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Woman in Islam and her role in human development




World Health Organization
Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

Woman in Islam
and
her role in human development
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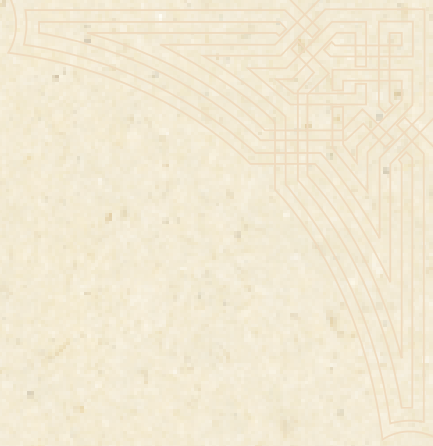
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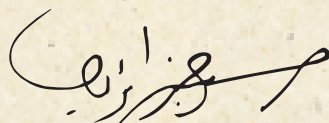


Foreword

Women have always played a vital role in human development, but a role that has largely been unsung and unrecognized. In very few cultures, until relatively recently, have women been acknowledged as having an equal role with men, and as having equal rights to participate in all social spheres. Numerous means, including selective interpretation of key religious texts, have been used to deny women those rights. This monograph seeks to explain how key Islamic texts have been subverted in this way, against the spirit of the true meaning. How does this link up with health? As the author shows, women's involvement in health issues on a daily basis, not only supports the Islamic thesis that women have an equal role in society but shows that society is dependent on women as nurturers, carers and professional caretakers, both at home and in the workplace. It is a thesis that can be extended to all walks of life.

For many in the industrialized world these issues are often now seen to be closed, and "equality" achieved. Whether this is true or not, for most women and men around the world, in poor urban areas, in rural and often hard-to-reach villages and towns, and even in comparatively affluent areas where access to education is not seen to be a problem, they continue to be live issues. They are issues that need to be brought out into the open and discussed openly so that all women, not just the privileged few, can have access to the choices and opportunities to which they have a right. This monologue is aimed at women and men in the Islamic community, but its message is universal.

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Hussein A. Gezairy MD, FRCS

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Introduction

The Arabic language, which is the language of the Holy Qur'an as well as the sayings and practices of the Prophet ﷺ, differs from English and other languages in that it has two grammatical genders: the feminine gender and the masculine-feminine gender, which addresses both males and females at the same time, unless a specific qualification exempts women from inclusion. In other words, unless clearly specified, all forms of masculine-feminine gender apply to both males and females. For example, when God addresses the believers on the issue of managing the affairs of the community: And who conduct their affairs through consultation and mutual consent among themselves [42:38], He is explicitly including both males and females in the voting and election process. Even the Arabic word *rajul* which means "man" is used in Arabic like "man" in English or "homme" in French or "Uomo" in Italian... etc., to mean a human being and not necessarily a masculine subject.

Other terms that are used frequently in the divine and prophetic texts and also mean "a human being" are the terms "Muslim" and "believer". When we come across them in a Qur'anic verse or a saying of the Prophet ﷺ speaking of the Islamic community, they do not exclude non-Muslims who are citizens in the Islamic society, as they are expected to be treated exactly on the same footing as Muslims. This was clearly specified in the Islamic "Magna carta" or the constitution of the Islamic state in Madinah, where the Jews who chose to join this state were granted equal rights and full support.

The only practices that are considered in accordance with Islam after the death of the Prophet ﷺ are those of the rightly-guided Caliphs. This is stated clearly in the following saying of the Prophet ﷺ: "Whomever of you lives [long enough] will see great controversy. So follow my practices and the practices of the rightly-guided Caliphs, and stick to them firmly. Beware of wrongly-invented supplements, for each of them represents a deviation that leads astray"¹. Thus, it is those rightly-guided Caliphs who set for us a practical example to follow. As for the practices of Muslims of later generations, be it the practices of rulers, leaders or even religious scholars, they cannot be set as an example except in as far as they follow the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings and practices. If they do not, then they belong to the class of wrongly-invented matters which could only be described as deviant. Unfortunately, the practices of the Muslim generations after the period of the rightly-guided Caliphs have been, for the most part, too far removed from Islamic teachings to be considered as sound Islamic practice. The Prophet has set for us a criterion to judge such practices as he says: "He who does something which is not in agreement with our directives, it will be considered as null and void"².

Many people, even Arabs and Muslims, are unaware of these observations, which leads to misunderstanding and misbehaviour.

