

HONORED AND EMPOWERED WOMEN: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Dr. Bushra Inayat Raja

Ph.D (Leadership and Management), UCL Institute of Education
University of London, UK

Email: bushra_edu@hotmail.com



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8716-6684>

Waqas Ali Haider

PhD Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, University of Okara,
Okara, Pakistan

Email: waqas.alihaider@gmail.com



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8391-1138>



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Abstract

The under representation of women in senior management positions is well recognized globally and locally. Research on the factors affecting women's career progression has been proceeding continuously over the years and there is a significant literature regarding this issue. Different studies focus on similar factors held responsible for women's lack of progress to senior positions across nations and societies. In the Islamic perspective there is a perception that Islam does not allow Muslim women to participate in different activities. Is does so? Based on the literature review this paper provides a brief account of the position of Muslim women from a religious perspective based on original and authentic sources in Islam. This aims to provide an analysis of the teachings of Islam regarding the role of women in society. We have come to the Conclusion in this article that during the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) women were engaged in Islamic and economic activities and Islam has honored and empowered women in all spheres of life. This paper also provides examples of remarkable Muslim women leaders of that time and since.

Key words: Honored Women, Empowered Women, Women leaders, Women in Islam, Muslim Womens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Status of women in the religious perspective

More than 1400 years ago Islam set out women's rights as mother, wife, daughter and sister through the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) giving them full privileges and honor in each and every aspect of their lives^{1,2} The Qur'an clearly confirms that woman is completely equal to man to Allah in terms of her rights, responsibilities and in receiving rewards for her deeds^{3,4}. For example the Qur'an states:

"For Muslim men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise. For them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward⁵.

"What makes one valuable and respectable in the eyes of Allah, the creator of mankind and the universe, is neither one's wealth, position, intelligence, physical strength nor beauty but only one's taqwa^{6,7,8}.

The Quran repeatedly affirms:

"If any do deeds of righteousness be they male or female and have faith, they will enter heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them"⁹.

"Whosoever performs good deeds whether male or female and is a believer, we shall surely make him live a good life and we will certainly reward them for the best of what they did."¹⁰.

In the last Khutbah¹¹ on 9th Dhul Hijjah¹² the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) said:

"you are all equal. Nobody has superiority over other except by piety and good action. Remember, one day you will appear before Allah and answer for your deeds. So beware, do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone"¹³.

Historically, women were also equal to men in the pursuit of education and knowledge^{14,15}. Almost fourteen centuries ago, the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), declared that

"seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim man and Muslim woman."¹⁶.

According to Sahih Al-Bukhari the women at the time of the Prophet (PBUH) became so keen to acquire more knowledge that they came to the Prophet (PBUH) with the following submission,

"You are always surrounded by men for imparting knowledge so appoint a day for us."

The Prophet (PBUH) promised to do so and went to them and taught them states that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the first teacher for women and men.^{17,18} He also sent representatives with messages to educate Muslim women. Thus they became among the most learned figures of their time and started offering guidance to others in educational matters¹⁹.

A woman is authorized to have freedom of expression equal to that of a man²⁰. Her judgment and opinions should be taken into consideration and cannot go unnoticed just because she is woman. According to Badawi²¹ both in the Qur'an and in Islamic history 'we find examples of women, who participated in speculative discussions and reasoned even with the Prophet (PBUH) himself as well as with other Muslim leaders'^{22,23}. An explicit example can be noted at the time of the²⁴ Caliphate of Hazrat Umar Ibn al-Khattab. Once he was discussing with *Sahabah Kiram*²⁵ and considering putting an

upper limit on the *Meher*²⁶. A woman from the back-seat of the Mosque objected, giving Quranic reference from *Surah Nisa*, V.4:20. She said.

"When Quran puts no limit on Meher, Omar, you have no right to intervene in a matter which Allah the All-Mighty has already decreed in Quran."

