

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Role of Muslim Modern Women

Abstract:

Modern life for Muslim women, in my view, may imply a dual concept:

a) Pursuing the main traits of Modernism emerged in the west during the 19th century as a response to the historic transformation in the western life that signified breaking with past including with religion. b) designing a distinctive role compatible with the Islamic worldview within a sustained and ever- changing environment of the current modern life. Therefore, In view of the foundational differences between the western history of religion in the west and Islam, Muslim perspective of modernism and role of modern women in Muslim communities and abroad are quite different. Consequently, the Muslim women around the world need to make a real analysis and innovative outlook of the entire landscape of the modern life and be cognizant of the exigencies of our changing environment in a highly turbulent but transforming world of human civilization. They should further identify the driving forces in the current processes of globalization in order to employ them in the interest of themselves, their family and their communities. In this context they need to be emancipated from self-centered individualism and unleashed liberalism while combating harmful customary practices, discriminatory stereotypes and traditions in the name of religion. Furthermore modern Muslim women should priorities areas of concern such as peace and security, poverty eradication, education and science and technology with a view to participating effectively in the related processes.

Salamon Alaikom va rahmatollah, At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to the distinguished organizers for holding this important conference on women. This is very timely and productive Inshallah. I would also thank for the kind invitation extended to me and other members of the IPHRC.

On the subject of my speech, it may be noted that, honestly, I am not very much in agreement with the proposed topic which has a reference both to Aisha and Cinderella together and compared the two. These are not comparable. But I would try to focus on the gist of the matter i.e. the role of modern Muslim women in the current era.

Modern life for a Muslim woman, in my view, may imply a dual concept. The first connotation is that modern Muslim women in an atmosphere of Modernism manage to shape their life style in all spheres, in line with the main traits and inherent characteristics of Modernism, within a peculiar western philosophy emerged in the 19th and early 20th century. We are all aware that the main pillars of the modernism of the past two centuries in the west centers around breaking with past including religion and many modernists rejected religious belief¹. It was, in one way or another, a revolution against religion and traditional faith.

What matters most in this domain is that the philosophy of modernism in the west evolved in the context of the western history of religious autocracy and church despotism during which thought and human sense of creation and development had been the hostage of the church fundamentalism and fanaticism shaped in the medieval era. It is generally in this context that women emancipation gained a prominent platform within the western society. In fact women emancipation was a revolution against the church inability to embrace the modern exigencies and new and emerging characteristics of modern human life. The critical point is that

1. [Pericles Lewis](#), *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* ([Cambridge University Press](#), 2000). pp 38–39.

[\[James\] Joyce's Ulysses](#) is a comedy not divine, ending, like Dante's, in the vision of a God whose will is our peace, but human all-too-human...." Peter Faulkner, *Modernism* (Taylor & Francis, 1990). p 60

the women emancipation in the west, being evolved to achieve legitimate human rights, further expanded within a natural flow of philosophical transformation of the western thought and ended up, in some areas, with the unleashed individualism and utilitarianism with the sexist tendencies.(you may have seen the recent pictures displayed in social networks where small groups of women managed, all of a sudden, to undress themselves and got naked in front of Muslim scholars in some conferences in the western countries in a show of protest against Islam.)

In contrast, the history of Islamic civilization and religion from the beginning, predominantly, is well indicative of rejection of the text absolutism and instead, the way of Ejtehad and diversity has always been opened to Muslim scholars in an atmosphere of religious openness within the boundaries of submission to Allah. Therefore, In view of the foundational differences between the western history of religion in the west and Islam, Muslim perspective of modernism and role of modern women in Muslim communities and abroad are quite different. This being understood that modern Muslim women have a distinctive role compatible with the Islamic worldview within a sustained and ever- changing environment of the current modern life.

Consequently, the alternative thought is that the Muslim women around the world need to make a real analysis and innovative outlook of the entire landscape of the modern life and be cognizant of the exigencies of our changing environment in a highly turbulent but transforming world of human civilization. Imperatively and within this frame work, modern women in Muslim communities at different levels need to identify the areas of real concern in the process of globalization in order to elaborate possible solutions and innovative response to the current challenges not only for women but for all populations in different societies.