Islam, women and empowerment

Islam establishes complete and genuine equality between man and woman. This is a fact readily acknowledged by everyone who knows Islam well and understands Islamic law as outlined in God's book, the Qur'an, and in the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Islam asserts the equality of men and women in their creation. The Qur'an states that God has created all mankind from a single soul; and from it He created its mate, and from the two of them He spread abroad so many men and women. [4:1] He also says: Mankind, We have created you all out of a male and a female. [49:13]

In the Islamic faith, both man and woman (and not woman alone) were equally responsible for the fault that they perpetrated in the first stage of creation. God says: Satan whispered to them both to expose to them what had been hidden of their private parts, and said: 'Your Lord has only forbidden you from this tree so you would not become angels or immortals.' And he swore to them: 'I am indeed giving both of you sound advice'. Thus he cunningly deluded them. And when they had tasted the fruit of the tree, their private parts became exposed to them, and they began to cover themselves with leaves from the Garden. Their Lord called out to them: 'Did I not forbid you both from this tree and tell you that Satan



is surely a clear enemy to both of you?’ They said: ‘Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves; and unless You grant us forgiveness and bestow Your mercy upon us, we shall certainly be of the losers. [7:20–23]

Similarly, Islam charges men and women with equal human responsibility. The Qur’an states: Whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, and is a believer, we shall most certainly cause him to live a good life. [16:97] Anyone who has done a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone who has done righteous deeds whether male or female and is a believer will enter paradise, wherein they shall be blessed with good beyond all reckoning. [40:40]

Both man and woman are equal in the commitment required of them to abide by God’s law and Islamic teachings: It is not befitting whenever God and his Messenger have decreed a matter, for a believing man or a believing woman to have for themselves a contrary choice in their affairs. [33:36]

Under Islam, man and woman are also equal in the reward they receive from God Almighty: The Muslim men and the Muslim women, and the believing men and the believing women, and the devoutly obedient men and the devoutly obedient women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women, and the relevant men and the relevant women, and the charitable men and the charitable women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their chastity and the women who guard theirs, and the men who remember God much and the women who likewise remember Him – for such as these, God has prepared forgiveness and a magnificent reward. [33:35]

Islam assigns equal political responsibility to both man and woman with regard to maintaining proper order in society: The believing men and the believing women are close allies of one another: They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. [9:71]

According to Islam, men and women are equal in their marital status. Both retain their respective surnames as they were before marriage. A woman does not adopt her husband’s surname after marriage, as though she is annexed to him.

Islam gives equal ownership rights to both man and woman with respect to what they earn through their own efforts or any other legitimate means: Men shall have a benefit of what they earn and women shall have a benefit of what they earn. [4:32]

In Islam both man and woman are equal in their financial and economic independence. A woman has no right to dispense of her husband’s property in the same way as a man has no such right with regard to his wife’s property, even though she may be rich and he is poor. Indeed, the Prophet has allowed a wife to give in charity out of her husband’s property, without damaging it, but he has not given a husband any such right.

With regard to inheritance from parents and near of kin, Islam gives them equal claims: Men shall have a share in what parents and near relatives leave behind, and women

shall have a share in what parents and near relatives leave behind; whether it be little or much. It is an obligatory apportionment. [4:7]

However, to ensure true justice and not mere equality, Islam has made the share of inheritance allocation commensurate with what men and women are required, under Islamic law, to pay for.

Both man and woman have, under Islam, equal rights to take up any profession. During the lifetime of the Prophet, some women worked in agriculture, some tended animals, or worked in weaving and cloth making, or in home industries, or other trades. Some women were nurses caring for those who were ill or tending men injured in battle.

Islam requires that men and women should be paid equal wages for the same work.

Furthermore, Islam gives both man and woman equal rights, or indeed it makes them equally duty-bound, to acquire knowledge. The Prophet ﷺ is quoted as saying: “Seeking knowledge is a duty incumbent on every Muslim (man or woman)”³. This constitutes a practical Islamic requirement that illiteracy must be erased completely for both sexes.

In safeguarding their reputation and social status, Islam treats both men and women as equal, prohibiting all slander, ridicule and backbiting: Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you revile each other, nor stigmatize each other... And do not backbite one another... [49:11-12]

Furthermore, Islam treats men and women as equal in legal and criminal responsibility. The same punishment is given to both for the same offences, and the same compensation is given to both for any damages they suffer.

In family matters, both have the same right with regard to choosing a spouse. No marriage is valid without the consent of the woman in the same way as no marriage may be valid without the man's consent.

In Islam, both husband and wife are equally responsible for their household. The Prophet ﷺ describes both husband and wife as shepherds tending their family. He himself, as his wife Aishah mentioned, used to “mend his shoes, patch up his robes and sew”⁴, “he attended to his family's needs”⁵, “he was an ordinary man: he looked after his clothes, milked his sheep and served himself.” The family home in Islamic society is characterized by mutual love and compassion. Both husband and wife discuss matters in a fair and reasonable way, and decide on the family affairs after consultation and mutual consent.

Islam gives man and woman the same treatment in attending congregational worship, celebration and gatherings.

All these are but examples of the equality Islam establishes in Muslim society. Furthermore, the Prophet ﷺ himself gives us practical examples of its implementation.

