



Economic Opportunities for Women and Their Status in Islam Analytical Exploration

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Abstract

In most parts of the world, women were regarded and considered as inferior to their male counterparts in the economic development of the society. There is no doubt that the status of women from time in memorial has been a controversial issue. Certainly, the role of women in any society is very enormous. This is because they play a significant role in the socio-economic survival of any society. Islam as a total way of life sanctifies the life of women like any other human being. It also recognizes the right of women, married or single to own property. Women are also not left behind in the process of re-distribution of wealth. This shows that the role of women in the societal economic development of any Islamic community is quite distinct. This study is primarily Aim at exploring economic opportunities available for women and their rights accorded by Islam towards balancing their transcendental and materials values. The study adopted descriptive method of research whereby data were source from various sources including internet, journal, newspaper, publish and unpublished thesis and other documented materials that are relevant to the study. Findings revealed that women in Islam contributed to the economic development of the society from time immemorable and it's recommended that government should empower women for self-reliance with financial assistance.

Keywords: *Economic opportunities, women status in Islam, an analytical exploration.*

Introduction

Women have been suffering for so many victimizations almost in every society globally because society in the past centuries forgot or was ignorant of the fact that women are the root of development in any society. But that time also culture had superseded everything, as a result of religious ignorance most of the dehumanization of women by men is only accepted by culture and tradition or by personal reason and not for religious reasons.

As a result of cultural perception women suffered just as slaves, culturally, they were considered as a tool, an object, a possession only to produce children, bearing and rearing the children, in fact, some societies considered women as economic tools that time. The more the number of wives the bigger the farm the husband possessed, to the extent that if a woman produces a baby-girl for a husband she could be sacked out of the house or face his terrible wrath because his wish is to have a baby-boy, he intentionally or ignorantly forgot that she (the mother) has nothing in terms of power of creation.

Without bias, most of the Nigerian societies regarded women as objects of satisfaction (sexually), only to be admired and desired. It is only in the Nigerian society when a wife delivered, the first question often asked is "is it a boy or a girl". If the baby is a boy, mostly the father becomes happier than a girl. There is a Hausa saying: "Mace ta Haifi Mace" which means, "A woman has given birth to a woman", the interpretation is no progress and it is degrading.

Consequently:

Women's inferior has been seen to be a product of a social system which has produced and maintained many other inequalities, inferiorities, discriminations and degradations. (Richard, S and Mohammed, H. 1993)

By the end of 20th and the beginning of 21st centuries these unconscious ideologies started to be changing positively on women especially in Nigerian societies. Today empowering women is very essential, this time women are seen as helpmates in any developmental aspect be it socio-political and economic matters and their roles are uncountable, this

time around we reached an extent creative in the societies regarded women as productive and creative in the society because any move towards sustainable development, women are involved, sometimes they are even the frontiers. In my area of study (Katsina state) and indeed in all societies in Nigeria today women are in senior government officials, Islamic scholars, business moguls. In this current awareness, women are doing a lot to improve themselves and the entire society because their men counterparts discovered their importance in the society.

Although in many societies in Northern Nigeria purdah has been in practice since the coming of Islam in Hausaland, but the contribution of women to the social, intellectual and economic well-being of the society cannot be over-emphasized. This is because of the various roles they play for the betterment of the society while they are being kept at home. Malami (2010) for instance, said, moral training of our young ones is the handwork of women. Various forms of trade are known to have been done by women. Yet, they help in consoling the men at home. This paper is intended in availing the opportunities abound to women and consider their status/rights accorded them by Islam.

The Concept of Women Empowerment According to Sandbrook and Halfani (2009) empowerment: Is a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation of economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of the powerless.

Specifically on women, empowering them does not mean the concerned gender should by all means be equal with their counterparts (i.e. men) by the dismantling of some cultural norms and traditional practices that devalue the status of women. The way to upgrade their status must necessarily be to look at their educational position, skills acquisition and enhance their position in the society. Contemporary English (2005); empowerment according to Longman Dictionary of Is to give someone more control over his own life or situation.

Therefore, to empower women, means women should have more control over their own lives or the situation they found themselves, be it educational, political, economic and the rest of them.

The idea here is that women should be empowered since we all believe that women contribute a lot in any society especially in agriculture, marketing, public service etc., therefore, when women are empowered, they would act as true helpmates to their husbands when it comes to assisting them in running the affairs of the home in so many ways. Moreover, when they are empowered, they would have something to do things that can bring income to them without depending solely on their husbands (punch, 2003).

