



"We Used to Have No Regard for Women": Gender Equity & the Advent of Islam

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Introduction

The status and rights of women are contentious issues within and across cultures. Opinions diverge for the most subjective of reasons, due to fluctuations in personal biases that are susceptible to changes in time and place. This becomes evident when examining perceptions of women in any particular society through the lens of its own people, while taking into account biases within the religious, historical, and social context of that society.

In current times, such differences between cultures continue to be hotly contested, with divergent views on the function of gender within society still spurring both intra- and inter-societal debates. To explore such discussions in depth is beyond the scope of the current paper. Rather, we focus on a period of time in which one particular society was remarkably successful in overcoming the malignancy of misogyny. Over a relatively short period of time in 7th century Arabia, deeply ingrained negative perceptions of women were reversed, and their treatment markedly improved.

Through the impact of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ's message, highly problematic cultural attitudes towards women that were widespread during the time later referred to as ‘the Age of Ignorance’ saw an extraordinary transformation. Islam’s acknowledgment of women’s equity in the societal, familial, and spiritual spheres was unprecedented at its time, and its demarcation of rights and obligations between men and women remains unmatched to this day. Through the application of Islam’s ethical principles and a paradigm placing women on an equal spiritual footing with men, pre-Islamic society was forever transformed for the better.

This paper will overview that transformation, one that can be demonstrated by the shift in one prominent man’s perspective. A companion of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra) became the second Caliph of Islam and one of the most influential leaders in recorded history. His own view of women changed significantly under the Prophet ﷺ’s gentle guidance after he embraced Islam. As he testifies in his own words: “In *Jāhiliyya*,¹ we used to have no regard for women

¹ Arabic for ‘the Age of Ignorance’—a term used in reference to the time prior to the advent of Islam.

whatsoever. But when Islam came and Allah made mention of them, this caused us to realize that they have rights upon us...”² To truly fulfill Islam’s mandate of justice and mercy, Umar’s realization of the proper status of women must continuously be revived in the hearts of all Muslims, at all places and times.

Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while a believer—We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do.
[Qur’an 16: 97]

Societal Regard

It is important to note at the outset that, as in any society, there was variability in the status of pre-Islamic Arab women. Early sources indicate that some women were able to attain a degree of relative independence in spite of constraining societal circumstances. For instance, the Prophet ﷺ’s wealthy wife Khadija was able to carry on business in her own name, and women in pre-Islamic times were often bold enough to speak their mind without hesitation, particularly those who occupied the upper echelons of society, such as Hind b. Utbah. However, as elaborated upon below, the drawbacks of being female in pre-Islamic society were unmistakable, with women of lower economic and social classes particularly downtrodden and oppressed.

Generally speaking, in pre-Islamic Arabia’s rigidly tribal society, without the support of a powerful tribe, the poor and marginalized would often suffer. This social reality was sharply criticized in many Qur’anic verses, a critique that formed a fundamental part of the Prophet ﷺ’s message. In his role as the final prophet in a long line of prophets in the Abrahamic tradition, the Prophet ﷺ had to challenge the long-standing practices of Arabia, while reviving the original spirit of the laws of previous Abrahamic prophets. Therefore, in analyzing the impact of the Islamic message on women in Arab society, the question to be asked is whether the men who embraced the message of the Prophet ﷺ came to view women

² *Sahih al-Bukhâri; Kitâb al-Madhâlim; Bâb al-Ghurfa wal-‘Ulya; Hadith 5505*

differently, and how; and whether early female converts to Islam felt empowered or hindered by their new faith.

One of the earliest stances in the Qur’an against the manifest injustices within pre-Islamic society was a denunciation of its treatment of women, in particular infant girls who were regarded as nothing more than a financial burden. Thus the heinous practice of female infanticide was rationalized, and implemented without consequence. The Qur’an describes and condemns the practice in the following verses:

And when one of them is informed of [the birth of] a female, his face becomes dark, and he suppresses grief. He hides himself from the people because of the evil of which he has been informed. Should he keep it in humiliation or bury it in the ground? Unquestionably evil is what they decide. [Qur’an 16: 59]

Those who were spared this fate often faced other cruel customs. In the pre-Islamic Arabian milieu, treating women as mere property was widespread. For instance, when a man died, his male relatives would ‘inherit’ his wife. Under this logic, in most circumstances, a woman could not inherit anything herself: “No one inherits but someone who carries the sword and protects the tribe,” as the Arabs would say. In this manner, a woman’s economic rights were largely overlooked due to a worldview that disregarded women and marginalized their contributions to society. The fear of other tribes’ raiding and plundering led to further marginalization of women, given that they would be considered part of the plunder, kidnapped, and taken captive by the raiders. This rendered women nothing more than a source of potential ‘shame’ to their families, and was in fact part of the motivation of those who buried their daughters alive: to circumvent this prospective humiliation.³