Having thus established genuine equality between the two sexes, Islam takes further care of women in a number of aspects, particularly in relation to their physical and mental well-being. It is universal wisdom that a girl will be exposed in her future life to the arduous demands of her special biological functions of pregnancy and childbirth, described by God in the Qur'an as strain upon strain [31: 14]. Hence, every girl needs proper health care right from childhood. Indeed she needs such care even before she is born. Proper health care means that she should receive, from childhood, good nutrition. She must not be compelled at any stage in her life, particularly during her growth, to do any type of work that impairs her health or weakens her constitution. Hence, God has honoured men by making them responsible to take full care of women:⁶ Men shall take full care of women... [4:34]. "God has not specified here a husband, father or brother... the verse denotes what is unanimously agreed that women must be fully looked after by men who undertake to meet their needs. A married woman is looked after by her husband, and one without a husband must be looked after by men in her family, if she is in need of such care."⁷

Thus, for a woman, work is a privilege, not a duty. She may undertake it whenever her circumstances allow. It is man's duty to take full care of her, looking after all her needs for her living, even though she may be rich. When the marriage contract is made, the husband makes a nominal gesture, giving his wife a dowry to indicate his readiness to take care of her. A wife may decide, if she dislikes her husband and wants to terminate her marriage, to make an opposite gesture, refunding him her dowry. This process is called *khula* which means, in effect, that she frees him of his marital responsibility of looking after her. Her marriage is thus terminated.

As for looking after women's psychological and mental well-being, God has made it clear that the rights of husband



and wife in relation to each other are perfectly equal (2:228). However, He has also encouraged men to aspire to a higher status, which can only be attained through resolve and kindness.

Islam and equality

In short, Islam establishes true and complete equality between man and woman, summed up in the Prophet's saying: "Women are full sisters of men".

It is to be noted from this rule that Islam sets the relationship between men and women in a form of fraternity and not in a form of a strife or struggle as it was set in some of the feminist movements of today.

In fact, this fraternal relationship and mutual support was, and still is, the main approach to empower both men and women on the same footing. God Almighty says: The believers, men and women, are close allies to one another: They enjoy what is right and forbid what is wrong. [9:71].

This social obligation of women and men is implemented in various forms, such as active participation in consultative and oversight councils, and expressing views through the media, or institutionalized, as the second rightly-guided Caliph, Omar,



did in the form of a system called the hisba, which is a mechanism to oversee, to control quality and to enact the rules and regulations agreed upon by the legislature.

We note in this connection that Islam adopted a gradual approach in dealing with a large number of issues, such as the prohibition of intoxicants and the abolition of slavery. However, it did not adopt such a gradual approach with regard to women. It established full equality of men and women all at once, and in a very decisive manner, bringing about a strong jolt in people's feelings. Al-Bukhari relates a statement by Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, the second rightly-guided Caliph: "In pre-Islamic days we cared nothing for women. When Islam was revealed and God mentioned them [in his revelations], we felt that they have rights which we owe to them, but we involved them in nothing of our own affairs. Once I was deliberating within myself about a particular matter when my wife said, 'It may be appropriate if you do so and so.' I said, 'And why do you interfere in something of my concerns?' She said, 'This is amazing coming from you, Ibn Al-Khattab! You object to being given a piece of advice, when your daughter (Hafsah) gives advice to God's messenger!'"

When Omar fully understood the ruling of Islam on the role of women and realized the extent of the role that women could play in society, alongside men and in partnership with them, he appointed Al-Shifa' Bint Abdillah to a highly important public position. She was an educated companion of the Prophet, and undertook the task of teaching illiterate women to read and write. Among her students was Hafsah Bint Omar, the Prophet's wife. It was Omar who appointed Al-Shifa' Bint Abdillah as Market Supervisor in Madinah.

Referring to Omar's time, Yahya Ibn Abi Sulaym says: "I saw Samra' Bint Nuhayk, a companion of the Prophet, wearing a thick dress and a thick overcoat, with a whip in her hand, correcting people's behaviour, enjoining what is right and prohibiting what is wrong."⁸

The late Abdul-Haleem Abu Shuqqah, a highly reliable contemporary scholar, mentions in his priceless, voluminous work, "Women's Liberation at the Time of the Prophet", more than 300 authentic sayings and practices of the Prophet that confirm women's full participation in social activities during the Prophet's time.

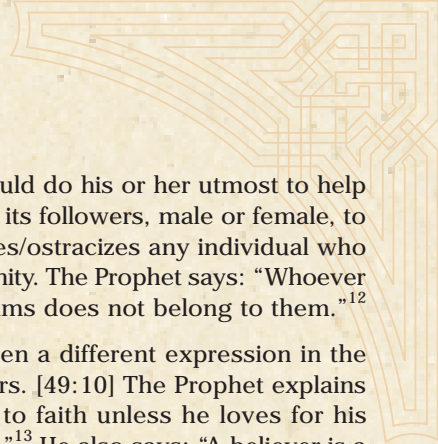
It is unfortunate that ignorant attitudes towards women were revived after the age of the rightly-guided Caliphs. Such attitudes continued to stretch their roots in subsequent generations, until they have come to be seen as the right ones which must be followed.