Without going out women can contribute a lot to sustain the society by such occupations as soap-making, detergent, pomade, sweet-making, children's foods, sewing, poultry-making and other petty trading (Malami, 2006). All these can make women better in any society especially those in the rural areas and the urban illiterates, in fact the literates can even participate in the above-mentioned jobs (Zaid, 2009).

Therefore, women empowerment could be seen as a channel through which they could be enlightened, uplifted, encouraged, promoted, improved and changed, their conditions and status from lower to higher in the society. In summary, empowerment could be seen as the collective action by the oppressed and deprived to overcome the obstacle of inequality which has previously put them in a disadvantaged position. It was further explained as the process by which women mobilize to understand, identify and overcome gender discrimination so as to achieve equality of welfare and equal access to resources.

The Status of Women in Historical Perspectives

The status of women in the society is neither a new issue nor it is a fully, settled one. The position of Islam on this issue has been among the subjects presented to the western reader with least objectivity. In order to achieve this objectivity, it may be useful to review briefly how women were treated in general in previous civilizations and religions, especially those preceded Islam.

Women in Ancient Civilizations Describing the status of the Indian woman, Encyclopedia Britannica states:

In India, subjection was a cardinal principle. Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a state of dependence says Manu. The rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is descent traced through males to the exclusion of females.

In Hindu Scriptures, description of a good wife is as follows:

A woman whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection, acquires high renown in this world, and in the next, the same abode with her husband (Mace, D. 1960).

In Athens, women were not better off than either the Indian or the Roman women.

Athenian women were always minors, subject to some male to their father, to their brother, or to some of their male kin (Allen, E.A 1889).

Her consent in marriage was not generally thought to be necessary and:

She was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents, and receive from them her husband and her lord, even though he were stranger to her (Ibid)

In the Encyclopedia Britannica, there was a summary of the legal status of women in Roman civilization:

In Roman law a woman was even in historic times completely dependent. If married she and her property passed into the power of her husband... the wife was the purchased property of her husband, and like a slave acquired only for his benefit. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office... could not be a witness, surety, tutor, or curator; she could not adopt or be adopted, or make will or contract.

Among the Scandinavian races women were:

Under perceptual tutelage, whether married or unmarried. As late as the code of Christian V, at the end of the 17th century, it was enacted that of a woman married without the consent of her tutor he might have, if he wished, administer and usurf her goods during her life (Ibid).

According to the English Common Law:

... all real property which a wife held at the time of a marriage became a possession of her husband. He was entitled to the rent from the land and to any profit which might be made from operating the estate during the joint life of the spouses. As time passes the English courts devised means to forbid a husband's

transferring real property without the consent of his wife, but he still retained the right to manage it and to receive the money which it produced. As to a wife's personal property, the husband's (Encyclopedia Americana 1969).

power was complete. He had the right to spend it as he saw fit Before moving on to the Qur'anic decree concerning the status of woman, a few Biblical decrees may shed more light on the subject, thus providing a better basis for an impartial evaluation. In the Mosaic Law, the wife was betrothed.

Explaining this concept, the Encyclopedia Biblica states:

To betroth a wife to oneself meant simply to acquire possession of her by payment of the purchase money; the betrothed is a girl for whom the purchase money has been paid (Encyclopedia, 1902).

Validation of her marriage.

From the legal point of view, the consent of the girl was not necessary for the The girl's consent is unnecessary and the need for it is nowhere suggested in the law (Ibid).

As to the right of divorce, Encyclopedia Biblical also said;

The woman, being man's property, his right to divorce her follows as a matter of course (Ibid).

The right to divorce was held only by man. In the Mosaic Law, divorce was a privilege of the husband only (Encyclopedia Britannica op.cit).

The position of the Christian church until recent centuries seems to have been influenced by both the Mosaic Law and by the streams of thought that were dominant in its contemporary cultures. In their book, Marriage East and West, David and Vera Mace wrote:

Let no one suppose, either, that our Christian heritage is free of such slighting judgments. It would be hard to find anywhere a collection of more degrading references to the female sex than the early church fathers provide.... Woman was represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought that she is a woman. She should live in continual penance on account of the curses she has brought upon the world. She should be ashamed of her dress, for it is the memorial of her fall. She should be especially ashamed of her beauty, for it is the most potent instrument of the devil. One of the most scathing of these attacks of women is that of Tertullian. (Do you know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too.

