

Women's Empowerment, working women and Islam

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This paper discusses the concept of women empowerment, by identifying its context which identifies those social processes in response to which this reaction emerged. Womenfolk faced extreme exploitation and humiliation in different eras of European history including antiquity, dark ages and enlightenment period. As capitalism wanted more workforce and larger consumer bases, it used women exploitation as a pretext to break the family structure. This concept stands at odds with Muslim societies like Pakistan where majority of the women prefers to follow higher objective of rearing families than to achieve individualized economic freedom and autonomy. In the later part, this paper presents certain Islamic injunctions from Quran and Hadith elaborating real rights, respect, and freedom to women which is in line with human nature.

Introduction:

For around last half century, awareness campaigns for the rights of women are on rise. In order to balance out the dominant positions males occupy in most of the contemporary societies, number of ideas and slogans have cropped up including autonomy, equal participation and representation of women in all walks of life, economic self-reliance and political independence etc. To achieve these ends, steps and actions have been suggested so that women are placed on equal footings with their male counterparts. Some of them are, provision of education, reducing mothers' mortality during labor, equal shares in jobs, equal pay structures, equal access to education and health etc.

These movements originally emerged in the western countries and later due to the globalized nature of the current world have become part of agendas and policies of third world countries including Pakistan. Due to the emphasis on these ideas and actions, their economic independence has improved; more women are serving in organizations, women rights awareness has increased, women rights organizations have surfaced who arrange awareness seminars, conferences, processions, various NGOs provide loans, training and skill development for women, and lastly considerable amount of funding for such projects are available from the western world.

Whereas it is debatable as to what extent the conditions of women in the west has improved, and whether what changes can be termed

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as improvement, since improvement is a subjective term which may mean different things for different societies, however, in a country like Pakistan, whose official religion is Islam and where majority of the population gives importance to Islam, debates and controversies have started concerning women empowerment concept, strategies and actions. First being whether men and women are equal in all respects, or 'equity' as per the teaching of Islam is a better concept, second being the kind of empowerment, i.e. whether western model of empowerment is in line with injunctions of Islam and whether majority of the women want empowerment on the lines of western ideology or they want their due rights as ordained by their Creator.

In order to be able to settle issues mentioned above we need deep understanding of the concept of women empowerment as presented by western ideology and actions. Weick has developed a technique/ methodology with the name of sense making in which the meaning of a phenomenon is interpreted in the light of its context¹. Schwandt explains sense making as a —process that includes the use of prior knowledge to assign meaning to new information...It is not simply the interpretation of information; rather, the continuous interaction with information allowing meaning to emerge².

So in this article we will use sense making technique and will try to understand the socio-historical, context in which this concept evolved.

Socio-Historical Context:

Every society identifies and believes on a source which could provide it authentic, reliable and true knowledge, and during the dark ages of Europe, church was its source. The nobility-clergy nexus ruled the society through brute force of the king and the sheer sanction of the religion. Differing with state narrative was a crime which was punished brutally. This unchallenged hegemony provided church with absolute power and in absence of any accountability mechanism led it to be corrupted absolutely. It interpreted religious verdicts to its advantage e.g. all divine texts claimed that land belonged to the God, so they claimed that since they were the carriers of God's message and King was the shadow of God on earth, so they were the rightful owners of the land and public could only use it after paying rent to them³. Through such misinterpretations, it used words of God to their advantage and established strong control on the society.

Church firmly believed Geocentrism to be the true and valid view of the Universe perhaps because it fitted well with their teachings, which though, is originally attributed to Ptolemy. However, by the 10th century, a number of Muslim scientists raised doubts on this view which held that earth was in the center of the Universe and proposed an alternative view i.e. heliocentric – a view which places Sun in the center. Interaction with the Muslim societies provided Europeans with fresh knowledge and insight starting from rationality in thinking⁴ to scientific way of life⁵. This new view was based on scientific studies so it appealed to inquisitive minds in Europe but attracted strong criticism from the Church. This proved to be the first crack in the edifice of the Church's authority which was seen as the sole provider of the true knowledge. In the coming years, scientific revolution established science as an alternative source of knowledge and then Era of Enlightenment saw scientific methods replacing Christianity as method of producing knowledge in the social sciences⁶. The new world view gave rise to new cultural ideals including instrumental reason, political liberalism, liberal individualism, autonomy, equality, abstraction⁷ etc.