Role of the Muslim man or woman in the social life of the community

The first statement we quote here is the Qur'anic verse which states: The believers, men and women, are close allies to one another: They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. [9:71] The first point that draws our attention in this verse is the close relationship between believing men and believing women. The phraseology of the verse suggests a host of subtle, but very serious, implications that make the relationship between believers, males and females, one of mutual help, cooperation and solidarity. This is explained by the Prophet ﷺ in his statement: "In their mutual affection, compassion and sympathy, the believers are like one body: when any of its organs has a complaint, the rest of the body responds with sleeplessness and fever."⁹

Such a social structure that resembles one body cannot discard a single cell, male or female, let alone a single member. The Prophet ﷺ has amplified the nature of this bond in a number of statements that bring it before us in absolute clarity. He says: "The best of people is the one who brings them most benefit."¹⁰ He also says: "Let anyone of you who can be of benefit to his/her brother/sister do so."¹¹





This means that every Muslim, man or woman, should do his or her utmost to help their brothers and sisters. Islam does not allow any of its followers, male or female, to adopt a passive or careless attitude. Indeed it alienates/ostracizes any individual who does not think about or act on the needs of the community. The Prophet says: "Whoever does not concern himself with the affairs of the Muslims does not belong to them."¹²

The bond of close alliance between believers is given a different expression in the Qur'an. God says: All believers are but brothers/sisters. [49:10] The Prophet explains this relationship, saying: "None of you attains truly to faith unless he loves for his brother/sister whatever good he loves to have himself."¹³ He also says: "A believer is a brother/sister of every other believer: he/she helps him when he/she is in need and takes care of his/her interests in his/her absence"¹⁴. Another saying by the Prophet states: "A Muslim is a brother/sister of every other Muslim: he does not treat him/her unjustly, nor does he/she give him/her away."¹⁵ Another version of this saying of the prophet related by Muslim on the authority of Abu Hurayrah adds: "Nor does he/she let him/her down." The Prophet is also reported to have said: "Whoever helps a brother/sister through some need will have God helping him/her with his/her needs. Whoever relieves a Muslim of a distress in this life will have a distress of his/her relieved by God on the Day of Judgment. And whoever covers up a fault of a Muslim will have his/her faults covered up by God on the Day of Judgment."

This means that doing whatever serves the interests of the Muslim community or its individual members, and preventing whatever harms the interests of the Muslim community or of its individual members are the practical measures that bring the fraternity and close alliance of Muslims into being. We need to remember that these are stated by God Himself to be essential qualities of believing men and women.

Acts of worship are duties incumbent on every Muslim, male or female, while bringing benefit and preventing harm are duties incumbent upon all Muslims, males and females collectively. Such duties must be fulfilled. If they remain undone, every one in the Muslim community is at fault and incurs a sin. Hence, every Muslim, man or woman, considers such a collective duty to be incumbent on him or her. In fact, Muslims should all try to outdo each other in good deeds, in response to God's order, Vie with one another in good works [2:148], and to the Prophet's injunction, "Take the lead in doing good works."¹⁶

We may wonder about the numerous words God uses to refer to what benefits people and to set their affairs on the right track. These include: haqq, birr, khayr, ma'roof, ihsan, sadaqah and islah. The first of these, haqq, means the truth, and it refers to what benefits mankind, as in the Qur'anic verse: Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum [i.e. falsehood] is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind [i.e. the truth] remains behind on earth. [13:17]

Similarly, *birr* refers to what benefits both the individual and the community. Its antonym, *ithm* refers to what is harmful to both individual and community. This is clearly understood in how God describes wines and gambling: They ask you about drinking and gambling. Say, in both there is great harm [*ithm*] although they have some benefit for people, but their harm far exceeds their benefit. [2:219] Thus the term *ithm*¹⁷ is used in this verse as an antonym of benefit.

Birr and *ma'roof* are almost identical in meaning. The Prophet says: "Do what is right [*ma'roof*] and steer away from what is wrong. Consider what you would like to hear people saying about you when you leave them and do it; and identify what you dislike them to say about you when you leave them and refrain from it."¹⁸ The Prophet also says: "The *birr* means good manners, while the *ithm* is that which makes you uneasy and you dislike to be known to people."¹⁹ Moreover, *ma'roof* represents a whole section of *sadaqah*, as the Prophet says: "Every *ma'roof* is a *sadaqah*,"²⁰ which may be more properly translated as "Every act of kindness is a civilized act."²¹

Sadaqah is a beautiful term which Islam uses to refer to what we describe today as 'civility' or 'civilized behaviour'. By its very connotation, *sadaqah* provides true evidence of the individual's belonging to the civilized Muslim community. This is indicated by a hadith that quotes the Prophet as saying: "*Sadaqah* is a true proof."²² Such true proof is manifested in different types of behaviour, each of which clearly indicates that the person concerned has a clear sense of belonging to the community of believers. He or she is further keen to strengthen the bonds of fraternity and close friendship between members of the community, or individual cells of its single body.

