

BEYOND MISLEADING CLAIMS: WOMEN AND MEN IN ISLAM

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Recently, some individuals, misguided by misleading information, have made deceptive statements suggesting that Islam discriminates against women, subjects them to violence, isolates them from society and social life, and confines them to their homes.

To highlight how far removed such claims are from the essence of Islam, I would like to draw attention to this matter in light of just one hadith from our beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH - Peace Be Upon Him).

Throughout history, Islam has emphasized the equality of all people and has consistently brought this understanding of equality to the forefront. One of the most profound examples of this is a hadith relayed by the Prophet (PBUH):

"People are equal as the teeth of a comb. The only differences in virtue are those of worship."²

This hadith underscores that Islam does not focus on gender distinctions but rather on the intentions and actions of individuals. The analogy of the teeth of a comb being equal and similar highlights the powerful message that, by nature, all humans are equal. The teeth of a comb are neither superior nor inferior to each other, just as individuals are neither superior nor inferior to each other based on their gender, color, or social status.

Several reasons underpin the analogy of "the teeth of a comb" used by our Prophet (PBUH):

1. The teeth of a comb run parallel to each other, with each tooth equidistant from the next. This symbolizes equality and justice between women and men.
2. The comb cannot perform its function without all its teeth. In other words, once the teeth are removed, the comb becomes ineffective. This signifies the interdependence of women and men, implying that when they collaborate, society functions at its optimum.
3. Each tooth of the comb holds equal importance independently of the others, meaning none is superior or less significant. This represents the equality, respect, and value of women and men towards each other.

Thus, by employing the analogy of "the teeth of a comb," our Prophet (PBUH) beautifully conveys the message that women and men should be equal, inseparable, and respectful towards each other.

Our Prophet emphasized the equality of every individual, regardless of gender, race, status, or wealth. He consistently conveyed that everyone – be it man or woman, rich or poor, white or black – is equal. However, superiority among individuals is determined solely by their acts of worship. This 'worship' isn't restricted merely to religious rituals like prayer or fasting but also encompasses moral actions such as honesty, altruism, virtuous deeds, fairness, compassion, and a merciful approach to humans and all living beings.

In one sense, this hadith serves as a response to societal discrimination, alienation, and pressures based on gender. On another level, it draws attention to one's inner world, intentions, and actions. It's

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² **Narrator:** Hz. Sehl Ibni Saad (r.a.)

Source: Ramuz el e-hadis, page 238, 4th hadith.

not our social status, gender, wealth, or lack thereof that defines our true worth, but the intentions nurtured deep within our hearts and the subsequent actions we take.

This hadith also serves as a call to individuals, encouraging resilience against societal pressures and prejudices, focusing instead on how one is perceived in the eyes of God (Allah). This revered Hadith is among the many teachings in Islam that emphasize the principle of equality and justice between men and women. Through these words, our Prophet (peace be upon him) signifies that women and men are equal, complementary, and inseparable, much like the teeth of a comb.

However, it's crucial to understand that this equality isn't about absolute similarity. While Islam acknowledges the biological and psychological differences between genders, it underscores that these distinctions don't make one gender superior or inferior to the other. **Each gender has its roles, responsibilities, and rights, providing a balance necessary for the healthy functioning of society.**

To further elucidate, let's delve into some examples:

- 1. Biological Differences:** Islam recognizes the biological differences between genders. For instance, while women have the capability to give birth and breastfeed, men lack these abilities. This distinction results in some variances in the roles of women and men. Yet, this difference doesn't imply the superiority of one gender over the other. Both play equally vital roles in society.
- 2. Differences Based on Social Roles:** Islam also accepts certain differences in the social roles of men and women. In Islamic teachings, men bear the responsibility of providing for the family, whereas women aren't burdened with this duty. Instead, women might take on a more prominent role in raising children and managing the household (though it's not obligatory). These roles can vary from one society to another and from individual to individual. However, in general, this perspective is seen as a way to acknowledge and appreciate the diverse abilities and roles of men and women.