For the purpose of understanding empowerment this article focuses on liberal individualism, autonomy and equality. Since these concepts emerged out of western history and in response to certain events in Europe therefore we need to understand their peculiar meaning. Though these western cultural Ideals and fundamentals may be universally known but they have spread in the last couple of centuries throughout the world and have peculiar meanings which need to be understood so that we know clearly what West means by these terms. At this point a quote from Bishop will help us understand these various concepts.

The congruence between viewing human actions as instrumental and all objects in the world – social factors included – as related only or largely via chains of cause and effect also reflects a profound aspiration to individuality. In its stark autonomy, the punctual self is a unique individual first and foremost. Likewise, autonomy is tied to some of our most cherished values in Western society like respect and tolerance for individuality...Western democratic traditions are built, in part, upon the liberal values that a person's individuality be respected, that her individual rights be protected, that her individual freedom remains unfettered and that here individual values be tolerated⁸.

Liberal Individualism is an underlying theme of political liberalism which believes that 'the state should not support one conception of the good life ... nor favor any particular religions sexual mores etc. To advocate or enforce some conceptions of the good over others restricts and threatens autonomy and individuality'⁹. They believed on the minimalist state which should allow natural process to manage economy and society.

This emphasis was a reaction to the oppressive clergy-nobility nexus which deprived people of the right to think, believe, own and express. However, this reaction was so strong that it reached to the other extreme where individuality of the individual became so dominating that it compromised its social and interactive nature. Too much emphasis on individuality led people to look inwards and to explore self to the disregard of the external environment and social systems. They took these social systems much the same as natural systems drawing parallels to ecosystem which maintain its temperature within habitable range through various mechanisms which come in to play automatically.

Alongside these thoughts, developed Darwin theory of natural selection which propagates the view that in a competitive environment, only those species tend to survive which are the fittest. Soon it became the dominant thought in society and competition came to be known as a superior process as compared to sympathy, mutual growth, which could ensure progress. When competition intensified, it led its promotion to the higher echelon i.e. cut-throat competition which actually meant 'might is right'. Undue emphasis on competition and accolades conferred to it unchallenged legitimacy through powerful elements and gained the right to succeed through all possible means.

These thoughts, along with the right of ownership claimed during French revolution 1789, provided everyone the right to own anything including land, rivers, mines, forests, lakes etc. but the main beneficiaries were the *Bourgeois* – the middle class, the haves who set up industries, factories etc. And since the *Bourgeois* class was the one which gained power in parliament as well, there was no one stopping them from extreme exploitation of the proletariat, the labor class. Within half a century, the condition of the labor was so miserable, and their exploitation was so acute that Fredrick Angles had to write a book titled ' ' to explain their pathetic situation. Ever since, capitalism has proliferated and spread to most parts of the world through colonization campaigns

in most of Asia and Africa. Though it did face an intellectual threat in the name of socialism and a state threat in the name of communism, but after the demise of Soviet Union, it has again resurrected out of ashes, albeit in new attire i.e. neoliberalism.

Making sense of Women Empowerment

The above background makes it very clear that the west had a very specific and peculiar context which necessitated a reaction to specific problems they were facing in their environment, in the shape of women empowerment. It had peculiar problems and issues and their solution that emerged from their society was based on their cultural ideals, values and preferences. It would be erroneous to consider this peculiar context of the West same as that of the rest of the world. Women had been treated differently in other cultures, so if they were not facing the same problems why and how a solution or reaction that originated in some other culture may fit well with their culture. Not only will it not fit well, it would disturb the culture and produce unwanted metamorphosis there.

Following paragraph amply throws light on the peculiarities of the western history, value structure and their natural outcomes for a society.

The rise of modern science, Enlightenment philosophy, industrialization and bureaucratization shared various interrelations. These tightly interlocked cultural developments adopted natural science's tendency to ignore or abstract away from the rich appearance of things, including the values and meaningful relationships of our ordinary experiences in the pursuit of pure knowledge. These practices of abstraction allow science to regard the world in an objectified way, that is to say, as made up of inherently meaningless objects in causal interaction with one another¹⁰. (p 107)

Out of the concept of abstraction mentioned above came the idea of liberal individualism, which provides certain rights to individuals considering them to be existing in vacuum, where no other member of society exist, whereas in reality we observe one man's action does have an impact over its environment. Right always comes with responsibilities. We do hear a lot of talk of rights but no responsibilities towards society, environment etc.

