different thinkers have defined 'women empowerment' in different ways. In this study, 'women's empowerment is defined by three pillars namely:

- 1) Authority.
- 2) Self-esteem or confidence.
- 3) Justice.

1. Authority

In Islam the husband is the leader (*Qawwam*) of the family as defined by Allah; he is responsible for them (wife and children):

وَالْمُطَلَّاتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنْفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ ۚ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَهُنَّ أَنْ يَكْتُمْنَ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ فِي أَرْحَامِهِنَّ إِنْ كُنَّ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۚ وَبُعُولَتُهُنَّ أَحَقُّ بِرَدِّهِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ إِنْ أَرَادُوا إِصْلَاحًا وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

“Divorced women shall wait by themselves for three periods of purity [after menses], and it is not lawful for them to conceal what Allah has created in their wombs if they believe in Allah and the Last Day; and their husbands have a greater right to restore them during this [duration], if they desire reconciliation. The wives have rights similar to the obligations upon them, in accordance with honourable norms; and men have a degree above them, and Allah is all-mighty and all-wise.” (Qur’an, 2: 228).

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ ۚ

“Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth ” (Qur'an, 4:34).

It is worth noting, however, that man's role of leadership in relation to his family does not mean his dictatorship over his wife. Islam emphasizes the importance of Shura or taking counsel and mutual agreement in family decisions. Allah says,

وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

“Those who answer their Lord, maintain the prayer, and their affairs are by counsel among themselves, and they spend out of what We have provided them with” (Qur'an, 42:38).

The key advantages of Shura, also interpreted as the “decision-making process”, in a family setting are:

- 1) It is one of the tools for improving family solidarity.
- 2) It makes the family members feel that they are part of a family that shares common values and goals for the sake of Allah.

2. Self-confidence

Developing self-confidence for women who are suffering from self-doubt to achieve their full potential is essential to women's empowerment.

Self-confidence is key to success: Individuals with high levels of confidence have both (a) high self-efficacy and (b) low fear of failure.

Self-efficacy is one's belief in their ability to succeed. It is a practice of reframing one's negative self-talk to create a positive shift in one's mindset; that is, to think positively.

To step outside one's comfort zone, one must have low fear of failure.

Self-confidence is about:

- 1) Accepting and trusting oneself.
- 2) Believing that one is capable.
- 3) Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses well.
- 4) Having a positive view of oneself.
- 5) Having the strength to claim one's rights.
- 6) Turning one's thoughts into action.

3. Justice

Women empowerment is about the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and providing opportunities to them, including the right to education, the right to reject the terms of a marriage proposal and to initiate divorce, the right to make choices in life, or have options, and the right to have access to opportunities.

It is noteworthy that in Islam a woman has a right to choose whom she should get married to meaning, no one should force her to marry anyone without her consent.

It was narrated from Ibn Abbas that: the Messenger of Allah said: "A widow has more right (to decide) concerning herself than her guardian, and a virgin should be consulted". It was said: "O Messenger of Allah, a virgin may be too shy to speak." He said: "Her consent is her silence" (Sunan ibn Majah, Book 9, Hadith 26).

It is also noteworthy that as the woman's right to decide about her marriage is recognized, so also her right to seek an end to an unsuccessful marriage is recognized.

Why is empowerment important in life?

The aim here is to describe the importance of empowerment in the following domains:

Education.

Economy.

Educational Empowerment

Education is a skill every human being has the right to. Unfortunately, there are still places in the world where women are denied the right to education.

In the age of the knowledge economy, education and women empowerment are paramount. This means, without education women's empowerment isn't possible.

Education plays a significant role in:

- 1) Enlightening women: it enables them to gain a sense of power, that is, the power to speak out; make informed decisions (decisions based on facts); review decisions; have their views pushed in the mainstream media (advocate their rights).
- 2) Developing women's confidence boosts their self-esteem and dignity.
- 3) Increasing women's earning power: opens the door to higher-paying jobs; it improves their socio-economic status and that of their entire family and community.

Education is a basic human right.

Lack of education has an enormous impact on one's life. It result in:

Economic Empowerment

Islam has empowered women by granting them a rightful share in their family inheritance. Allah says,

لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ
الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ ۚ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا

“From what is left by parents and those nearest related there is a share for men and a share for women whether the property be small or large a determinate share” (Qur'an, 4:7).

A woman's entitlement to *Mahr* (dowry)

Dowry is the transfer of cash, jewelry, and other valuable assets from the bride to the groom at the time of marriage.

In Islam the man is obligated to pay the *Mahr* (dower) to the woman unless the woman chooses not to take:

وَأَتُوا النِّسَاءَ صَدُقَاتِهِنَّ نِحْلَةً فَإِنْ طِبْنَ لَكُمْ عَنْ شَيْءٍ مِنْهُ نَفْسًا فَكُلُوهُ هَنِيئًا مَرِيئًا

“Give women their dowries as an obligation; but if they remit anything of it of their own accord, then consume it as [something] lawful and wholesome” (Qur'an, 4:4).