Yet from the point of view of the *Shariah*, none of these factors were seen as relevant to a woman’s essential value. Regardless of any perceived ‘shame’ in relation to women, infanticide and any form of honor killing are completely

³ Sulaimani, F. (1986) ‘The Changing Position of Women in Arabia Under Islam During the Early Seventh Century.’ University of Salford, International Studies Unit. <http://usir.salford.ac.uk/14814/1/361089.pdf>

impermissible in the *Shariah*. When the Prophet ﷺ was asked by a companion about what one should do if he caught his wife in the act of adultery, he clearly prohibited killing either the wife or the man with her; thus, even extreme provocation was not considered an acceptable defense.⁴ Taking a woman’s life is not seen as less of a crime than taking a man’s, and renders the murderer liable to suffer the most severe of punishments in retaliation: the death penalty. There is no gender differentiation in the sanctity of life.

Even in private settings, women often faced societal gender-based discrimination. Under certain menstruation laws and practices, women’s physiology was often used as an excuse to further marginalize them. Muslim women do observe certain restrictions during their menstrual cycle, in some ways similar to Orthodox Jewish women. But the Prophet ﷺ’s statement that, “A believer never becomes impure,”⁵ is a foundational principle within Islam, such that all the laws surrounding this and similar ritual purity issues, related to both women and men, were never intended or viewed as punishment for sin. Women are excused from prayer and fasting during menstruation due to the weakness that accompanies menstrual bleeding, but they are not ostracized nor deemed spiritually impure, nor are they obligated to separate themselves from society.

It is well documented that the Prophet ﷺ would make it a point to be intimate, sans intercourse, with his wives during their menses. He would recite Qur’an in his wife ‘Aisha’s lap and let her comb his hair while she was menstruating. He would inform her that she could touch things freely, telling her, “Your menses are not in your hands.”⁶ Furthermore, he would encourage menstruating women to come out and witness the festive Eid proceedings, instilling in women a sense of their essential purity and value.

⁴ Brown, J. (2016) ‘Islam is not the Cause of Honor Killings. It’s Part of the Solution.’ Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research.

https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/jonathan-brown/islam-is-not-the-cause-of-honor-killings-its-part-of-the-solution/#_ftn4

⁵ Sahih al-Bukhari 283 In-book reference: Book 5, *Hadith* 35, USC-MSA web (English) reference: Vol. 1, Book 5, *Hadith* 281 <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/5/35>

⁶ Collected by Muslim (298), Abu Dawud (261), at-Tirmidhi (134), and an-Nasai (1/192)

In further contrast with the erasure of women under other value systems and societies, Islam affirmed the rights of women to maintain their identities, property, and dignity throughout their lives. Even after marriage, a Muslim woman’s name and property remains her own. As will be elaborated upon in the next section, she is not obligated to spend her own money on her family. Additionally, Muslim women have the right to represent themselves in court, as well as to testify and pledge their fealty on their own behalf. The Prophet ﷺ was directed in the Qur’an (60:12) to take the pledge of allegiance from women directly, thus giving them primary responsibility over themselves, and their own lives and choices.

Furthermore, even in the earliest days of Islam, women would feel free to speak up on their own behalf, and their voices would be heard. One chapter of the Qur’an begins by mentioning the plaintive entreaties of a woman to the Prophet ﷺ, testifying: ‘Surely, Allah has heard the speech of the woman who argues with you [O Muhammad] concerning her husband and directing her complaint to Allah. And Allah hears your dialogue; indeed, Allah is Hearing and Seeing’ [Qur’an 58:1]. From then on, the Prophet’s ﷺ companions, including Umar himself, would treat this woman with great respect.⁷

Not only was the Prophet ﷺ sensitive to women’s troubles, but he also took heed of their advice. Following the Truce of Hdaybiya, a number of Muslims felt chagrined at some of the conditions of the truce, which they perceived as unfair. When the Prophet ﷺ ordered them to sacrifice the animals they had brought for that purpose and to shave their heads, they initially did not heed his order, no matter what he told them. Upon noting the seriousness of the situation, Um Salamah, one of his venerable wives, advised the Prophet ﷺ not to say anything more, but rather to simply to shave his own head and offer his own sacrifice. As she had predicted, the Companions quickly fell in line and followed suit, and any escalation was averted due to her wise counsel.

