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## **Women Empowerment and Accountability in the Era of the Holy Prophet (PBUH): A Balanced Model for Contemporary Feminist Movements**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the concept of women's empowerment and accountability in the era of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), presenting Islam as a balanced and holistic model relevant to contemporary feminist discourse. The research explores the educational, economic, social, and legal dimensions of women's status during the prophetic period, highlighting the methods adopted by the Prophet (PBUH) to promote learning, dignity, and moral responsibility among women. Islam, as a religion rooted in knowledge and ethical accountability, laid the foundation for an inclusive educational system centered on the Qur'an and Sunnah. Mosques functioned not only as places of worship but also as centers of learning, enabling women to actively participate in intellectual and social development. Through historical case studies of prominent Muslim women, this paper demonstrates that Islam empowered women while simultaneously holding them accountable, thereby establishing a balanced framework that remains relevant for modern societies.*

**Keywords:** *Women empowerment, Islam, Accountability, Education, Prophetic era, Gender justice*

### **Introduction**

Islam presents a comprehensive and balanced way of life that ensures rights and responsibilities for all human beings. While acknowledging the biological and psychological differences between men and women, Islam grants both genders dignity, empowerment, and accountability based on justice rather than uniformity. Women are accorded rights suited to their nature and social roles, while being held equally responsible for their moral and religious obligations. This paper explores how Islam empowered women during the era of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and how this empowerment was practically implemented.

To appreciate the transformative impact of Islam, it is essential to examine the status of women in pre-Islamic civilizations. A comparative historical overview allows a clearer understanding of the revolutionary changes introduced by Islam in restoring women's dignity and rights.

### **Status of Women Before Islam**

In ancient civilizations such as Greece and Rome, women were largely deprived of legal and social rights. They were often treated as property, lacking independent legal identity, and were subjected to trade and exploitation (Hashemi, 2005). Greek society viewed women as morally inferior beings, and in many cases, they could be bought, sold, or gifted like commodities (Khamenei, 1989). Their primary role was limited to satisfying male desires and producing offspring (*The Story of Civilization*, Vol. 2).

Arab society prior to Islam exhibited similar patterns of oppression. Women were regarded as symbols of shame, denied inheritance and property rights, and deprived of guardianship authority. Female infanticide was a widespread practice, reflecting the deeply entrenched misogyny of the era (Fawzi Zyfa, 1996). According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, women's status in pre-Islamic Arabia had deteriorated to that of childbearing slaves with minimal rights and no access to education (Brown, n.d.).



The situation in ancient Hindu society was also unfavorable. Although early traces of matriarchal traditions existed, women gradually lost their status as male deities replaced female goddesses. In matters of inheritance and legal rights, women were treated unequally and marginalized over time (Malik, 2003).

These historical examples illustrate that women across civilizations faced systemic discrimination and exploitation. Religious and cultural institutions often reinforced these injustices, distorting ethical teachings and legitimizing gender-based oppression.

### **Status of Women After the Advent of Islam**

The advent of Islam marked a radical transformation in the status of women. Islam recognized women as dignified individuals with legal identity, moral agency, and social rights. Women were granted clearly defined rights in property ownership, education, marriage, and economic participation, ensuring their empowerment within a framework of accountability.

### **Property and Inheritance Rights**

Islam was the first religion to formally grant women inheritance rights. The Qur'an explicitly states that both men and women are entitled to a share of inheritance, regardless of the size of the estate:

“For men is a share of what parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much—a determined share” (Qur'an, 4:7).

This provision ensured women's financial security and independence, challenging deeply rooted patriarchal norms.

### **Right to Education**

Islam emphasized education as a universal obligation. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) actively promoted learning among women and allocated specific time for their instruction, thereby institutionalizing women's access to education (Al-Bukhari, n.d.).

### **Economic Rights**

Islam acknowledged women's right to earn and own wealth independently. The Qur'an affirms: “For men is a share of what they earn, and for women is a share of what they earn” (Qur'an, 4:32).

This principle validated women's economic agency and legitimized their participation in trade and labor.

### **Right to Choose a Spouse**

Islam categorically prohibited forced marriages. Ibn Abbas narrates that when a woman was compelled into marriage without her consent, the Prophet (PBUH) annulled the marriage and granted her the freedom to choose, thereby establishing consent as a fundamental marital right.

## **Case Studies from the Era of the Holy Prophet (PBUH)**

### **Women's Educational, Social, and Scholarly Roles**

Before Islam, female literacy in Makkah was extremely rare, with only a few women able to read and even fewer able to write (Kahala, n.d.). Islam fundamentally altered this reality by encouraging education for both genders. The Prophet (PBUH) dedicated a specific day for women's education, reflecting his commitment to their intellectual development (Al-Bukhari, n.d.).