It is prohibited for a man who wants to divorce a wife and marry another one to take back the dowry, even if it is a lot of wealth after they have had their privacy with each other. Allah says,

وَأِنْ أَرَدْتُمْ اسْتِبْدَالَ زَوْجٍ مَّكَانَ زَوْجٍ وَآتَيْتُمْ إِحْدَاهُنَّ قِنطَارًا فَلَا تَأْخُذُوا مِنْهُ شَيْئًا أَتَأْخُذُونَهُ
بُهْتَنًا وَإِثْمًا مُّبِينًا

“And if ye wish to exchange one wife for another and ye have given unto one of them a sum of money (however great), take nothing from it. Would ye take it by the way of calumny and open wrong” (Qur’an, 4:20).

وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمْ أَنْ تَأْخُذُوا مِمَّا ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ شَيْئًا إِلَّا أَنْ يَخَافَا أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ اللَّهِ

“And it is not lawful for you (men) to take back (from your wives) any of what you have given them, except when both parties fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allah” (Qur’an, 2:229).

Taking the dowry back is an injustice and an act of sin.

A woman's entitlement to her earnings (income or salary)

وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوْا مَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بِهِ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ ۚ لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا
اَكْتَسَبُوا^ط وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا اَكْتَسَبْنَ^ج ۚ وَاسْأَلُوا اللَّهَ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ^ق إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ
بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا

“And in no wise covet those things in which Allah hath bestowed his gifts more freely on some of you than on others: to men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn: but ask Allah of His bounty: for Allah hath full knowledge of all things” (Qur'an, 4:32).

It is understood from the above verse that Islam has given equal ownership rights to both men and women with respect to what they earn. Hence, it is forbidden for men to violate women's right to earnings.

It is worth mentioning that a wife is not obliged to disclose to her husband how much she earns and how much she spends.

It is also worth noting that a wife's possessions before marriage do not transfer to her husband.

A wife's entitlement to *Nafqah* or maintenance

In Islam, the husband is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife; he is obliged to pay for his wife's housing, food, medical expense, and clothing during their marriage.

وَالْوَالِدَاتُ يُرْضِعْنَ أَوْلَادَهُنَّ حَوْلَيْنِ كَامِلَيْنِ^ط لِمَنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يُتِمَّ الرَّضَاعَةَ^ج وَعَلَى الْمَوْلُودِ لَهُ رِزْقُهُنَّ وَكِسْوَتُهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ^ج لَا تُكَلَّفُ نَفْسٌ إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا^ج لَا تُضَارُّ وَالِدَةُ بَوْلِدِهَا وَلَا مَوْلُودٌ لَهُ بَوْلِدِهِ^ج وَعَلَى الْوَارِثِ مِثْلُ ذَلِكَ^ق فَإِنْ أَرَادَا فِصَالًا عَنْ تَرَاضٍ مِنْهُمَا وَتَشَاوُرٍ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَا^ق وَإِنْ أَرَدْتُمْ أَنْ تَسْتَرْضِعُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذَا سَلَّمْتُمْ مَا آتَيْتُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ^ق وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ

“Mothers shall suckle their children for two full years, —that for such as desire to complete the suckling— and on the father shall be their maintenance and clothing, in accordance with honourable norms. No soul is to be tasked except according to its capacity: neither the mother shall be made to suffer harm on her child’s account, nor the father on account of his child, and on the [father’s] heir devolve [duties and rights] similar to that. And if the couple desire to wean, with mutual consent and consultation, there will be no sin upon them. And if you want to have your children wet-nursed, there will be no sin upon you so long as you pay what you give in accordance with honourable norms, and be wary of Allah, and know that Allah sees best what you do ” (Qur’an, 2: 233).

In the event of a husband's failure to provide *Nafqah*, a wife has a right to apply for a maintenance order from the Family Court or *Shar'ah* court or initiate divorce.

The wife's entitlement to Nafqah (financial maintenance) is so essential for a wife to focus on parenting (raising responsible children) and caring for the household needs.

The husband's financial responsibility is neither waived nor reduced because of his wife's wealth or because of her access to any personal income gained from work, rent, profit, or any other legal means.

However, it is worthwhile to state that Islam does not forbid women from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions that fit their nature and in which society needs her most.

Regardless of her affluence, she is not duty-bound to spend on the family (husband and her children).

In the event that the husband neglects his financial responsibility, a wife is permitted to spend from his wealth without his knowledge:

Narrated `Aisha: Hind bint `Utba said, "O Allah's Messenger Abu Sufyan is a miser and he does not give me what is sufficient for me and my children. Can I take his property without his knowledge?" The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "Take what is sufficient for you and your children, and the amount should be just and reasonable (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 69, Hadith 14).

It is clear from this hadith that any money taken by a wife from her husband's wealth without his knowledge should be for necessities rather than luxuries; for the needs of the family and not their desires. It is forbidden for a wife to spend her husband's money extravagantly.

When you empower people through the economy, you enable them to:

- 1) Make decisions.
- 2) Break the poverty cycle.