This respect and acknowledgment of women was something that the Prophet ﷺ taught the rest of his companions as well. Coming back to Umar ibn al-Khattab’s shifting perspective: during his caliphate, he appointed two different women,

⁷ Attributed to al-Bayhaqi’s *al-Asmâ’ was-Sifat* and to Ibn Abi Hâtim in *ad-Durr al-Manthoor* (6/179)

Samra b. Nuhayk⁸ and Shifa b. Abdullah,⁹ to fulfill the role of market supervisors. They would patrol the markets to ensure that fair business practices were being carried out, and proper Islamic behavior was maintained.

Thus, women were not restricted to their familial roles as wives, mothers, and daughters within the private sphere. Performing valued public duties could also be considered a means by which gifted women were able to fulfill their potential and benefit society at large. A clear balance was sought between a woman’s role in the public and private spheres, delineating her rights and responsibilities in a manner where no single aspect was granted disproportionate importance to the detriment of the other. In this way, while acknowledging the productive ways in which a woman can contribute to overall society, Islam does not suggest that a woman’s role in the private sphere as a mother or wife is inferior to a role performed in public; instead, Islam extols the virtues of all these roles and calls society as a whole to recognize the value in performing them, and to honor the women who do so.

And their Lord responded to them, ‘Never will I allow to be lost the work of [any] worker among you, whether male or female; you are of one another. So those who emigrated or were evicted from their homes or were harmed in My cause or fought or were killed—I will surely remove from them their misdeeds, and I will surely admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow as reward from Allah, and Allah has with Him the best reward. [Qur’an 3: 195]

Familial Regard

It can be argued that a woman’s place in society is ultimately a reflection of her place within her family. It should then come as no surprise that in pre-Islamic Arabian society, the familial status of a woman was precarious, largely contingent upon circumstances beyond her control. A strange contrast existed between the

⁸ Al-Mu’jam Al-Kabeer At-Tabarani 785

⁹ Al-Ahad wal-Mathani 2860

laudatory treatment of mothers of sons—who were respected in society and lauded through poetry, especially if they had given birth to brave warriors—and the utter lack of worth granted to an infant daughter, as touched upon earlier. It was as though the value of a woman could only be established through her attachment to a male, an unfortunate reflection of the lack of inherent value with which women were regarded in pre-Islamic Arab society.

This can also be illustrated by the dubious pre-Islamic marital arrangements a woman could be entered into, of which there were many, ranging from formal marriages with an official proposal and dowry to temporary contracts that could last as little as a few hours. However, none of these forms of marriage guaranteed a woman’s security, or ensured a relationship of parity and mutual responsibility. Prior to Islam, husbands bore no official economic or social duties towards their wives, who had no recourse to divorce. In contrast, husbands could divorce at will, and marry as many women as they wanted without limit. A woman could hence be kept in limbo, without physical or emotional maintenance, and unable to leave her unfortunate situation through divorce.

Men were also free to command their wives as they willed, without taking into account any consideration but their own caprice. A husband could even temporarily ‘give’ his wife to another man whom he admired—perhaps a courageous knight, or a noble poet—in order for her to become impregnated, taking her back once she showed signs of pregnancy from the other man. Her own feelings would not be considered in the matter. While most nobles, like the Quraysh tribe the Prophet ﷺ belonged to, saw fornication as beneath them and abstained from it, some elites would keep women in bondage to lease their bodies as prostitutes against their will. They also engaged in many other oppressive practices, such as forced marriages, honor killings, and female genital mutilation: human rights tragedies that existed pre-Islam, and still exist today in some tribal cultures that are oblivious to the guidance of Islam.

Equally inauspicious endings to marriage abounded. In pre-Islamic Arab society, a widow was tantamount to property her husband left behind, to be inherited by her husband’s male relatives who could dictate her future as they saw fit. One common

form of marriage was for a son to ‘inherit’ his stepmother. Even prior to that, a woman in pre-Islamic society was required to mourn her husband by consigning herself to the tiniest, darkest chamber in the marital home for an entire year, a heinous practice known as *iftidâd*. She would don her worst clothes, not touch water, clip a nail, remove any body hair, nor appear in society. Once the year ended, in a ceremonial culmination of bereavement, she would wipe her private parts with an animal that would usually die as a result, then pelt the first stray dog she saw with animal dung, thus bringing her mourning to an end.¹⁰ Even thereafter, her future would not be her own, but rather constrained by the whims of whoever had inherited her.