Hazrat Umar Omar withdrew his order and humbly replied in the presence of people:

*"The woman is right and Omar is wrong"*²⁷.

It appeared that women of that time knew their rights and responsibilities very well²⁸. There were instances which showed that some women even challenged the great scholars of their time if they said something which was against the rights granted to women by the Quran and the Sunnah^{29,30,31}.

The history of Islam also reveals that Muslim women participated in all walks of life from as early as the seventh century³². The best example is that of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) wife, Hazrat Khadija (RA)³³ who was a very successful businesswoman who had employed the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to sell her goods overseas³⁴. This indicates clearly that Islam awards women equal rights in relation to work to earn and possess independently³⁵. The Qur'an says

*"to men is what they earn and to women what they earn but ask God of His bounty"*³⁶.

Thus a woman's life, her property, her honor are as valued as those of man³⁷.

Thus the evidences confirm that in Islam a woman has full rights in each and every aspect of her life³⁸. She is acknowledged as an independent personality possessed of human qualities and worthy of spiritual aspirations³⁹. Her human nature is neither lesser to nor deviant from that of man⁴⁰. The treatment of women in different Islamic countries is the result of culture and not of the teaching of Islam⁴¹. In many cases, this is the result of misinterpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah⁴².

EXAMPLES OF REMARKABLE MUSLIM WOMEN LEADERS

*"From an Islamic perspective, leading has strong connotations of leading towards knowledge and righteousness through words and acts, entailing a knowledge status for the teacher/leader, as well as perceiving her/him as a role model in a holistic sense"*⁴³.

Contrary to general opinion, the history of Muslims is rich with women of great achievement in all walks of life⁴⁴. From the earliest days of Islam to the contemporary world, Muslim women have been and continue to be dynamic leaders in their time⁴⁵. They have contributed to society as scholars, legal jurists, rulers, warriors, businesswomen and in other positions⁴⁶.

"The Sahabiyat (women companions) were the noble women who were the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad. They were pure, virtuous

crusaders of Islam and were honored during the very lifetime of the Prophet with the prediction that they would live in paradise in the Hereafter. Their achievements and influence are found in every sphere of that momentous period in the history of the world. They were as active in religion as in politics, as courageous in war as in the peaceful and persuasive propagation of the teachings of Islam. They were to be found in the political arena, in the field of education, in the courts of Islamic jurisprudence, in the interpretation of Shari'ah⁴⁷, in trade and commerce, in agriculture, in medicine and in nursing. In short there was no sphere that did not benefit from their intellect, their wisdom and their gentle yet firm strength of character⁴⁸.

Islam has raised women to dignified and proud positions⁴⁹. 'Many of the women companions accomplished great deeds and achieved fame. Throughout Islamic history there have been eminent intellectuals and jurists⁵⁰. The leading example is that of Hazrat Aisha (RA) the wife of the Prophet (PBUH), who studied under the Prophet's guidance for nine years. After His (PBUH) death she became renowned as a scholar and had the distinction of being one of the greatest sources of Hadith literature⁵¹. She provided guidance to the first Muslim society, even to the renowned Sahabah⁵² and the *Khulafa Rashidun*⁵³ who sought her advice on a range of matters.

'Her knowledge of the many branches of religion like Tafsir⁵⁴, Hadith⁵⁵, Fiqh⁵⁶ and Shari'ah, her wisdom in interpretation, and her mastery of the teachings of the Prophet - all these qualities made her one of the most remarkable personalities of the time'⁵⁷.

Her pupil, Urwah bin Zubayr, testifies,

"I did not see a greater scholar than Aisha in the learning of the Quran, obligatory duties, lawful and unlawful matters, Arab history, and genealogy."⁵⁸

During the period of Hazrat Abu Bakar she worked as *Mufti*^{59,60}.

