

# Analysing the Scope of Women as Leaders: In the Light of Islamic Canon

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Women have been conceptualized as marginalized, inferior, and acquiescent and all that are not men. In other words, they have been stereotyped as 'inferior other' to men. The fact that this consciousness of women being marginalised, was raised in the West with the dawn of movements like feminism in the twentieth century, hence not that far from the present, the history of Islamic insights about the condition of women(as marginalized) dates back to fourteen hundred years. Islam did not only highlight the pathetic condition of women (in the erstwhile Arab specifically), but also brought remedies to the ills of society against them; it plucked the roots of those traditions that were against women and their honour. Prophet of Islam (Peace be upon Him) gave women respect and dignity, and they started to live the life of true freedom. In this paper, I will analyse if there is a scope for women to become leaders of a commune, state and nation in the in the light of holy Quran, *Hadith*, the precious sayings of prophet (Peace be upon Him), and other legitimate works of Islam.

*Keywords:* Islamic canon, inferior other, marginalized, dignity, holy Quran and Hadith.

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The dream and pursuit of reaching the dizzy heights—be it that of becoming leader of a community, nation or state— would be assured and realised only by equality in social, political, economic, educational and other domains and structures of a particular society and culture. Islam has guaranteed all of these rights to both men and women equally; rather at certain instances women’s rights have been given emphasis. History is witness to the fact that, among Muslims, there were women who excelled in every sphere of society, even in the time which dates back to fourteen hundred years, springing from the reason that they enjoyed all of the above mentioned rights. I would illustrate the argument with certain examples to prove my point.

To begin with, Islam guarantees equal educational rights to women against men. Mohammad (Peace be upon Him), the prophet of Islam gave greater emphasis on the education of women. His (Peace be upon Him) teachings make it obligatory for parents to educate their daughters. Abdul Malik Mujahid quotes the precious words of the messenger of Allah, “it is obligatory on every Muslim to acquire knowledge” (9). Allah orders in the very first verse of Quran “Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists). . .” (96:1). We must again come to the fact that fourteen years ago several Muslim women were great scholars in Islamic jurisprudence and in general epistemological discourse.

One of the most famous among them is the mother of Muslim ummah, Ayesha Sidiqa (May Allah be pleased with Her), the wife of Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon Him). She undoubtedly has narrated several *Hadiths*. One of her students says that she never came across as great a scholar in learning Quran, obligatory duties, in lawful and unlawful things, in literature, in poetry and in Arabic history as Hazrat Aysha (RA). Many Sahaba sought guidance from her; she was an expert in mathematics as people would come to her to get the things resolved related the matters of inheritance (qtd. in Naik 01.16.58). Among other women who specially deserve mention are Umme Salma, wife of Prophet (PBUH) and Fatima binti Qayas. Umme Salma was known for her intelligence and understanding because of her education and teachings; “according to Imam Al-Nawawi she was the most intellectual woman amongst the learned women” of the time (Naik 01.17.48). Fatima bint Qayas has been praised for her intelligence, wise judgement and good opinions by Imam Muslim (qtd. in Naik 01.18.35).

The practice of burying daughters alive in Arab society was common before the onset of Islam; Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon Him) cleansed the society of this shameful practice. It was Islam that gave women the right to life; however, modern societies have indulged in the shameful practice of infanticide, killing the girl

child in the womb of her mother even before her birth, in this world of advanced technology. Allah strictly warns man from doing such acts in Quran, “. . . and do not kill your children out of poverty; We will provide for you and them” (6:151). Not only this, Allah forbids humanity from feeling shamed and regretful on the birth of a girl child: “And when one of them is informed of [the birth of] a female, his face becomes dark, and he suppresses grief. He hides himself from the people because of the ill of which he has been informed. Should he keep it in humiliation or bury it in the ground? Unquestionably, evil is what they decide.”(16:58-59). Thus, Allah calls ‘such a thinking’ as evil, which of course could be endemic for society. Apart from this there are many instances where the prophet taught Muslims and the world that women are as respectful beings and equal as men; He (Peace be upon Him) would stand up and ask Fatima (RA) to sit in his place whenever she paid a visit to His home.