With the advent of Islam came a paradigm shift in society’s views towards women that mandated monumental changes in their familial lives. A sharp departure from these ancient practices was legislated to establish a woman’s rightful status in her family as valued and cherished in her own right. First and foremost, Islam enshrined the noble status of mothers, calling for the utmost respect and kindness toward them, regardless of their behaviors or even their beliefs. Mothers are acknowledged for their mercy, tenderness, and selflessness through special mention in the Qur’an:

And We have enjoined upon man [care] for his parents. His mother carried him, [increasing her] in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents; to Me is the [final] destination. [Qur’an 31:14]

A mother’s immense value and importance was often underscored by the Prophet ﷺ. He would instruct his companions to treat their mothers with special care and gratitude, teaching them that kindness towards one’s mother is a means to attaining the pleasure of God and immense reward. On one occasion, Mu‘āwiya b. Jāhima came to him saying, “O Messenger of Allah, I want to go out and fight [in *jihad*] and I have come to consult you.” He said, “Do you have a mother?” Mu‘āwiya said, “Yes.” He said, “Then stay with her, for Paradise is at her feet.”¹¹ Taking care

¹⁰ Collected by Mālik in al-Muwatta’ (2/596-598) in *at-Talâq, Mâ Jâ’a ‘an al-Hidâd*.

¹¹ Collected by Ahmad (15577), an-Nasâ’i (3104), and Ibn Mâjah (2781), and deemed sound by al-Arna’oot.

of one’s parents was thus made equivalent to striving with one’s life for the cause of justice and protecting the oppressed.

Describing another such interaction, the companion Abu Hurayra narrated, “A man came to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, which person is most deserving of my good company?’ He said, ‘Your mother.’ He said, ‘Then who?’ He said, ‘Then your mother.’ He said, ‘Then who?’ He said, ‘Then your mother.’ He said, ‘Then who?’ He said, ‘Then your father,’”¹² thereby further highlighting the importance of this special and unique relationship.

His companions were deeply impacted by these teachings. Ibn ‘Umar (ra) once saw a man circling the Ka‘bah while carrying his mother around his neck. The man asked him, “O Ibn ‘Umar, have I repaid her?” He said, “No, not even for a single contraction. But you have done well, and Allah will reward you for this little with much.”¹³ In another narration that illustrates the shift in outlook brought about by Islam, the companion Abu Dharr (ra) humbly admitted about himself that, “I once exchanged insults with a man, so I chastised him about his mother. He complained about me to the Prophet ﷺ who then said to me, ‘Did you exchange insults with so and so?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘Did you insult his mother?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘You are a man in whom is [an aspect of the pre-Islamic] ignorance.’”¹⁴

Whereas Islam had confirmed what was already established in pre-Islamic society with regards to mothers, it revolutionized their treatment of daughters. As noted above, the Prophet ﷺ fully understood where his society’s disregard for women had come from: the very nature of how a woman was viewed, and the lack of essential, independent value attached to a woman. Burying a girl alive physically was only the ultimate culmination of her already buried value. The Prophet ﷺ changed this by demonstrating a woman’s inherent value since birth, through the way he treated his own daughters: the greatest example of a total upheaval of the status quo. When his beloved daughter Fatima, the woman he called the ‘leader of

¹² Collected by al-Bukhâri (5971) and Muslim (2548)

¹³ Collected by al-Bukhâri (11) in *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Ibn al-Mubârak in *al-Birr was-Sila*, al-Bayhaqi in *Shu‘ab al-Eemân* (55).

¹⁴ Collected by al-Bukhâri (6050) and Muslim (1661)

the women of Paradise,’ walked into his home he would stand up to receive her, kiss her on the forehead, and seat her in the place he had been sitting. He said of her, “She is a piece of me.”¹⁵

In fact, the Prophet ﷺ fully reversed the negative cultural implications attached to daughters by saying: “Whoever raises two daughters and does well with their upbringing will be with me in paradise like these two fingers (holding together his index and middle finger).”¹⁶ In contrast to their characterization as a financial burden in the days of ignorance, they were now considered the greatest investment for one who sought the Hereafter. Any residual negative cultural considerations attached to daughters that still remained would be dispelled through constant recourse to the Prophet ﷺ’s example. Ya‘qūb b. Bakhtān said, “Seven daughters were born to me. Whenever a daughter was born, I would enter upon the scholar, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, and he would tell me, ‘O Abu Yūsuf! The prophets were fathers of daughters,’ and his statement would dispel my grief.”¹⁷

Along with being a means to Paradise, one’s role as the father of a daughter was considered a serious responsibility. Muhammad b. Sulayman would say, “Boys are a blessing, and girls are good deeds. Allah questions about blessings, and rewards for good deeds.”¹⁸ For a father, this meant being dedicated to one’s daughters by showing them love and compassion, giving them the best upbringing through educating them and looking after their affairs, and thus, seeking paradise through them. Imam Sha‘bī would say, “Whoever marries his princess to a wicked man has severed ties with her.” In this way, concern for daughters would continue up until and beyond their marriages.

