

The Freedom of Women in the Era of the Prophet (ﷺ)

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Abstract

Allah Almighty honored women, yet ignorance and unjust customs reduced them to objects of amusement and subjected them to severe oppression throughout history. In every era, women endured hardship, cruelty, and social marginalization. With the advent of Islam, however, a transformative change occurred. The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), as the benefactor of humanity, rescued women from oppression, immorality, and disgrace, restoring their dignity and rightful status. He ensured their protection, clearly defined their rights, and recognized their essential roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. Islam elevated women to a position of honor and respect, making them the foundation and light of the household, while outlining balanced responsibilities for both men and women. The article “The Freedom of Women in the Era of the Prophet (S.A.W)” offers a comprehensive study of Quranic teachings and Prophetic traditions, highlighting the multidimensional role of women in the Prophetic era. It demonstrates that Islam granted women honor, justice, and full protection of their rights at every level of life.

Keywords: Women in Islam, Prophetic Era, Quran and Sunnah, Rights of Women, Status of Women, Islamic Teachings, Gender, Justice.

Introduction

Islam granted women human dignity, social status, and legal rights that were absent in pre-Islamic societies. The advent of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) brought a message of freedom, protection, and respect for women. These teachings established women as independent individuals and active participants in society.

In Islam, the concept of freedom is closely linked with boundaries and piety, where every individual, including women, is free with responsibility. The Qur'an grants equal status to men and women, and the basis of superiority is solely piety (taqwa) Indeed, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the one who is most righteous (has the most taqwa).⁽¹⁾ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

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In the Prophetic era (S.A.W), women were practically granted rights such as education, freedom of expression, and participation in political and economic affairs. Hazrat Aisha (RA) became a renowned source of knowledge, and women used to attend the mosque to ask religious questions. These reforms provided women with opportunities for growth and helped establish social balance.

1. The Status of Women Before Islam and Islam's Reformatory Role

Before the advent of Islam, women were deprived of inheritance and were themselves treated as property. The birth of a daughter was considered a matter of shame.

And when the girl who was buried alive is asked, *for what sin was she killed?*

وَإِذَا الْمَوْءُودَةُ سُئِلَتْ (يَايَ ذَنْبٍ قُتِلَتْ)²

Islam brought about a revolutionary transformation in the status of women by granting them comprehensive rights in matters such as inheritance, marriage, divorce, and economic participation—rights that were previously denied to them in pre-Islamic societies. Through these legal and moral reforms, Islam restored the dignity of women and recognized their identity as respected and autonomous members of society. A notable example of this recognition is Hazrat Khadijah (RA), the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), who was a successful and renowned businesswoman in Makkah. Her independent economic status and her active role in business dealings serve as clear evidence that Islam acknowledges the intellectual and financial independence of women, and considers them worthy of trust, consultation, and leadership in both private and public spheres.

2. The Religious and Educational Freedom Granted to Women During the Prophetic Era (S.A.W)

Islam made the pursuit of knowledge obligatory for both men and women. The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) said: 'Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.

طلب العلم فريضة على كل مسلم³

The Qur'an highlights the spiritual and religious greatness of women such as Hazrat Maryam (RA), Hazrat Asiya (RA), and other virtuous women, offering profound evidence of the equal intellectual and spiritual potential of women. Hazrat Maryam (RA), the mother of Prophet Isa (AS), is revered for her piety, purity, and unwavering devotion to Allah. Her story is a beacon of faith and an exemplar for women in every era. Similarly, Hazrat Asiya (RA), the wife of the Pharaoh (فرعون) is celebrated for her courage and unwavering belief in the face of oppression and tyranny. Despite the worldly power she held as a queen, her dedication to her faith and her ultimate sacrifice for the sake of Allah's truth make her one of the most honored women in Islamic history. These stories, along with those of other righteous women in the Qur'an, emphasize that women, like men, are equally capable of achieving spiritual and intellectual excellence. Islam recognizes the immense potential of women in the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and righteousness, affirming that they are full partners in the quest for enlightenment.