Islam lays the burden of the financial security of women on the shoulders of man; he has to earn and feed his wife and children and not the other way round. Thus, Islam sets women free from financial responsibilities. If a woman wants to earn, she can do so by legitimate means that Islam has allowed her; she is again free to keep her earning with her and spent on her own self solely. At the time of marriage it is a necessary obligation for a man to pay *Maher*, a monetary assistance, to the woman he is going to get married with. The holy Quran says, “And give the women their dowries (Maher) willingly” (4:4). There is a famous incident in the history of Islam regarding Hazrat Umar’s asking men not to give excess of Maher; however, when an ordinary women quoted from Quran, “If husband gave her wife bundles and bundles of wealth as Maher even then he cannot demand anything after divorce” (4: 20) Hazrat Umar (RA) respected her and took his stand back. This is freedom of women in Islam, the political freedom of speech.

The phrase, ‘political freedom’ brings me to the core discussion of this paper: whether there is scope for women to become leaders in their community and state under the purview of Islamic Sharia (canon). Although there may be some [mis]conceptions about the [im]possibility of women becoming leaders as per the popular Muslim view, we would like to analyse and clarify such conceptions in the light of scriptural text of Islam, the holy Quran, supplemented with *Hadith*, the sayings of prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon Him). The fact of the matter is that there are verses in the holy Quran the implication of which can be cited both in favour and against the possibility of women becoming leaders of a community or a state.

To begin with, we would like to cite the favourable verses first. There are almost four important occasions in Quran, where it can be inferred that women are equal and as reasonable entities as men, hence the possibility of their becoming the leaders. Firstly, it is mentioned in Quran that Allah gives rights to women similar to men (2:228). Secondly, the story of Bilquis, a ruler in the time of Prophet Solomon, has been mentioned in chapter 27 of the Quran without any, whatsoever, criticism: her faculty of ruling, and the habit of counselling others in decision making are the attributes of a better ruler, as such; she was also astute, while she passed in the test of recognising the her disguised throne, miraculously done by prophet Solomon; she even accepted the state of prophethood of Solomon as immediately as possible which again reflects her wise judgement. Thirdly, The Quran again says:

The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those - Allah will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise. (9:71)

The verse clearly mentions that men and women are “allies” of each other; they have the duty to uphold the right and forbid what is not. Since, these duties can be better endorsed from a prominent position, and, what’s more, Allah is commanding both men and women the same duties, it is inferred that they both can aspire for such a job. Usmani argues, “the verse paves the way for the women to become the repository of state authority including the authority of the Head of the State” (258-61).

Fourthly, Allah enjoins and entrusts the powerful and the leaders (Muslims) to observe three important duties: establishment of Salah; enforcement of zakat; and adhering to and preaching good and forbidding the evil. The Quran says:

[And they are] those who, if We give them authority in the land, establish prayer and give zakah and enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. And to Allah belongs the outcome of [all] matters. (22:41)

The above quoted verse, “the believing men and believing women are allies of one another” (9:71) proves again the point; since, men and women are partners in observing Allah’s commands, it testifies that women can also have a say in leading Muslims from the front in any sphere, whatsoever, and effectuating Allah’s basic duties (and of course others duties as well) of upholding prayer, zakah and preaching righteousness.

Lastly, it is important to notice that Quran does not forbid women from ruling; it is relatively silent on this issue. Even though it has not also talked specifically about ‘women’s leadership’, the relative silence and the above mentioned verses leave a scope for women to become leaders. In addition, there are a number of instances where the views of renowned Islamic scholar have been in favour of such an establishment.

Underpinning the rule of Shahjahan Begum, Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (ra), the renowned scholar of Dewbandi school of thought, produced a ‘Fatwa’. He opined that if the government is democratic and the ruler has a jury of members to consult to, it is absolutely legitimate that a woman be at the front and a principal self. He reasoned that there is nothing wrong in such a case of woman being a ruler/leader; since the affairs of the state are being conducted collectively by the jury and the head, she makes herself equal to one of the members of the jury only. In addition, the Prophet (PBUH) also consulted Umme Salma at Hudeybia and acted on her advice (Choudhury 173).