With regards to a woman’s marriage, her role in shaping her own destiny is emphasized by the fact that the *Shariah* flatly invalidates a marriage conducted without the woman’s consent, whether express or implied. Once again, the Prophet ﷺ led by example, clearly demanding that consideration be given to a woman’s consent in regard to marriage. Ibn ‘Abbās narrates that when a virgin girl came to

¹⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari* (3714)

¹⁶ *Jami` at-Tirmidhi* (1914)

¹⁷ *Tuhfat al-Mawdood*: (p. 26)

¹⁸ *Sawn al-Mukramât Bi Ri‘âyat al-Banât*

the Prophet ﷺ and told him that her father had married her off despite her objections, the Prophet ﷺ gave her the choice to annul the marriage.¹⁹ In a similar report, the Prophet ﷺ annulled the marriage of al-Khansā' b. Khizām, a formerly married woman whose father had married her off without her consent.²⁰ Another woman once came to Aisha, one of the Prophet's ﷺ wives, saying that her father had married her to her cousin in order to elevate his own status. When the Prophet ﷺ heard her story, he left the ultimate decision whether to remain married up to the woman herself. At that point, she said that she was not in fact opposed to the marriage, “but I wanted women to know that their fathers are not entitled to this.”²¹

An in-depth discussion of divorce laws in Islam will be dealt with in a future publication. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that an appropriate channel exists for a Muslim woman to initiate the process of separation and subsequent divorce, while ensuring a fair outcome for both parties. A practical example of a wife initiating separation from her husband occurred when the wife of Thabit b. Qais came to the Prophet ﷺ and said, "O Allah's Messenger! I do not blame Thabit for defects in his character or his religion, but I, being a Muslim, dislike to behave in un-Islamic manner (if I remain with him)." On that Allah's Messenger ﷺ said, "Will you give back the garden which your husband has given you (as dowry)?" She said, "Yes." Then the Prophet ﷺ said to Thabit, "O Thabit! Accept your garden, and divorce her once."²²

In general, the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ significantly curtailed men's unbridled control over women. No more could a man force his servant girl into prostitution for his own financial ends. In the context of marriage, a wife was instructed not to obey her husband in matters that are unlawful in Islam. The number of wives a man could have was restricted to four, with the caveat that all wives be treated equitably. The number of times a man could proclaim a divorce from his wife without consequence was limited to three, after which the divorce

¹⁹ Collected by Abu Dawud (2096) and deemed authentic by al-Albâni

²⁰ Collected by al-Bukhârî (4845)

²¹ Collected by Ibn Mâjah (1874) and deemed authentic by al-Buwaysiri and al-Wâdi'i

²² *Sahih al-Bukhari* (5273)

would be final. This ensured that divorce was taken seriously, and prevented a man from attempting to manipulate his wife through idle threats.

Additionally, the dowry a woman was given prior to entering into marriage was considered her own, to do with as she saw fit. Within marriage, wives were guaranteed inalienable economic rights, including the right to maintenance for themselves and their children. One woman whose stingy husband would not give her enough money for herself and her children once consulted the Prophet ﷺ who allowed her to take from her husband’s money that which was reasonably sufficient for her and her children’s needs.²³ Whether a woman is married or not, under Islamic law, she is not obligated to spend on herself out of her own money, while still being entitled to a portion of inheritance and earnings. Financial responsibility is delegated to her closest male relative, whether father, husband, or brother.

Following the death of a Muslim husband, the *iddah* (the prescribed mourning period, which lasts four months and ten days) is considered a mercy to the woman, allowing her to remain in her husband’s home for its duration. This grants a woman the practical and emotional space needed to reflect on her loss during a vulnerable time. Once this period is over, she is free to remarry whomever she wishes. The Prophet ﷺ himself married multiple widows who voluntarily accepted him, demonstrating a commitment to doing away with the stigma and injustice surrounding them, in sharp contrast to a society that had previously treated widows with such callousness.