You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealed of that forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuades him who the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert that is death even the son of God had to die). Not only did the church affirm the inferior status of woman, it deprived her of legal rights she had previously enjoyed.

Institutions do not necessarily conform to what the Muslims believe to be the It should be noted here that the above interpretations by religious original version of all revealed religions, which was believed to be essentially the same throughout history.

Women in Islam

In the midst of the darkness that engulfed the world, the divine revelation echoed in the wide desert of Arabia with a fresh, noble and Universal message to humanity. Thus:

O mankind, keep your duty to your lord who created you from a single soul and from it created it mates (of the same kind) and from them twain has spread a multitude of men and women (Qur'an 4:1)

El-Khouly (1967) pondered about this verse when he said: It is believed that there is not text, old or new that deals with the humanity of the woman from all aspects with such amazing brevity, eloquence, depth and originality as this divine decree.

Stressing this noble and natural conception, the Qur'an states:

He (God) it is who did create you from a single soul and therefrom did create his mate, that he might dwell with her (in love), (Qur'an 7:189). The creator of heavens and earth: he had made for you pairs from among yourselves, (Qur'an 42:11). And Allah has given you from your mates, children and grandchildren, and has made provision of good things for you. Is it then in vanity that they believe and in the grace of God that they disbelieve? (Qur'an 16:72).

The Spiritual Status/Opportunity of Women in Islam

The Qur'an provides clear - cut evidence that woman is completely equated with man in the sight of God in terms of her rights and responsibilities.

The Qur'an states:

Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds (Qur'an 74:38).

It also states:

...So, their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying); I will not suffer to lose the work of any of you whether male or female. You precede one from another... (Qur'an 3:195).

Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him we will give a new life that is good and pure and we will bestow on such their reward according to their actions (Qur'an 16:97, see also 4:124).

Woman according to Qur'an is not blamed for Adam's first mistake. Both were jointly wrong in their disobedience to God, both repented and both were specifically blamed.

Forgiven (Qur'an 2:36, 7:20-24). In one verse in fact (20:121) Prophet Adam was in terms of religious obligations, such as the Daily prayers, fasting, poor-due and pilgrimage, woman is no different from man.

In some cases, indeed, woman has certain advantages over man, for example, the woman is exempted from the daily prayers and from fasting during her menstrual periods and forty days after child birth, she is also exempted from fasting during her pregnancy and when she is nursing her baby if there is threat to her health or her baby's. If the missed fasting is obligatory, she can make up for the missed days whenever she can. She does not have to make up for the prayers missed for any of the above reasons.

The Economic Status/Opportunities of Women in Islam

Islam decreed a right of which woman was deprived both before Islam and after it (even as late as this century) (Siba'l, 1966), the right of independent ownership.

According to Islamic Law, woman's right to her money, real estate or other properties is fully acknowledged. This right undergoes no change whether she is single or married. She retains her full rights to buy, sell, mortgage or lease any or all her properties. It is nowhere suggested in the law that a woman is a minor because she is a female. It is also noteworthy that such right applies to her properties before marriage as well as to whatever acquires thereafter.

With regard to the woman's right to seek employment it should be stated first that Islam regards her role in society as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential. Neither maids nor babysitters can possibly take the mother's place as the educator of an upright, complex-free and carefully - reared children. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as "Idleness"

However, there is no decree or law in Islam which forbid woman from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature and in which society needs her most. Examples of these professions are nursing, teaching (especially for children) and medicine.

Sulaiman (1978), opined that:

It is very sad, that our Muslim society is pleased to employ non-Muslim women to treat its members in hospitals and teach their children, while it keeps its women ignorant, idle and imprisoned.

Moreover, there is no restriction on benefiting from woman's exceptional talent in any field. Islam restored to woman the right of inheritance in some cultures. Her Share is completely her own and no one can make any claim on it, including her father and her husband. The Qur'an says:

Unto men (of the family) belongs a share of that which parents and near kindred leave and unto women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be a little or much a determinate share (Quran 4:7).

Her share in most cases is one-half the man's share with no implication that she is worth half a man! It would seem grossly inconsistent after the overwhelming evidence of man's equitable treatment in Islam to make such an inference. This variation in inheritance rights is only consistent with the variations in financial responsibilities of man and woman according to the Islamic law. Man in Islam is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, children, his parents and in some cases of his needy relatives, especially the females. This responsibility is neither waived nor reduced because of his wife's wealth or because of her access to any personal income gained from work, rent, profit, or any other legal means.