Amani Malik also favoured and legitimatised leadership by women; he said that a women can even assume the role of becoming the head of a state (Hossain 228). “It is correct”, says Allama Syed Sulaiman Nadavi (ra) “that the natural tendencies of a woman make her unfit” for discharging the duties of Immamat, and other duties at the helm of affairs, and she is been exempted from such duties, it does not mean that it is unlawful “for a woman to ever lead the public politically or to assume the leadership of the army” (Hossain 217). But before making any conclusions it is imperative to discuss the contrasting and hostile views also.

The popular view regarding the topic of the discussion is the contrary one—perhaps the relative popularity owes to the fact of patriarchal hermeneutic tendencies vis-à-vis the traditions of Islam. This is displayed by some of the verses of the holy Quran and by some traditions attributed to the beloved Prophet (Peace b upon Him). The Quran says, “. . . but the men have a degree over them (women)” (2:228). Also, in the same chapter the Quran reveals “And bring to witness two witnesses from among your men. And if there are not two men [available], then a man and *two women* from those whom you accept as witnesses. . .” (2:282, emphasis mine). This verse implies that since the evidence of one man is equal to two women or the vice versa, it can be said that a woman is unequal to man, or to be more precise, a woman is half of a man; the second part of the verse— “. . .so that if one of the women errs, then the other can remind her” (2:282)—proves that Allah is talking more about the forgetful nature of women folk, not that they should be considered half against men. In fact, “there may be gendered differences in rates of memory decline. Though research on the subject has not always been

consistent, it is known that women experience much higher rates of *Alzheimer's disease*,” an irreversible, progressive brain disorder that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills and, eventually, the ability to carry out the simplest tasks(Wikipedia; emphasis mine). At another instance, men are considered as the protectors of women: “Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard” (Al Quran 4:34). The argument is that if men are the protectors of women, can they (women) aspire to be as leaders? However, the traditions, attributed to Prophet (Peace be upon Him), in support of the oppositional view have been criticised for lack of authenticity.

Abu Bakra reports that when it reached to Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon Him) that the Persian people have appointed the daughter of Kisra as their queen, the Prophet said “Never shall a people prosper who make a woman their ruler” (Elius qtd. in 198). Abu Said Al- Khudri also reports that on the eve of Eid the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) commanded some women to “give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of hell-fire were” women; Allah’s prophet further mentioned that “I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than” women; the women asked why it is so that they are deficient in intelligence and religion? The prophet replied, because the evidence of two women is equal to one man, it is the deficiency in intelligence for them, and that women can neither pray nor fast during menstrual period, it is the deficiency in their religion (qtd in Elius 198).

However, Choudhury notes that Abu Bakra was found guilty of false evidence and was even punished by Hazrat Umar (RA). Hence his reporting about the daughter of Kisra cannot be considered as authentic (qtd. in Elius 202). Regarding the second narration of the deficiency in intelligence and religion with regard to woman Maulana Abdul Halim, Imam Al-Nawawi, and Professor Doctor Abdul Hamid Mutawali say, this tradition has no origin and is fabricated, false and forged(qtd in Elius 202).

As quoted above also, there is evidence that Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon Him) consulted Umme Salma related the event of Hudeybia; in addition, there are many evidences, that in the history of Islam there were women intelligent enough and had a comprehensive knowledge to deal with the matters of politics. The holy Quran does not also directly abstain women from leadership: it does not permit or prohibit them from such a pursuit. The traditions attributed to prophet are also believed to be fabricated and inauthentic. Therefore, the relative silence of the canonical texts leaves it upon the shoulders of Muslim community to make decisions;

and, since women are equal to men and are as intelligent (evidenced by the examples of great women in the history of Islam) as men, they can be leaders as well, apart from other services to the commune of Muslim brotherhood.

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