The Prophet ﷺ’s female companions would also use his exalted example to keep their husbands’ behavior in check, as Umar experienced firsthand. Umar once raised his voice at his wife, and she responded in kind. When he reacted to her response with anger, she stated that Umar had no right to be outraged. After all, Umar’s own daughter, who was married to the Prophet ﷺ, would respond to her husband similarly. The Prophet ﷺ would allow his wife to express her opinion without silencing her, “and he is better than you,” Umar’s wife noted.²⁴ This

²³ *Sunan Abi Dawud* 3533 Book 23, *Hadith* 3526

²⁴ *Sahih al-Bukhâri*; Kitâb al-Madhâlim; Bâb al-Ghurfa wal-‘Ulya; *Hadith* 5505

respect for women involves simply putting into practice the Qur’an’s teachings on marriage, describing husbands and wives as a ‘mercy’ to one another.

And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought. [Qur’an 30: 21]

Spiritual Regard

As a society’s negative treatment of women is only a symptom of beliefs about their very nature, it is important to diagnose the underlying disease in order to arrive at a cure. A dire state of affairs is essentially a consequence of views regarding a woman’s inherent value, or the presumed lack thereof. Yet the Islamic view of women’s spiritual status, grounded in the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet ﷺ, places men and women on an entirely level spiritual playing field, equal in their potential for a profound relationship with God.

From the outset, the Qur’anic narrative of mankind’s beginnings leaves no room to place the woman at fault. While the basics of the story in the Garden of Eden are essentially the same as in Genesis, there is no account of a temptation by Eve; rather, Satan deludes *both* Adam and Eve into eating the fruit. They are then both blamed for their mistake—the Qur’an specifically uses the dual linguistic form to address the two of them—and both are forgiven once they seek God’s mercy. Thus, men and women are equal in spiritual responsibility for their negative actions, as well as in the spiritual potential they can reach when seeking their Creator.

Nowhere is the spiritual potential uniquely available to women more apparent in the Qur’an than through its recounting of the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, peace be upon them both. She is lauded for demonstrating her active devotion to God in many ways, including those traditionally reserved for men in her culture: through studying under the tutelage of Zachariah (pbuh), engaging in sincere worship, and even being blessed with miracles.

And [mention] when the angels said, "O Mary, indeed Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds. O Mary, be devoutly obedient to your Lord and prostrate and bow with those who bow [in prayer]. [Qur'an 3:42-43]

In particular, the Qur'an highlights Mary's experience of childbirth with considerable sympathy, conveying her anguish through her own words and offering her comfort:

And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, "Oh, how I wish I had died before this and was left in oblivion, utterly forgotten!" But a voice called to her from below, "Do not grieve; your Lord has provided beneath you a stream. And shake toward you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you ripe, fresh dates. So eat and drink and be content." [Qur'an 19:23-26]

This emphasizes women's ability to integrate a sense of spirituality at every point in their lives, including experiences specific to them.

In this manner, Mary (pbuh) is continually lauded by the Qur'an as a paragon of faith, an example and inspiration to be followed by both men and women. This lofty station was not restricted to Mary alone. Asiyah, the believing wife of the tyrant Pharaoh, is also cited as a role model for all believers, regardless of their gender. Her heartfelt prayer, for God to grant her a house near Him in Paradise, is recorded in the Qur'an to be recited by Muslims for eternity.

The role of women in propagating Islam has always been an integral part of the faith. The Prophet ﷺ himself exemplified this in his encouraging attitude towards women's learning. One companion recounts an instance in which a woman came to the Prophet ﷺ, saying: “O Messenger of Allah, the men went away with [the privilege of] hearing from you, so dedicate for us one of your days so that we may come to you, and you can teach us from what Allah taught you.’ The Prophet ﷺ said, ‘Gather [the women] on such-and-such day in such-and-such place.’ So they gathered, and he came to them, and taught them of what Allah

taught him.”²⁵ His consideration of women’s desire to learn, specifically making the effort to welcome women into a safe and private group environment where they could ask questions at their ease, is especially noteworthy, considering the current context in which women’s access to Muslim scholars is, for the most part, limited.

This inclusive outlook bore the bountiful fruit of a flourishing legacy of female Islamic scholarship, starting with the Prophet ﷺ’s own wife, Sayyida Aisha (ra), one of the top narrators in Sunni collections and the source of countless legal rulings. The great scholar and worshipper Um ad-Dardâ’ (ra) said, “I sought devotion in everything, and did not find anything more gratifying than sitting and studying with the scholars.” It is significant that she was allowed, indeed welcomed, among scholarly circles in a culture in which women had, in the very recent past, been barely considered human— especially considering that they are still sometimes excluded from scholarly spaces today, in sharp contrast to the Prophet ﷺ’s own example.