Woman, on the other hand, is far more secured financially and is far less burdened with any claims on her possessions. Her possessions before marriage do not transfer to her husband and she even keeps her maiden name. She has no obligation to spend on her family out of such properties or out of her income after marriage. She is entitled to her dowry which she takes from her husband at the time of marriage. If she is divorced, she may get alimony from her ex-husband. An examination of the inheritance law within the overall framework of the Islamic law reveals not only justice but also an abundance of compassion for women (Abd al - Ati, 1977).

The Social Status/Opportunities of Women in Islam

Despite the social acceptance of female infanticide among some Arabian tribes, the Qur'an forbade this custom and the custom of depriving our female children education both Islamic and western is like burying them alive, and it is considered as a crime on the parents...

Quran 81:89, 16:58-59, talks about the brutality of burying daughters' alive and how men darken their faces on the receipt of the news of the birth of female children. Far from saving the girl's life so that she may later suffer injustice and inequality, Islam requires kind and just treatment for her. Among the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in this regard are: -

Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into paradise (Tbn Hanbal, 1980). Whosoever, supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the Day of Judgment as this (he pointed with his two fingers held together).

A similar Hadith deals in like manner with one who supports two sisters (Ibn Hanbal, 1980).

The right of females to seek knowledge is not different from that of males.

The Prophet (PBUH) said "seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim" (Al-Baihaqi in Badawi 1983). Muslim as used here includes both males and females.

As a Wife

The Qur'an clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the two halves of the society, and that its objectives, beside perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Its bases are love and mercy (Qur'an 30:1).

According to Shari'ah, women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent. Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to prophet and reported that her farther had forced her to marry without her consent. The Prophet gave her choice (between accepting the marriage or invalidating it (Ibn Hambal, 1980). In another version, the girl said:

Actually, I accept this marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right (to force husbands on them) (Ibn Majah, 1983).

Besides all other provisions for her protection at the time of marriage, it was specifically decreed that woman has full right to her dowry, which is a marriage gift presented to her by her husband and is included in the nuptial contract and that such ownership does not transfer to her father or husband. The concept of dowry in Islam is neither an actual or symbolic price for the woman, as was the case in certain cultures, but rather it is a gift symbolizing love and affection. As the woman's right to decide about her marriage is recognized, so also her right to seek an end to an unsuccessful marriage is recognized.

As a mother

Islam considered kindness to parents next to the worship of God:

Your Lord has decreed that you worship none save Him, and that you be kind to your parents (Qur'an 17:23).

Moreover, the Qur'an has a special recommendation for the good treatment of mothers:

And we have enjoined upon man (to be good) to his parents; His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness (Qur'an 31:14) (see also Qur'an 46:15, 29:8).

A man came to the Prophet (PBUH) asking;

O messenger of God, who among the people is the worthiest of my good company? The prophet said your mother; the man asked, then who else? The prophet said your mother, the man asked, then who else? Only then did the prophet Say, your father (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

A famous saying of the prophet is "paradise is at the feet of mother". (In Al-Nisa'i, Ibn Majah and Ahmad).

Conclusion

The history of Muslims is rich with women of great achievements in all walks of life from as early as the seventh century till date. It is not impossible for anyone to justify any ill-treatment of woman by any decree of rule embodied in the Islamic law, nor could anyone dare to cancel, reduce, or distort the clear-cut legal rights of women given in Islamic law. More so the reputation, chastity and material role of Muslim women were objects of admiration by impartial observers.

It is also worthwhile to state that the status which women reached during the present era was not achieved due to the kindness of men or due to natural progress. It was rather achieved through a long struggle and sacrifice on woman's part.

Effort is made by successive governments to strengthen the condition of women in Nigeria. Government and Women Organizations play a vital role in the life of women, especially the rural women.

Recommendations

1. Eradication of illiteracy among women.
2. Market-oriented activities must be taken professionally planned and implemented for women with the aim of promoting economic activities for them.
3. Government should empower women for self-reliance with financial assistance.
4. Government and Non-Governmental Organizations should be cautious in the liberating rights and gender equality in their local traditions, culture and religion precepts.
5. Women Organizations and other NGOs should be awarding scholarships en-mass to girl-children.
6. All three tiers of governments, especially the third tier i.e local government, should put much emphasis on empowering women in the rural areas.

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