Islam requires every Muslim, male and female, to prove at least once a day, his or her belonging to the Muslim community by undertaking at least one civilized action. Issuing a general directive to all Muslims, the Prophet ﷺ, says: "It is an incumbent duty for everyone to fulfil a *sadaqah* every day the sun rises".

One person in the Prophet's audience thought only of the financial aspect of *sadaqah*, which is charity. Therefore, he asked: "How could I give a *sadaqah* when we do not have enough money?" The Prophet's answer gave a full clarification, indicating the numerous aspects of *sadaqah* in the Islamic sense. He said: "Among the ways of *sadaqah* are ... enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong; removing a thorn, a bone or a stone from people's pathway; guiding a blind person; helping a deaf or a deaf-mute person to understand; giving directions to someone who wants something you know where to find; rushing to provide help to someone appealing for urgent assistance; helping someone to lift something that is too heavy for him... All these are aspects of *sadaqah* you bestow upon yourself."

In another saying of the prophet, Abu Tharr quotes the Prophet ﷺ as saying: “Turning to your brother with a smile on your face is a sadaqah; enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong is a sadaqah; giving directions to someone who has lost his way is a sadaqah; helping a person with poor eyesight through his difficulty is a sadaqah; removing a stone, thorn and bone from people’s pathway is a sadaqah; and pouring water out of your bucket into your brother’s bucket is a sadaqah.”²³

However, the Prophet ﷺ did not leave the question about financial charity unanswered. He is quoted to have said: “It is a duty of every Muslim to pay sadaqah”. People asked him: “What if he has nothing to give?” He said: “He does some work so as to benefit himself and give away in charity.”²⁴

In a third hadith Abu Tharr says: “I asked the Prophet ﷺ, ‘What if I do not do that?’ He replied: ‘You help someone in what he is doing, or you do something for an unskilled person.’ I said: ‘And what if I do not do that?’ He answered: ‘You spare people any evil you could do. This counts as a sadaqah which you bestow upon yourself.’”²⁵

In a fourth hadith the Prophet says: “Every kind word is a sadaqah; a help provided by one person to another is a sadaqah; a drink of water given to someone is a sadaqah; and removing harmful objects from people’s path is a sadaqah.”²⁶

When we look at this long list of good actions that are counted as civilized actions or sadaqahs, we can clearly see the image painted by the verse that says: The believers, men and women, are allies to one another: They enjoin what is right and forbid what is detestably wrong. [9:71] Thus we can better appreciate the importance of all believers, men and women, exercising the duty of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. This signifies enjoining a long list of actions that are right and beneficial to individuals and community, and speaking out against a long list of wrongs that work against the interests of individuals and community. Needless to say, a person who enjoins what is right must do it himself, and one who speaks out against a



wrong should refrain from doing it himself. The Prophet ﷺ says to us all: “Do what is right [ma’roof] and steer away from what is wrong.” The Prophet mentions a certain type of people who will be punished in the hereafter. Anyone of them would say: “I used to enjoin what is right, but would not do it myself; and I used to forbid what is wrong and would do it.”²⁷ In the Qur'an the Prophet Shuayb is quoted as saying to his people: I have no desire to do, out of opposition to you, what I am asking you not to do. [11:88]

This bright picture becomes even more brilliant when we take into account the concept of advice, with all that the word ‘advice’ connotes, such as love, compassion and sincerity. The Prophet says: “[The essence of] religion is sincere advice.” We asked: “To whom?” He replied: “For God, his book and his messenger, and to the leaders and members of the Muslim community”.²⁸

When we include our modern expansion of the concept of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, the image of the positive society advocated by Islam becomes even clearer. This is even further enhanced by a broader view of what constitutes benefit or interest and what constitutes harm and wrong.

In our present day, breaking a red traffic light may be included in the list of what is wrong, because the Prophet says: “A Muslim should listen and obey [the authorities’ directives], whether he likes or dislikes, unless he is ordered to do what



constitutes disobedience to God.”²⁹ Putting in place rules for traffic, organizing right of way, does not constitute disobedience to God. On the contrary, it serves people’s interests and brings them benefit. Hence, obeying such rules becomes a duty in accordance with the Prophet’s saying. By extension, disobeying these rules is wrong, and drawing the attention of someone else to the need to obey them is good and beneficial, or, to use the Islamic term, ma’roof.