During the time of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), women actively participated in religious gatherings, asked questions, and directly sought religious knowledge. Hazrat Aisha (RA) held a distinguished position in the fields of Hadith, Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and medicine. Imam

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Zuhri (RA) states: If the knowledge of Hazrat Aisha (RA) were to be combined with that of all the other wives of the Prophet and all women, her knowledge would surpass all⁴.

In the Prophet's mosque (S.A.W), women had designated seating areas, and the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) established specific times for their education and training⁵.

Islamic jurists have recognized the right of women to education. Imam Ghazali (RA) writes: 'The education of women is a means of their reform and is based on religion; denial of this is not possible⁶.

According to Hanafi jurisprudence, it is obligatory for women to seek knowledge of religious matters, just as it is for men. They are not only permitted to learn but are also encouraged to do so⁷.

3. Social and Political Freedom of Women During the Prophetic Era (S.A.W).

Islam granted women a social status where they were honored, empowered, and held responsible for their character. The Qur'an recognized women as an essential part of society and gave importance to their opinions, counsel, and decisions: وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ

And for women is a right similar to that against them, according to what is reasonable.⁸ The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) acknowledged women as individuals during the pledge of allegiance, taking their oath separately, which is evidence of their political standing.⁹

During the Caliphate of Hazrat Umar (RA), a woman publicly disagreed with him in the mosque, and the caliph accepted her viewpoint.¹⁰

This incident is considered by scholars as proof of women's right to express their opinion, their understanding of religion, and their active participation in society.

Hazrat Umm Sulaym (RA), Hazrat Umm Atiyah (RA), and other women also took part in wartime services, nursing, and defense efforts. A hadith narrates that during the Battle of Uhud, Hazrat Aisha (RA) and Hazrat Umm Sulaym (RA) provided water and tended to the wounded¹¹.

From a jurisprudential perspective, Imam Abu Hanifa (RA), Imam Malik (RA), and other scholars accepted women's participation in testimony, trade, buying and selling, and expressing opinions, provided it is within the limits set by Shariah¹².

4. Legal and Economic Freedom of Women During the Time of the Prophet (ﷺ)

Islam granted women legal status, allowing them to be owners of property, heirs, witnesses, and participants in buying and selling. The Quran clearly outlines a woman's right in the inheritance law: لِلذَّكَرِ مِثْلُ حَظِّ الْأُنثِيَيْنِ The male shall have the share of two females¹³.

This principle is a rejection of the pre-Islamic notion in which women were deprived of inheritance rights. During the time of the Prophet (ﷺ), women freely exercised their ownership rights. A clear example of this is Hazrat Khadijah's (RA) business ventures. Hazrat Zainab (RA), the wife of Abdullah bin Mas'ud (RA), gave charity from her own earnings, and the Prophet (ﷺ) accepted it¹⁴.

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This illustrates that women during the time of the Prophet ﷺ were granted full legal and economic rights, allowing them to actively participate in property ownership, inheritance, business, and charitable actions.

Women were granted legal rights in matters such as marriage and divorce. Hazrat Khansa bint Khidam (RA) complained to the Prophet ﷺ about an unwanted marriage, and the Prophet ﷺ annulled the marriage¹⁵.

It is clear from Hadith that a woman, as long as she is of sound mind and adulthood, has full autonomy over her property, dowry, charity, and transactions.

Islamic jurists have acknowledged a woman's economic independence. Imam Shafi'i (RA) wrote: "A woman's wealth is her property, and neither her husband nor her guardian has the right to dispose of it"¹⁶.

Islamic law recognized women as equal citizens in terms of financial and legal rights, which was revolutionary in the societies of that time. This recognition provided women with financial autonomy and legal equality, ensuring their rights in a way that was unheard of in many pre-Islamic societies.