And this was what the first Muslim women pioneers in Islam such as Hazrat Khdija and other women of Alul bait of the Prophet Mohammad (peace is upon him) have opted for the prosperity and growth of the then Islamic society. Their attitude, thought and the life style have been evolved in the way commensurate with and

capable of responding to the needs and demands in a new modern Islamic society of the time.

In this very environment, the first imperative and the fundamental prerequisite is that a modern Muslim woman needs to have a sense of responsibility towards herself, her family and her community in which she lives. An important element for a modern woman in this path, like the pioneer Muslim women in Islam, is to understand surrounding environment including the dynamic and influential forces which have an impact in shaping the life of women in a globalized world. Women should endeavor to employ these forces in the best interest of themselves and the societies in which they live with a view to making a change in line with the Islamic perspective of peace and prosperity.

In view of the above and to put into effect the considerations outlined, I try to identify the areas on which the Muslim modern women, in my view, should focus and take into account when they act to make progress. These areas may constitute the theoretical foundational approach needed to be looked at by modern women as a point of departure:

1-Emancipation from a pure individualist, self-centered and egoistic vision of the modern life. Women's interests, like men, are defined in conjunction with the rest of humanity. Quran provides that:

خلق لكم من انفسكم ازواجالتسكنوا اليها وجعل بينكم موده ورحمه²

Pioneer women in Islam in their modern era created by the Prophet, did not view their rights as an instrument of beauty and pleasure. Women in Islam are not considered commodities, sexual or otherwise and commercial tools. Women in Islam are not the instrument of pleasure and sexual satisfaction, even though they claim the so called "rights/choice" within the sexual partnership and the ownership of their body as may be understood from some international human rights literature.³ One other important point is that women and men in Islam do not compete with each other for their individualist desires, rather they complement

² -Quran, Verse 21 Surat u Rum

³ -Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Paras 94-96

each other for the best interest of themselves, their family and their community. They collaborate with men for the common and collective interest, For Quran orders:

تعاونوا على البر والتقوى

In fact, women and men are equal human beings in Islam. Quran ordains:

انا خلقناكم من ذكر وانثي وجعلناكم شعوبا وقبائل لتعارفوا ان اكرمكم عند الله اتقيكم

No one, neither man nor woman, is superior to the other before the Creator, but with the power of Taqwa. Men and women are equal human beings but with different responsibilities in some aspects of the development within the family and society. The institution of family is the fundamental unit of society. The interests of children including their upbringing is above all and in fact is the primordial consideration in all cases, though women should not be hurt in looking after the children. لاتضار والده بولدها.

Equality, equity and justice are the main determinants in defining roles and responsibilities of women and men in a modern Islamic society. Some of these concepts even provided for in the core international human rights instruments particularly the CEDAW⁴ which need to be interpreted within an Islamic conducive discipline within a progressive modern Muslim society. Human rights of women in the Islamic value discipline are not ends in themselves to be enjoyed for the sake of sole individual satisfaction and utility, but they are means to enforce the human dignity and to ensure the progress and advancement of women, their family and their community in a prophetic modern society. As far as the human being is concerned, it is the human dignity that is an end in itself and the human rights is tasked imperatively to safeguard it. Therefore, human rights in an Islamic perspective do not constitute individualism and utilitarianism within a peculiar western modern philosophy. In this framework, the human rights have a critical and pivotal role in the empowerment and advancement of women in the modern

⁴ -International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

time. It is the imperative and demanding mission of human rights to eliminate the impediments and obstacles for the advancement of women.

2- Equally important, is the emancipation from the traditional harmful fanatic and customary practices such as FGM⁵. Other manifestations such as discriminatory barriers imposed on women's education, property, land ownership, etc...are not rooted in Islamic teachings *طلب العلم فريضة على كل مسلم ومسلمه*, Prophet (peace be upon him) ordered. All of them should be eliminated in the interest of women's empowerment and advancement in the family and society. Allah orders:

للرجال نصيب مما اكتسبوا وللنساء نصيب مما اكتسبن

Women as half population of the human society need to be considered as a dynamic force to instigate and consolidate development within the family and society. Any approach otherwise is doomed to fail and is not Islamic.