Polluting the environment in any way or form is wrong and harmful. Therefore, speaking out against pollution is an act of forbidding what is wrong; while speaking for keeping the environment safe is an act of enjoining what is good. Likewise, smoking, which exposes the smoker and those in close proximity to him to health risks, is wrong. To try to persuade a smoker to quit is to forbid what is wrong. Similarly, giving sound counsel to non-smokers, particularly young people, so that they may be able to resist the temptation to smoke comes under enjoining what is right. Breast-feeding of newly born children is very good, and to promote it among women of childbearing age is to enjoin what is right. Vaccinating young children to give them immunity against childhood infectious diseases is of immense benefit because it protects children against a number of very serious diseases. To work for universal immunization is to enjoin what is right.

We see that we can draw an almost endless list of rights and wrongs. God denounces a particular community, because they would never restrain one another from wrongdoing. [5:79] By contrast, He praises those who stand firm against what is wrong: We saved those who had tried to prevent evil, and overwhelmed the transgressors with dreadful suffering for their iniquitous deeds. [7:165] The Prophet is quoted as saying: “Support your brother, whether he is in the wrong or being wronged.” A man asked: “Messenger of God! I understand that I should support my brother when he is wronged, but how can I support him if he is in the wrong?” The Prophet said: “You prevent him from wrongdoing. This is the good support you give him”³⁰ This concept of mutual support takes us back to the Qur’anic verse with which we started and to the relevant hadith, both of which speak about Muslim men and women being close allies of one another.

Women's lack of access to equality

This bright and ideal picture is contrasted by a dark one through which the Muslim community has lived for the past thirteen centuries. This is a picture in which one half of the Muslim community (i.e. women) has been paralysed, unable to perform any of these collective or community duties. We can visualize this picture if we are to compare what God and His messenger order and the condition in which half the Muslim community has lived.

God commands us in these words: Do what is good. [22:77] And He says: Let there become of you a nation that invites to all that is good. [3:104] Yet half the Muslim community is deprived of the ability to do good or to invite others to do it.

God tells us: Spend on others out of the good things that you have earned. [2:267] But half of the people in the Muslim community are not allowed to work and earn and spend on others out of their good earnings.

God calls on us to associate faith with good deeds, which include every action that benefits people. He says: Whoever does righteous deeds, whether man or woman, and is a believer, We shall most certainly give a good life. [16:97] In fact, He mentions faith and good deeds together in over 80 verses of the Quran to emphasize the importance of good action. Nevertheless, half the people in Muslim countries are not given the opportunity to serve their community through doing good works.

And God makes it clear that: The believers, men and women, are allies to one another: They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. [9:71] But in the Muslim communities of today, half the people are not allowed to go out to their community to enjoin what is right or forbid what is wrong.

God Almighty says to us: Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. [49:13] Nevertheless, the two halves of the Muslim community are not allowed to sit together, discuss matters or do anything that leads them to know one another.

The Prophet ﷺ says: "Seeking knowledge is a duty incumbent on every Muslim."³¹ It is a fact of life that half the Muslim community lives in utter ignorance, not allowed to seek knowledge or pursue learning.

In the Qur'an, God commends those who counsel one another to follow the truth and counsel one another to be steadfast. [103:3] He also praises those who counsel

one another to be steadfast, and enjoin mercy on one another. [90:17] Despite all this, half the Muslim people are not allowed to counsel one another in terms of the truth, steadfastness and mercy.

The Prophet ﷺ considers that the essence of religion is to give “sincere advice ... to the leaders and members of the Muslim community”. And yet half the Muslim community is given no chance to give sincere advice to either Muslim leaders or individuals.

Speaking of people’s discourse, God says: No good comes out of much of their secret talks; except for one who enjoins charity, or justice, or for setting things right between people. [4:114] Half the people in the Muslim community are not allowed to set things right between people.

In reference to every Muslim man and Muslim woman, the Prophet suggests that “he [or she] does some work, and thus he benefits himself and can give away in charity.”³² Yet half the population in Muslim communities are not allowed to do work.

The Prophet ﷺ considers as part of faith “the removal of harmful objects from people’s passage”³³. But in Muslim communities half the population are not given a chance to do just that.

The Prophet tells us: “Whoever helps a brother through some need will have God helping him with his needs.”³⁴ And we do not allow half of our population to help others through their needs.

God’s messenger counts among the types of sadaqah which someone enjoins on people “helping the blind, the deaf, the deaf mute and the weak.”³⁵ Nevertheless, half the Muslim population are not given a chance to help any of these or to do any other type of sadaqah.

God says: Call people to the path of your Lord. [16:125] But half the population in Muslim communities are not allowed to go out to the community calling people to the path of their Lord.