Another prominent woman renowned for her spiritual and intellectual excellence was Sayyida Nafisa, a descendant of the Prophet ﷺ. For a time, she taught *hadith* to Imam al-Shafi’i, one of the founders of the four Sunni schools of Islamic law, and at his request prayed the funeral prayer over him. More recently, Nana Asma’u led extensive efforts to educate women across the African Sokoto Caliphate in the 1800s. Countless more such examples could be cited. One study by Dr. Mohammad Akram Nadwi documented 8,000 female scholars of *hadith*—and not a single one of these women was ever disqualified for dishonesty.

26

Muslim women’s influence on history stretches beyond scholarship as well. Nusayba b. Ka’ab (ra) was one of the Prophet ﷺ’s defenders during the dire circumstances of the Battle of Uhud, when she valiantly shielded him from the swords of the Makkans. The Prophet ﷺ’s granddaughter, Zaynab b. Ali (ra), was one of the strongest voices of righteous defiance against the tyrant ruler Yazid, following the massacre of her brother, Husayn b. Ali (ra), and other members of

²⁵ Collected by al-Bukhâri (1/175) and Muslim (2633)

²⁶ Nadwi, A. M. (2007). *Al-Muhaddithat: Women Scholars in Islam*. Interface Publications.

the Prophet ﷺ’s family. For centuries, pilgrims to Makkah quenched their thirst through the irrigation channels built along pilgrimage roads at the behest of Zubayda, wife of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, and the spiritual odes of Rabi’a al-Adawiya describing her yearning for God are contemplated to this day.

The extensive contributions of women to Islam should come as no surprise, arising from the legacy of a Prophet ﷺ who, as mentioned, described his beloved daughter Fatima (ra) as being a piece of him. It is unfortunate that a widespread perception exists to the contrary, and that some ‘contentious’ passages in the Islamic corpus have been used to marginalize women. The devastating effect of these odious efforts can be seen in many Muslim communities around the world. This reality should not be whitewashed, nor romanticized, but rather confronted head on, using the tools of the tradition itself.

The strength of a principled, authentically rooted position that rejects misogynistic readings of certain verses and narrations lies in well-grounded methodological principles of scriptural interpretation, established by the Prophet ﷺ himself during his lifetime, and by those who followed him. The Prophet ﷺ’s clearly delineated message provides Muslims with an unmistakable mandate to establish equity for all. Jurisprudential rulings are required to be made in accordance with Islam’s well-established objectives, taking into account the relevant circumstances, as demonstrated in the authoritative Islamic tradition. Islam’s markedly equitable system established the equivalence of men and women as the default, unless revelation determined an exception to this rule, in keeping with God’s prevailing mercy and justice for all His creation.

The respected pre-modern Muslim scholar Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH/1350 AD) noted: “Indeed, the *Shariah* is founded upon wisdom and welfare for the servants in this life and the afterlife. In its entirety it is justice, mercy, benefit, and wisdom. Every matter which abandons justice for tyranny, mercy for cruelty, benefit for corruption, and wisdom for foolishness is not a part of the *Shariah*, even if it was introduced therein by an interpretation.”²⁷

²⁷ I’lām al-Muwaqqi’īn 3/11

Thus, as demonstrated throughout this paper, the Prophet ﷺ’s divinely ordained mission as a mercy to all extends to guaranteeing women their rightful place as determined by Islamic law, without hesitation or apology. Should an outlier opinion violate fundamental Islamic principles of equity, it is to be rejected, from even the most traditional of perspectives. Less than this could not be expected from followers of a prophet who stated unequivocally: “Women are but the full siblings of men.”²⁸

This principle of respect and esteem between genders can be demonstrated once more in the example of Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra). As Caliph, he had once publicly mandated a legal ruling. But when a woman stepped forward from the crowd and corrected him, citing the Qur’an, this ruler over the vast swathes of Muslim lands conceded, “The woman has disputed ‘Umar, and she has defeated him.”²⁹ Demonstrating humility towards women in the face of the truth—without any sense of machismo—was simply what Umar had learned from the Prophet ﷺ himself. This attitude is part and parcel of what it means to be a Muslim man, and should be taken to heart by anyone who is serious about following the Prophet’s ﷺ example today.