Another valued concept west cherishes is equality. No doubt, all human beings are and should be equal in dignity, respect and treatment; however every human being carries significance in his

own domain. If every human being is unique why men and women are not considered unique in their own right! Can we give equal importance to all parts of a vehicle? Of course all are important with reference to their functions, however not all are equal. A certain part which carries out very important function, so it needs protection which other hard covering parts provide. Same is the case with female. She has different qualities, characteristics, values and biological structure than men. She has those characteristics which enable her to bear, take care, provide milk to and rear a child. She has the capability to hold the family united and family is the most important basic unit of any society. A family provides its members with protection from external excesses, provides company, provides psychological support, educates them and rears them into responsible, useful and productive members of society. So if the family is intact, society can absorb any kind of shock, but if the family is broke, individual is broke. And that is what has actually happened in the west where now family has become an endangered species, and individuals, though have all the material ingredients of a house, is deprived of the psychological support and social environment which is vital for a social being, that human is.

When these values are adopted in a country like Pakistan, where majority of the society is Muslim and consciously and willingly adheres to its code of life, it double-burdens the women who chose to pursue a career. While performing career related activities, they continue to perform their functions as a wife and mother. And those who prefer their carriers, their family badly suffer.

Furthermore, out of peculiar events in European history, evolved the economic system of capitalism which provided capitalists ample opportunities to maximize their profit and use everything including humans as instruments. As evidence we have mentioned above, how masses/labor class was exploited after French revolution. As this system is still in place, it continues to exploit the hapless have-nots. Since their profits will skyrocket if there are more customers for their products. So it is in their interest to break family so that all members of family live independently and buy product individually, and as capitalists there will be double the labor as women join the queue with men.

Moreover, this alleged exploitation of women by males is just a distraction of the system which continues to exploit and oppress weaker sections of society irrespective of their gender, race,

nationality, age etc. Males are exploited equally in this system. What is happening with black males in US these days? How white males were treated when they started Occupy Wall Street Movement? What about the two complete cities of Japan which were burnt to death by US atomic bombs!

Islam – Creators' sagacious Plan

Islam provides the guidelines from the Creator of the whole human race which reached humanity through His last Prophet Mohammad SAW. Islam provided a comprehensive road map for smooth running of the society and for the protection of the weak in the society. The following section enumerates certain commands of Islam regarding protection and provisions of rights to women.

The Holy messenger SAW identified, "The best of you is he who is best to his wives".¹¹

The saying of the Holy Messenger SAW clearly sets women as the reference point for commanding respect in the society. This is not seen even today in any other compatriot society.

Holy Prophet (S A W) said, "Anyone who brought up her daughters with full care and then marry them. He is as close to me as my two fingers¹²." This indicates the emphasis on brought up and education of women in an Islamic society. The Holy Messenger SAW also said, "Education is mandatory for all Muslims (both men and women)¹³." Islam takes extra care to protect women against possible exploitation in the society therefore they are protected through aura¹⁴ or through the company of their close relatives when they come out of their houses. The western societies, in contrast, do not provide this protection to women and consequently they are exploited leaving behind single-mothers in teens¹⁵, bringing up their children out of wedlock. Islam on the other hand protects against extra-marital relations. Allah SWT says in the Holy Quran, "All (women), except these, have been permitted for you to seek (to marry) through your wealth, binding yourself, (in marriage) and not only for lust."¹⁶

Islam demands of its followers to entertain the women within prescribed bounds as specified by Islam. Allah SWT in the Holy Quran commands, "You and your wives are dresses of each other."¹⁷ Moreover, The Holy Messenger SAW said to one of his companions, "Why didn't you get married to a virgin so that you would play with her; and she could play with you."¹⁸ In business and in ownership of property Islam takes women as equal to men. Hazrat Khadija(R.A), the first wife of the Holy

Messenger (S A W), was one of the most famous business-ladies of the time. Services of the Holy Messenger were hired by Hazrat Khadija (RA) for looking after her trade business in various countries, in particular Syria¹⁹.