Indeed we see an even more amazing failure on the part of some of us who claim to be advocates of Islam. We read the verses in which God outlines the qualities Muslim men and women naturally have: That which is with God is far better and more enduring for those who believe and in their Lord place their trust. [These are the ones] who shun the more heinous sins and abominations; and who, whenever they are moved to anger, readily forgive; and who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer; and who conduct their affairs through consultation and mutual consent among themselves; and who spend on others out of what we provide for them as sustenance. [42:36-38] Some people who claim to belong to the advocates of Islam isolate one of these qualities, namely, 'who conduct their affairs through consultation and mutual consent', and try to limit its import to men only. Thus, they stop the enforcement of a definitive verse in God's book to deprive women of their intrinsic right to vote and contest elections.

Numerous indeed are the examples that can be added. And so we witness with wonder the wrongful practice of many Muslim communities today!

Just like Muslim men, Muslim women are required to do all this long list of collective or community duties, some of which we have mentioned in this paper. It is not by coincidence that faith is often mentioned in the Qur'an in conjunction with good deeds. In fact, faith cannot be attained by wishful thinking. It is defined as something we firmly believe in our hearts and to which we give credence by



practical action. It may not accord with your wishful thinking, nor with the wishful thinking of the people of earlier revelations. He who does evil shall be requited for it, and shall find none to protect him from God, and none to bring him support. But anyone, be it man or woman, who does good deeds and is a believer, shall enter paradise and shall not suffer the least injustice. [4: 123–124]

Involving women in human development

Muslim women have endured long centuries during which they were denied the chance to fulfil their social duties. This has made the modern call to reverse this trend sound rather strange and unfamiliar. New ways are needed to enable women to play their role in bringing about what benefits society and prevents harm from it, consolidate the bond of close friendship between believing women and believing men, empower women to enjoin and do what is right, and perform the many types of sadaqah that prove their belonging to the virtuous Muslim community.

The World Health Organization's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has taken some initiatives in this regard in Alexandria, Egypt, which hosted the Regional Office for half a century. As in many other cities in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, a number of shanty towns had emerged, a general characteristic of which is poor health and environmental conditions. Health and social services are very poor in quality. Housing and general surrounding environmental conditions, including provision of safe water, sanitation and waste collection, are poor. There is overcrowding and lack of risk awareness. Openings for women to acquire working skills are almost non-existent. Furthermore, women are denied any chance to participate in social problem-solving.

Three such shanty towns were chosen for demonstration projects and a plan of action was agreed with a nongovernmental organization for the improvement of health and environmental conditions. The University of Alexandria, community leaders and the Alexandria Governor's Office were also involved. The objectives of the projects were defined as improving the environment, particularly public hygiene and solid waste disposal; increasing awareness of health, environment and social issues in the local community, particularly among women and children; encouraging people in the community to join the efforts of social and economic development; creating income-generating opportunities, particularly through environment-related activities; and encouraging people to improve their housing, health, environment and economic conditions.

WHO entered into a contract with the University of Alexandria for the training of twelve women, who had completed mid-level education, in each of the three shanty towns. The

training aimed to equip the women with the necessary ability in environmental improvement and in sustainable development, so that they would be able to train housewives in their local areas and increase their awareness of relevant issues. The women participated in drawing up the training programme so as to ensure that it would meet the needs of both trainees and the community, and would give them appropriate skills to undertake income-generating activities. The first training programme concentrated on general environmental problems, particularly solid waste disposal, and recycling whatever may be recycled, the health risks of air pollution, and smoking. It also stressed the importance of water purification, reducing water wastage, expansion of green areas, and food safety. A number of workshops were organized on several subjects, including preparation of healthy food, basket-making using naturally available material, environmental inspection of schools, first aid, and avoiding harmful traditional practices.

Means of transport were provided for these women who also received some financial support. They were given the title of “environmental guides” which increased their self and social esteem. The nongovernmental organization provided these guides with equipment for street cleaning and waste collection, as well as four thousand trees for planting, with the aim of expanding green areas.

The project achieved remarkable success, with highly satisfactory results. It has encouraged us to replicate it and widen the extent and scope of such projects. The trained guides were able to identify some innovative ways to improve health standards, promote a safe environment and increase income in their local communities.

This experiment is only one simple example of the many ways that can be used to enable women to play their important role in the community. Health and the environment were chosen as the area of activity because these are not controversial. Needless to say, women have an important role to play in health promotion, in a variety of ways.

Women and health promotion

Women have a highly important role to play in health education and awareness. This is an aspect of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. Some of the health-promoting practices that may be included under ‘what is right’ have already been mentioned, such as breast-feeding and child immunization, and some health ‘wrongs’ such as smoking and environment pollution. But the list under both headings is very long indeed. Women are the best to enjoin what is right and speak out against what is wrong in this particular area.

Women also play a pivotal role in nutrition. Indeed, it is women who feed the human race, all over the world. Women's role in food production is acknowledged to be very important indeed, as is their role in the selection of food for the family, its preparation in line with health standards, in making the family aware of what constitutes a healthy diet, and how to meet health conditions in food preparation, and ensure food safety. More importantly, it is women who ensure that children develop healthy nutritional habits.