The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong, establish prayer, give zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. On these, Allah will have mercy. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise. [Qur’an 9: 71]

Conclusion

As illustrated throughout this paper, the advent of Islam was a significant leap forward for women in pre-Islamic Arab society. Historically, the Qur’an and *Sunnah* were viewed as neither oppressive nor regressive, but rather advocates on behalf of women. No narrations can be found from any of the Prophet ﷺ’s female companions ever complaining about the revelation itself nor the manner in which the Prophet ﷺ implemented it. On the contrary, they are authentically

²⁸ Collected by Ahmad (2/256), Abu Dawud (236), and at-Tirmidhi (113)

²⁹ Ibn Hajar *Fath ul-Bari* 4853

documented to have said, “Surely, Allah and His Messenger are more merciful with us than we are with ourselves.”³⁰ They did not perceive any rulings pertaining to them as oppressive, and they actively spoke of the empowerment they felt by the revelation that had elevated the previously most vulnerable members of society.

Of course, it is not enough to point out the positive changes Islam instigated for women in the 7th century, and ignore the all-too-many negative circumstances Muslim women find themselves facing in the present day. Rather, it is incumbent upon Islamic scholars and the Muslim community at large to develop our understanding of Islam in a way that ensures our realization of the Prophet ﷺ’s teachings, as he said: “The most perfect believers in faith are those best in manners, and the best of you are those best to their women.”³¹ Most importantly of all, he taught by example and practiced what he preached. Without being subject to any other paradigm of gender justice, the Islamic paradigm that the Prophet ﷺ established provides the most equitable, just, and beneficial outcomes for all people. The same spirit of empowerment he embodied should be implemented by Islamic scholars going forward, in order to ensure the greatest benefit to society and to the world as a whole.

Perhaps the best verse to end this paper with—although many such verses exist, as listed in the appendix below—is the verse whose circumstances of revelation demonstrate God’s mercy towards all His creation, male and female. Upon a query from the esteemed Umm Salamah (ra) on whether women would be mentioned in the Qur’an as the men were mentioned, the following verse was revealed to emphatically illustrate that principle of equitable mercy:

Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the

³⁰ al-Tirmidhī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsá. Sunan al-Tirmidhī. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1998), v.3 p.204 #1597; deemed authentic (ṣaḥīḥ) by al-Tirmidhī in his commentary.

³¹ Collected by at-Tirmidhi (1/217-218), Ahmad (2/250 & 472), and Ibn Hibbān (1311). At-Tirmidhi deemed it *hasan-sahih*, and al-Albāni deemed it authentic in *as-Sahihah* (284).

women who guard them, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so—for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. [Qur’an 33: 35]

Appendix: The Qur’an’s Regard for Women

1. Equally human:

O humankind! We have created you from a single male and female, and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted. [Qur’an 49: 13]

2. Equally eligible for salvation:

Allah has promised the believing men and believing women gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally, and pleasant dwellings in gardens of perpetual residence; but approval from Allah is greater. That is the great attainment. [Qur’an 9: 72]

On the Day you see the believing men and believing women, their light proceeding before them and on their right, [it will be said], ‘Your good tidings today are [of] gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein you will abide eternally.’ That is the great attainment. [Qur’an 57: 12]

That He may admit the believing men and the believing women to gardens beneath which rivers flow to abide therein eternally and remove from them their misdeeds—and ever is that, in the sight of Allah, a great attainment. [Qur’an 48: 5]

3. Equally eligible for reward:

And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer—those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed. [Qur’an 4:124]

Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while a believer—We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do. [Qur’an 16: 97]

Whoever does an evil deed will not be recompensed except by the like thereof, but whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while a believer—those will enter Paradise, being given provision therein without account. [Qur’an 40: 40]

And their Lord responded to them, ‘Never will I allow to be lost the work of [any] worker among you, whether male or female; you are of one another. So those who emigrated or were evicted from their homes or were harmed in My cause or fought or were killed—I will surely remove from them their misdeeds, and I will surely admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow as reward from Allah, and Allah has with Him the best reward. [Qur’an 3: 195]

4. Equally inviolable:

And when the infant girl [who was] buried alive is asked, for what sin she was killed. [Qur’an 81: 8-9]

And do not kill your children out of poverty. We will provide for you and them... And do not kill the soul which Allah has made sacred... [Qur’an 6: 151]

And those who accuse chaste women and then do not produce four witnesses—lash them with eighty lashes and do not accept from them testimony ever after. Those are the defiantly disobedient. [Qur’an 24: 4]

5. Equally recognized as a promoter of good:

The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those Allah will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise. [Qur’an 9: 71]

6. A sign of God’s mercy:

And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought. [Qur’an 30: 21]

It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her. [Qur’an 7: 189]