According to Usmani⁶¹ Hazrat Ashifa bint Abdullah was a great name in Islamic history. She is considered to be one of the first female teachers in Islam, a successful professional, scholar and intelligent woman. Hazrat Umar (RA) appointed her as a public administrator of Madina market and trusted and valued her views over others. Among the second generation of early Muslims, Hazrat Amra bint Abdurrahman was one of the greatest scholars and jurists and greater than many other male scholars during this period. She provided legal verdicts and was considered an authority on Hadith. Caliph Hazrat Umar ibn Abdul Aziz, encouraged Muslims to learn with her. Hazrat Aisha bint Sa'd ibn Abi Waqas was also a jurist and scholar. Hazrat Sayyida Nafisa, the Prophet's great granddaughter also was a renowned scholar. She was a teacher of Islamic jurisprudence. Her students travelled from distant places to learn with her. It is said that the Shafi'i school of law Imam al-Shafi'i, had great respect for her, he also studied Hadith with

her after his arrival in Egypt. Hazrat Umm Salim, Umm Anas was the mother of the famous Sahabi Anas. She was a highly respected Sahabiyah. Ibn Hajar said

*"Her creditable qualities are too many to mention"*⁶².

Moreover, Hazrat Saffiyah, Hazrat Umm Salamah and Hazrat Faima Bint Qays were also highly respected and great scholars possessing great intellect and brilliance⁶³.

These few examples from Islamic history reveal that women were not confined indoors or restricted to domestic work⁶⁴. The record of learned women of the early days of Islam confirms that women were not kept illiterate but rather were fully encouraged to participate in the process of education and learning⁶⁵. They also participated in public life especially in times of emergency when they used to accompany the Muslim armies to the battle fields and helped by providing water and giving first aid to the soldiers.⁶⁶

*"However, the role that women contributed at the beginning of Islamic history has often been overlooked or neglected and as a result recorded data has been disproportionately unavailable even though Islamic history is full of stories and accounts of women and the significant role they played- their legacy is that of courage, integrity, and deep devotion to the message that the Blessed Prophet (PBUH) brought to mankind"*⁶⁷.

MUSLIM WOMEN LEADERS FROM 1000C.E ONWARDS

According to Abidi there have been prominent Islamic women leaders since 1000C.E. For example Razia Sultan (1236-40) was the first Muslim Woman in Indian history who ruled in the 13th century⁶⁸ Noor Jahan, wife of Jahangir, had greater influence in political matters than any other Mughal queen. Zaibun Nisa daughter of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb was an eminent poet and theologian, while Chand Bibi (1580-1599) is recognized as one of the kindest Muslim women in the history of India. Begum Hazrat Mahal was a prominent leader who actively participated in the country's first war of independence. She exercised authority and showed qualities of leadership and diplomacy. For over three quarters of a century, Bhopal was ruled by Muslim women, including Qudsiya Begum, (1819-44), Sikandar Begum (1819-1868) Shah Jahan Begum (1838-1910) and Sultan Jahan Begum (1858-1930). They all ruled Bhopal as Begums of Bhopal⁶⁹.

Fatima Jinnah, sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah was a renowned political leader, and one of the leading founders of Pakistan who took a very active part in Pakistan's politics.⁷⁰ Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan was ambassador to the Netherlands, Tunisia and Italy between 1954 and 1966 and according to Bennett (2010) since 1988 a number of Muslim countries have had women rulers and presidents, for example, Turkey (Tansu Ciller 1993-6), Bangladesh (Sheikh Hasina Wajed 1996-2001), Pakistan (Benazir Bhutto 1988-90 and 1993-6) and Indonesia (Megawati Sukarnoputri 1991-2001 and 2002-2004).⁷¹

The conclusion which can be drawn from the above evidence is best summarised by Bennett⁷²:

“This is an extraordinary record and somewhat of a challenge to the widespread perception that Muslim women are oppressed [...]. To what degree did culture rather than Islam aid and abet their roles, or indeed is it sustainable to distinguish Islam from culture”.