3- Emancipation from unleashed and irresponsible liberalism in all aspects of life. Freedoms should be understood within the Islamic perspective in a balanced manner. All human beings are born free by the Almighty. No one can impose restriction on human freedom illegitimately. This is the rule and not the exception. However, rights and freedoms come with corresponding responsibilities. Rights and freedoms of women should not result in kind of utilitarianist approach. Collective interests such as security and public morality and ethical values of society should be considered as legitimate restrictions in this domain as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights⁶ provide for. Holy Quran maintains that:

ان السمع والبصر والفؤاد كل اولئك عنه مسولا

Perverse practices such as LGBT's can in no way be accepted under the rubric of freedom and the so called ownership of the one's body as a right. These devastating and abhorrent practices cannot be accepted as manifestation of a modern society.

And to build on these theoretical assertions I may declare the 4th,

⁵ -Female Genital Mutilation

⁶ -UN core Human Rights instrument adopted in 1966

Enhancing the capacity of women to face and foresee the challenges of globalization; as appeared among the objectives of the Summit.

Women in Muslim societies may take actions on different areas of real concern to Muslim and international community in an increasingly globalized world. Globalization is not merely an economic process, but has social, political, environmental, cultural and even religious dimensions which have an impact on the life of all peoples in all societies, (Muslims and non Muslims) worldwide.⁷ It is a complex process of structural transformation, with numerous interdisciplinary aspects which has an impact on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights of all men and women.⁸ What matters most in these processes is that they should be guided by the fundamental principles of accountability by the powerful nations for their extraterritorial engagements particularly in the field of peace and security, as well as international cooperation and solidarity and respect for diversity.⁹

Within the above description of the global situation, the following areas are critical ones, in my view, for Muslim women to follow and take action to build a modern Muslim society:

a) Peace and security: Women as a dynamic and constructive force need to engage in peace making and peace building activities in their own societies and abroad in all aspects. The first step in this regard is to denounce the sense, tendency and practice of militarism which brought destructive consequences for Muslim women and children and the entire populations. Those who wage wars in countries should be held accountable for the devastative consequences.

b) Poverty eradication: This very important mission can be accomplished through diverse local, national and international means. Participation in decision making in economic development of their countries, providing development mechanisms with technical studies and advice, advocacy and activities at the grass root level and

⁷ -UN General Assembly resolution on Globalization and Human Rights

⁸ -Ibid

⁹ -Proposed Draft Declaration on the Rights of Peoples and Individuals to International Solidarity Article2, Article 11(2), Article12 among other Articles.

drawing in international cooperation and stressing on the principle of accountability for the foreign stake holders are among the measures women can take.

c) Education: Women as educators and trainers as well as the target of education should be empowered within a Prophetic modern society. Women with their human virtues are the best educators to upbringing the future generations. The early phases of the children's life are pivotal in education and training which women can highly contribute to. Women are also capable of designing, planning and implementing educational strategies. Education through national and global social networks is of high importance in this domain.

d) Science and technology: Science and technology particularly in the knowledge based areas are among the principal driving forces of the development at the national and international level. Women can play a major role in this domain. In my country, women constitute more than 60% of the university students of whom many study at the high academic levels. Many of them gained the top international prizes in science and technology. With active participation in the area of science and technology, women can reduce the gap between their countries with those at the top.

Conclusion:

Modernism in the western context dates back to the developments in the western countries mainly in 19th and 20th century which has its genesis in the western history including in religion. We are all aware that the main pillars of the modernism of the past two centuries in the west centers around breaking with past including religion and many modernists rejected religious belief. It was, in one way or another, a revolution against religion and traditional faith. As a result, a modern western woman may act within the parameters of the modernism in the west to respond to the challenges of her society. However, the modern Muslim women in the Islamic world and even beyond need not necessarily follow the same pattern on development opted by women in the western countries. Within this framework,

the modern Muslim women should imperatively emancipate themselves from pure individualist tendencies, unleashed liberal temptations as well as destructive harmful customary and traditional practices.

Therefore, to be realistic and constructive they need to seek for the solutions commensurate with the characteristics of the Muslim societies and their history, responsive to the modern and emerging threats and challenges and congenial with the changing environment and above all, within the value disciplines introduced by the Allah Almighty through Quran and other legitimate Islamic sources.

Consequently, modern Muslim women as the first step need to have a good knowledge of the process of globalization in all its branches, economic to cultural and social, particularly social media, and identify the driving forces influential in shaping the real life in different communities in Islamic world. The areas of concern such as **“peace and security”**, **“poverty eradication”**, **“education”** and last but not least **“science and technology”**, in my view, are the key ones to be tackled by modern Muslim women.