The social, economic, and cultural structure of a society can shape the social roles attributed to genders. Islam acknowledges a framework where men tend to be the breadwinners and women lean more towards child-rearing and domestic duties. However, this is not a universal or immutable rule. Multiple cultural, social, and economic factors play a part in defining these roles. For instance, in some societies, women's participation in the workforce might be exceptionally high. In such cases, women can also assume the role of family providers. Such situations might lead men to take on more household and childcare responsibilities.

At an individual level, these roles can also vary. Not every man or woman may fit societal expectations or norms and might determine their roles based on their abilities, interests, and preferences. For example, while a woman might prefer to be active in her career, a man might opt for a more flexible job to focus on childcare. Or both parents might equally share professional and domestic tasks. These decisions hinge on mutual agreement, adhering to what is permissible ("halal") without coercion.

For these reasons, the social roles accepted by Islam are not stringent and inflexible rules. Various societal and individual factors influence how these roles are distributed and practiced. What's essential is ensuring that these roles do not disrupt the balance of gender equality and mutual respect, allowing every individual to employ their talents and preferences within the bounds of what is permissible.

Indeed, according to the foundational teachings of Islam, a man has the responsibility to provide for his family financially. This obligation, known as alimony or the duty of provision, is a specific rule in Islamic law. This rule stipulates that a man must provide basic necessities, such as food,

clothing, and shelter, to his wife and children. This responsibility is something a man undertakes as part of the marriage contract.

However, this doesn't prohibit women from working or being financially independent. Women can pursue education, own businesses, and earn their income. Islamic law emphasizes that they are not obligated to use this income to contribute to the family's sustenance. The money women earn remains entirely theirs, free for their discretion.

Yet, in many modern societies, both men and women tend to share the financial burdens of a family. This trend is contingent on various factors but often relates to increased female labor force participation and families needing dual incomes. These situations exemplify the flexibility of Islamic law and its ability to adapt to the changing contours of modern life.

- 3. Religious Rights and Responsibilities:** In Islam, both genders have equal rights and responsibilities concerning religious rituals. For instance, both women and men are expected to pray, fast, give alms ("zekat"), and make a pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj), provided their financial and physical conditions allow. This serves as a testament to the principle of equality between men and women in Islam.

These examples underscore Islam's notion of gender equality. However, these diverse roles and responsibilities don't diminish the mutual respect and equal worth of women and men. On the contrary, they emphasize that both genders are vitally and equally important for the holistic functioning of society.

This simple, yet profound hadith is just one of the myriad proofs showcasing Islam's emphasis on gender equality and its sensitivity towards the matter. Therefore, claims suggesting that Islam oppresses women, discriminates against them, subjects them to violence, alienates them from social life, and confines them to their homes do not reflect the genuine teachings of our religion.

Passing judgment on Islam without understanding its true teachings, based on superficial knowledge or misleading propaganda, is neither a fair approach nor does justice to the profound essence of this noble religion. My advice is to turn to the core of Islam, the hadiths, and the Quran, to discover its real teachings on men and women.

Over the years, numerous societies have been clouded by misunderstandings and prejudices between the genders. However, the true teachings of Islam highlight the equality between men and women, offering a framework where every individual can optimally use their abilities and preferences.

In conclusion, Islam's perspective on women and men reminds us that, at the core of humanity, we are equal entities, dependent on, and complementary to, each other. Therefore, truly understanding and living Islam is not just about performing religious rituals; it's also about promoting equality, justice, and mutual respect in society.

For 1400 years, Islam has existed and offers people a life on earth that is akin to paradise. Long before issues like women's equality gained global attention, Islam had embraced these values. However, until recent times in the modern world, some Western societies perceived women as second-class citizens, even going to the extent of debating their very humanity. This is a truly shameful stance, questioning whether women are indeed humans. Some Western societies have regarded women as mere objects and tools of necessity.

It is these societies, some of which even treated their women unjustly up to the mid-20th century (like the English who sold their women in markets) that should be primarily scrutinized for their misdeeds.

Criticizing the enlightening teachings of Islam is akin to finding fault in the brightness of the sun – a misleading approach.

It should not be forgotten that today's Muslims, compared to past generations, are more aware, experienced, and confident in addressing such criticisms. Therefore, we must tread carefully in our discourses.