THE CURRENT CULTURAL CONTEXT AND WOMEN IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT POSITIONS

Historically, Pakistan has been a patriarchal society.⁷³ However, in the past decade or so, social change has opened up the possibility for women to engage in education and enter the workforce⁷⁴. This contrasts with traditional Pakistani culture where a woman’s expected role has been to take care of domestic affairs⁷⁵.

As described in literature, previously, a girl child in the Pakistani family frequently did not have many educational opportunities⁷⁶. The literacy level of girls is slowly improving and gradually women have begun to gain access to higher education institutions. The number of women students in higher education has increased significantly. These changes have taken place across the country due to a significant cultural shift in parental perspectives, that is an increased recognition that educating girls allows for the possibility of women working outside the home, contributing economically to the family and even pursuing a career⁷⁷.

Further to this, globalization has brought about change in Pakistan⁷⁸. After completing their education women are entering the workforce in every walk of life⁷⁹. For example, “at university level women are studying management sciences to raise their technological literacy and practical managerial skills. They are training in the fields of telecommunication and mass communication and being provided with the knowledge, skills and experience to become successful practitioners and leaders in the field of computer sciences, communication sciences and software engineering. Many women are now enrolling in Master of Business Education programs (PU 2013; FJWU, 2013). Women in Pakistan have held important roles in politics, social organizations and administration, media and communications, the civil service, banks, the armed forces, the police, engineering and information technology^{80,81}.

At the same time, with the long-held traditional and social views of women and despite the government’s policies the pace of change is very slow⁸². Although women have been held in high esteem in Islam, have held outstanding positions in Islamic history and have served in prominent leading positions in the contemporary era⁸³, generally, few women are able to obtain senior positions in politics and there are few women in higher education management positions⁸⁴. It is therefore likely that merely having educational and professional programs for women in universities will not be sufficient to bring about real change. Rather, there must be a true commitment on the part

of Government to appoint women to key administrative posts, where currently they are noticeable by their absence. The available statistics clearly show that there is much work to be done to increase the presence of women in senior management positions. The first need is to examine the problem in depth and establish the root causes identifying what, how and why this issue persists.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As stereotypes and traditional attitudes towards women are found to be amongst the main constraints that obstruct their way to senior management positions these societal constraints create gender divisions in practice which perpetuate occupational segregation. Ignorance of women's equal rights in Islam makes people reluctant to accept women's management roles. Therefore, the status of women in Islam should be judged in the light of authentic sources on the subject which provide objectivity and not by observing what individual Muslims do or what any Muslim society does^{85,86}. Without a positive change of attitudes and social mind-sets, a significant increase in women's status will not occur. The government alone cannot resolve the problem of women's empowerment. A key task for the Pakistani government is to raise awareness of women's rights within Islam and implement more stringent laws to ensure women's rights at the societal level rather than emphasizing women's empowerment alone.



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 - ⁵ Quran Surah Al-Ahzab, 33:35
 - ⁶ Allah 's consciousness and awareness
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¹¹ Sermon

¹² 12th and last month of the Islamic year

¹³ Al- Bukhari and Khan 1987. *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-bukhari: ArabicEnglish*. India: Kitab Bhavan.

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²² Surat Al-Mujādila meaning "The Pleading Woman"

²³ Quran, Surah Al-Mujadila 158

²⁴ The Caliphate meaning Islamic state comprising the first four caliphs in Islamic history and was founded after Muhammad (PBUH)'s death. Caliph comes from the Arabic word 'Khalafa' meaning successor.

²⁵ Sahaba were the followers and close companions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH)

²⁶ Marital gift/money given by the husband to his wife at the time of marriage

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³³ RA: (Razi Allah Tala Anhu) May Allah be pleased with her/him.

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⁵³ The Khalifah Rashidun, the first four caliphs in Islam's history

⁵⁴ The interpretation of the Quran

⁵⁵ The saying of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH

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