It is women who take the leading role in child immunization. For example, when WHO urged Afghan women through the radio to bring their children for immunization, they responded in a way no one could have ever expected, despite being described as "backward". Large numbers of women brought their children to vaccination centres. Vaccination coverage achieved very high rates, comparable to those prevailing in developed countries, despite the fact that Afghanistan was in a war and a crisis situation.

In many countries, it is women who are responsible for providing drinking-water for the family. It is often the case that women carry water over long distances. Moreover, it is the mother who trains her family in matters of personal hygiene and solid waste disposal.

Women look after each other and also tend to children. They are often the first to provide first aid in accidents involving children. Very often it is the woman who decides whether she or anyone in her family needs help from health services. Women often undertake the management of treatment of simple illness that are rarely in need of a doctor's examination, such as headaches, minor cases of constipation and diarrhoea, throat infection, colds, fever, etc.

Furthermore, it is the woman who gives those who are ill in the family their medications. She makes sure that medicines are kept away from sources of heat and humidity, and beyond children's reach.



The contribution women make to health promotion is incalculable, whether at the domestic level, as discussed here, or at the community and professional level, as doctors, nurses, health visitors, workers in health centres and institutions. And what women may do in the health field can be extended to all areas of human development and of life in general.

Conclusion

The only course of action that will ensure progress and success for the Muslim community is to follow in the footsteps of its first generations, to hold fast, with all our strength, to God's book and the Prophet's sayings and practices. It will take courage to scale the ascent that may impede our way towards the activation of the role of Muslim women as it was practised during the time of the Prophet and the rightly guided Caliphs. It is to such a goal that the efforts of the Islamic community should be dedicated.



References

- 1 Related by Al-Bukhari on the authority of Al Irbad Ibn Saryah.
- 2 Related by Muslim on the authority of Aishah.
- 3 Related by Ibn Majah and others on the authority of Anas Ibn Malik.
- 4 Related by Al-Bukhari in Al-Adab Al-Mufrad on the authority of Aishah.
- 5 Related by Al-Bukhari on Aishah's authority.
- 6 "The Arabic term used in this verse, qawwamoon, denotes taking care of someone or something, ensuring the well-being of that person or the proper maintenance of that thing. Thus, it is a duty and honour, not superiority as many people imagine. This is clearly the case in the Prophet's usage of the same word in the hadith related by Ibn Majah on the authority of Abu Hurayrah: "A group of my community will ever continue to take care of what God has ordered, caring little for any opposition."
Ibn Hazm, Al-Muhalla, Vol.8, p. 316 [Arabic]
- 8 Related by al-Tabarani.
- 9 Related by al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of al-Nu'man Ibn Basheer.
- 10 Related by Al-Daraqutni in Al-Afrad, and by Al-Dhiya' Al-Maqdisi in 'Al-Mukhtarah on the authority of Jabir.
- 11 Related by Muslim on the authority of Jabir.
- 12 Related by Al-Tabarani in Al-Mu'jam Al-Awsat on the authority of Huthayfah Ibn Al-Yaman.
- 13 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Anas.
- 14 Related by Abu Dawood.
- 15 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Ibn Omar.
- 16 Related by Muslim on the authority of Abu Hruayrah
- 19 Related by Muslim on the authority of Nawwas Ibn Sam'an.
- 20 Sadaqah is generally translated as 'charity', because it is most frequently used in this sense, but it has a much wider significance as explained in the following paragraphs.
- 21 Related by Al-Bukhari on the authority of Jabir and by Muslim on the authority of Huthayfah.
- 22 Related by Muslim on the authority of Abu Malik Al-Ash'ari.
- 23 Related by al-Tirmithi in this particular version, and by Al-Bukhari in Al-Adab Al-Mufrad and Ibn Hibban.
- 24 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Abu Moosa.
- 25 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim
- 26 Related by Al-Bukhari in Al-Adab Al-Mufrad.
- 27 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Usamah Ibn Zayd.
- 28 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Jareer Ibn Abdullah.
- 29 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Ibn Omar.
- 30 Related by Al-Bukhari on the authority of Anas.
- 31 Related by Ibn Majah on the authority of Anas.
- 32 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Abu Moosa.
- 33 Related by Muslim on the authority of Abu Hurayrah.
- 34 Related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Ibn Omar.
- 35 Related by Ahmad on the authority of Abu Tharr.

Investing in health, particularly that of the poor, is central to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. In support of this strategy WHO's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is actively promoting in countries of the Region community based initiatives like Basic Development Needs, Healthy Cities, Healthy Villages and Women in Health and Development. These approaches are based on the principle that good health status—an important goal in its own right—is central to creating and sustaining capabilities of poor people to meet their basic needs and to escape from poverty. The Community-Based Initiatives Series is aimed at facilitating the management of such initiatives. Users of the series may include government authorities, community representatives, WHO and other international agencies and non-governmental organizations.

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