MODERN DEBATE ON THE SOCIO-POLITICAL RIGHTS OF MUSLIM WOMEN

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1. Introduction

Women’s rights and their status in Islam have become prominent issues in the media, as well as academic, religious and political circles today. Images which characterize Muslim women as oppressed victims with no rights are tenacious, despite the reality of women being elected as leaders of the world’s most populous Muslim states such as Turkey, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The political participation of women at the highest ranks coupled at the same time with what seems as the deterioration of their status in some Muslim societies, including even those which have elected a woman leader – illustrates the complexity and diversity of the situation of women in the Muslim world.

For thousands of years, women have throughout history been subjugated in most, if not all, patriarchal societies of the world. Thus, for centuries it was considered ‘natural’ that women were inferior to men, and this meant they had to submit to the latter’s authority. Even religious scriptures could not altogether escape from adopting such attitudes: social attitudes can be so pervasive as to affect even progressive religious writings, leading them to be interpreted in a way that reflects prevailing attitudes. This is also true

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2 Benazir Bhutto was elected Prime Minister of Pakistan (population about 150 million) in 1988 and again in 1993; Begum Khaleda Zia has been Prime Minister of Bangladesh (population 140 million) since 1991, and today Jawed Hasina is Prime Minister of Bangladesh; Tansu Ciller has been Prime Minister of Turkey (population 70 million) since 1993.

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for the issue of a Muslim woman’s rights, as revealed to the Prophet, before these were subverted by patriarchal society.  

Indeed, Islam tried to introduce profound changes and radically alter the outlook towards women by improving their status and rights in society at the time.  

It was instrumental in introducing wide-ranging legal and religious enactments to improve the position of women in Arabian society and protect them from male excesses. There are thus numerous Quranic injunctions which gave effect to these changes and brought about significant improvements the public and private spheres. More importantly, they gave women a full-fledged personality.

There is in Islam no difference between men and women as far as their relationship to Allah is concerned, as both are promised the same reward for good conduct and the same punishment for evil conduct. As the Qur’an indicates, “And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women.”

The Qur’an, in addressing the believers, often uses the expression, “believing men and women” to emphasize the equality of men and women in regard to their respective duties, rights, virtues and merits.

Today many of the old social structures are crumbling and being replaced by new social orders, rational and liberal, on the scene, making it increasingly difficult to maintain old attitudes towards women. The scriptures are therefore being re-read and reinterpreted, at least, among the progressive sections of these societies.

A better understanding of the position of women in Islam can be achieved by both examining the issue from in a comparative manner, and in light of the authentic sources of the teachings of Islam.

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4 Ibid.
6 Ibid. See also Afzalur Rahman, Role of Muslim Woman in Society, Seerah Foundation, London, 1986, pp. 56-75
8 Ibid. Surah 33:35.