Women didn't have the right to inheritance before Islam. Allah SWT in the Holy Quran says, "Allah directs you concerning your children: for a male there is a share equal to that of two females"²⁰. This does not mean that women are given less than men instead in Islam; women are not responsible for earning or spending on their near and dear ones. The sole responsibility of earning lies on men and they are supposed to look after the women of their families including sisters, mothers, wives, daughters, and women in relatives. In addition to it, she can buy property in her own name as a legal person. She can possess property without anybody's interference. She has complete right on her property as men have in Islam as she can sell it, rent out it and can give it to anyone as a gift.

Islam binds men to pay *mehar* (dowry) to women before matrimony. "Give women their dowry in good cheer."²¹ Even in the case of divorce Islam sets the standards that all gifts and wealth given to wife cannot be taken back, "Divorce is twice; then either to retain in all fairness, or to release nicely. It is not lawful for you to take back anything from what you have given to them."²² Divorce in western world is a recipe for disaster. In western marriages divorce takes place only if one of the spouses takes up charges of adultery against the fellow spouse in a court of law.

The scholar work of Hazrat Ayesha (RA) is a model for all women. Both men and women used to visit Hazrat Aysha (RA) for learning Islam; she (RA) is the fourth highest narrator of sayings of the Holy Messenger SAW²³. She is known to have described Islamic teachings for the companions of the Holy Messenger SAW, her scholarly debates set-aside many of the conflicts of the time.

Islam has protected women well in both socio-economic terms. Apart from these securities women have legal and political protection too. Women in Islam practice their political right by electing the ruler to power. It is narrated by Anas RA, "When the Messenger of Allah accepted the women's oath of allegiance; he SAW accepted their pledge."²⁴ Remember the right to vote in Europe came in early 20th century.

Hazrat Ummer (R.A) appointed Hazrat Shifaa (R.A) as an administrator and account officer for the market²⁵. This appointment is of particular importance as Hazrat Ummer's (RA) era is known for administrative reforms and appointment of a woman to administer market emphasizes the diversity of employment which Islam allows for women. Hazrat Umm-e-Ammarah used fight in battles alongside the Holy Messenger SAW and his SAW companions²⁶. Women as part of active military contingents has been a more recent phenomenon even in western societies and yet the example of Hazrat Umm-e-Ammarah indicates that Islam provided opportunity for women who intended to fight upfront. At the event of Hudabiya Holy Prophet (S A W) consulted Hazrat umm-e-Salma and acted on her advice to move on²⁷, indicating the advisory role of women in running of state affairs.

This can be summed up in the shape of the general principle in Islam regarding women that came from the Khutaba Hujjtul Wida, the Holy Prophet's last sermon (S A W), "O, people fear from Allah in the matter of women; treats them carefully and fairly as Islam teaches you²⁸." This is to say that matters of women have to be handled with fear of Allah in the heart and in the light of teachings of Quran and Sunnah.

The above are only few instances quoted from the Islamic history and the teaching of Quran and Sunnah to point out well-empowered and well-protected role of the women in active social, political, business, administrative, and scholarly life in Islam.

Conclusion

The world view of Islam defines the purpose of life and provides clear guidelines to fulfill that purpose. The roles of men and women are defined and both are guided by the teachings of Quran and Sunnah to perform their roles. So Islam focuses on pursuing the guidelines provided by the Creator. Western societies consider acquiring greatest pleasure of life to be the utmost purpose of life, consequently there is strife in both males and females for acquiring greatest pleasure but not in shouldering the burden of responsibilities. So they want to have sex but not have children, they want the company of opposite sex but not the shared responsibility of married life. This strife in the gender is not limited in sexes; it is in various age brackets as well. Children want more freedom long before they can understand the very meaning of it and parents want their siblings to bear their own

expense so that parents can enjoy their lives and the like. Too much emphasis makes an individual an inward looking selfish creature. Individuals upbrought under this theme refrain from marriage and having kids fearing this will de-shape their figures. This selfishness has serious consequences for the society at large. In majority of the western countries, population growth rate is negative. This means that one day the whole race will get extinct. Moreover, one who thinks in this ways should also ponder on the fact that had his/her parents adopted this philosophy; this individual would have never existed. This world is running due to sacrifices, sharing, giving. If everyone becomes individualized entity, the humanity will cease to exist.

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