Literature Review

1. "Al-Mar'ah fi 'Asr al-Risalah" Author: Dr. Aisha Abdul Rahman (Bint al-Shati)
This book extensively discusses the character, role, and social status of women in the era of the Prophet ﷺ. It also provides detailed information about the lives of the female companions (Sahabiyat), highlighting their religious, political, and economic contributions.
2. "Huqooq al-Nisa' fi al-Islam" Author: Maulana Maududi,
This book elaborates on the fundamental rights of women in Islam, including their freedom, marriage, divorce, inheritance, education, and social participation. Maulana Maududi clarifies the rights of women and their dignity within the framework of Islamic teachings.
3. Sisters in Islam: Women's Rights in the Prophetic Era" Author: Jamal Badawi.
This article, written in English, discusses the rights and freedoms of women based on Islamic teachings and the life of the Prophet ﷺ. It provides insight into the economic, religious, and political roles of women during the time of the Prophet ﷺ.
4. "The Rights and Duties of Women in Islam" Author: Abdul Rahman al-Jazairi.
This book presents research on the rights of women based on Islamic jurisprudence, covering issues such as freedom, inheritance, education, and testimony in courts. It highlights women's rights under Islamic law.
5. "Aurath Aur Islam" Author: Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri.
In this book, the concept of women's freedom is discussed in a comparative manner, contrasting the Western and Islamic perspectives. Dr. Tahir-ul-Qadri elaborates on the condition of women's rights in the Western world and their elevated status in Islam.
6. "Al-Mar'ah Bayn al-Islam wa al-Jahiliyyah" Author: Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali.

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This book provides a comparison of the status of women before and after the advent of Islam, beautifully illustrating the transformation in their freedom and position. Sheikh al-Ghazali explains the situation of women during the Jahiliyyah (pre-Islamic period) and their rights in Islam.

These previous works and books provide evidence that extensive research has been done on the rights and status of women in Islam. They shed light on women's roles, rights, and freedoms from various perspectives, using Islamic history, jurisprudence, and the life of the Prophet ﷺ. These works demonstrate the deep understanding and scholarly approach to women's rights in Islam.

Findings:

- 1- Islam granted women complete human, legal, religious, and social status, which was absent in pre-Islamic societies.
- 2- During the Prophetic era ﷺ, women were practically granted the right to education, trade, consultation, worship, and participation in political affairs.
- 3- Islamic law granted women ownership of property, inheritance rights, and financial autonomy—privileges that no other system of that era provided.
- 4- Women's expression of opinion, offering advice, bearing witness in court, and pledging allegiance (Bay'ah) are all clear manifestations of the Prophetic era's enlightened treatment of women.
- 5- These practices highlight how women were not only included in the communal and political processes but also respected as individuals with valuable contributions.
- 6- In the light of Hadith and Islamic jurisprudence, women's dignity, freedom, and autonomy are acknowledged—within the framework of Shari'ah.

Recommendations

- 1- Women should be educated and made aware of their Islamic rights through the promotion of knowledge and awareness so that they can better understand and realize their rightful position in society.
- 2- The study of Islamic history, the Prophetic Seerah ﷺ, and Islamic jurisprudence should be made widespread in a modern style, with particular emphasis on the chapters concerning women's participation.
- 3- At the societal level, women's dignity, character building, and intellectual freedom should be promoted based on Islamic teachings. This will help foster a respectful and balanced environment for women.
- 4- Women's freedom and participation should be included in legislation and policy-making in accordance with Islamic principles, as practiced during the time of the Prophet ﷺ.
- 5- Scholars, educators, and parents should prioritize the religious and worldly education of women, along with character development, to ensure balance and moderation within the Muslim community.

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Conclusion

In the Islamic state during the Prophetic era (ﷺ), women were granted a status, freedom, and dignity that not only stood in stark contrast to the ignorance of that time but also serves as a guiding light for even the most advanced modern societies. Islam did not present women as mere followers or weak beings but as honorable, responsible, and empowered individuals who played active roles in education, economy, worship, politics, and law.

Under the blessed guidance of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), women acquired knowledge, asked questions, served in battlefields, offered counsel, and expressed their opinions. All of these acts are living testimony to the fact that Islam, rather than suppressing the natural potential of women, provided them with the opportunity to flourish and shine.

In today's age, if we sincerely desire to establish true progress, freedom, and character development for women, we must turn to the noble Seerah (biography) of the Prophet (ﷺ) for guidance. It is in this path that we find the assurance of the Ummah's success, societal balance, and the preservation of human dignity.

References:

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 - 6 - Ghazali, Ihya-ul- Uloom, Vol: 3 Page 165.
 - 7 - Murgeenani, Hidayah Vol: 1 Page 242.
 - 8 - Surah Baqra Verse No: 228.
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