The wives of the Prophet (PBUH) played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting Islamic knowledge. Hazrat Ayesha (R.A) emerged as one of the most influential scholars of early Islam. According to Ibn Sa'd (n.d.), several wives of the Prophet memorized Ahadith, with Hazrat Ayesha and Hazrat Umme Salma being particularly prominent. Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani



(n.d.) notes that a significant portion of Islamic jurisprudence is derived from Hazrat Ayesha's narrations.

Her scholarly authority was widely acknowledged by the Companions. Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (R.A) stated that whenever the Companions faced complex issues, they found guidance through Hazrat Ayesha (Al-Tirmidhi, n.d.). She also issued legal verdicts during the caliphates of Umar and Uthman, demonstrating women's active role in Islamic legal discourse.

Hazrat Umme Salma (R.A) was renowned for her deep understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah, issuing legal opinions on emerging matters (Al-Jawzi, n.d.). Other notable scholars included Asma bint Umays (R.A), who was skilled in Hadith and dream interpretation (Al-Dhahabi, n.d.), and Hazrat Nafeesa (R.A), whose lectures were attended by Imam Shafi'i in Egypt (Ibn Khallikan, n.d.).

### **Political and Social Participation**

Hazrat Asma bint Abi Bakr (R.A) played a vital role during the Hijrah by delivering food and information to the Prophet (PBUH) and Abu Bakr (R.A) while they were in the Cave of Thaur. Her courage earned her the title *Dhat al-Nitaqayn*. She also narrated 156 Ahadith, reflecting her scholarly engagement with Islam.

### **Economic Empowerment**

Early Islamic society recognized women's economic contributions. Shifa bint Abdullah (R.A) was appointed as a market supervisor in Madinah, demonstrating institutional trust in women's economic competence (Hamidullah, 1981). Hazrat Khadija (R.A), a successful businesswoman before Islam, continued her trade afterward, and the Prophet (PBUH) acknowledged her financial support (Ahmad ibn Hanbal, n.d.).

Women were also permitted to work during sensitive periods. The Prophet (PBUH) allowed a divorced woman to earn her livelihood during *'iddah* (Abu Dawood, n.d.). Hazrat Asma bint Abi Bakr (R.A) similarly contributed to her household through physically demanding labor, illustrating the dignity accorded to women's work (Al-Bukhari, n.d.).

### **Family Rights and Legal Autonomy**

Islam abolished coercive marital practices and established women's right to consent. The Prophet (PBUH) sought the approval of his daughter, Hazrat Fatima (R.A), for her marriage to Hazrat Ali (R.A), setting a practical precedent. Women's inheritance rights were further secured through Qur'anic legislation, as demonstrated in the case of Sa'd ibn Rabi's (R.A) family after his martyrdom.

### **Accountability and Contemporary Significance**

Islam establishes equal moral accountability for men and women. The Qur'an declares that every individual is responsible for their deeds (74:38) and affirms equal spiritual reward regardless of gender (3:195). Thus, empowerment in Islam is inseparable from responsibility. Modern scholars acknowledge Islam's balanced gender paradigm. Ahmed (1992) argues that Islam differentiates roles without endorsing female subjugation. Maneck (2004) and Fernea (1998) highlight Islamic feminism as a unique and adaptable framework capable of addressing modern challenges while remaining rooted in Islamic ethics.

### **Contemporary feminists movements:**

Existing literature on women and Islam often focuses either on apologetic defenses of women's rights or on critiques framed through Western feminist paradigms. Limited scholarly attention has been given to the concept of accountability as an integral component of empowerment in Islam. Furthermore, contemporary feminist movements frequently emphasize rights without sufficiently addressing moral responsibility. Contemporary feminist movements present both points of convergence and divergence. While shared concerns include opposition to injustice,



discrimination, and violence against women, Islamic teachings differ fundamentally in their epistemological foundations and moral framework. Islam proposes a model of gender justice rooted in divine guidance, where empowerment is coupled with accountability, and individual rights are harmonized with social obligations. This study fills this gap by analyzing women's empowerment in early Islam as a balanced system where rights and duties coexist, offering an alternative framework for modern gender discourse.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Islam, from its inception, established a comprehensive and balanced framework for women's empowerment grounded in education, economic participation, legal autonomy, and moral accountability. Women in the era of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) were active scholars, economic contributors, and social participants, rather than passive recipients of rights. By ensuring women's access to education, property, consent in marriage, and economic independence—while holding them equally accountable—Islam introduced a model of gender justice unparalleled in its historical context. This prophetic model offers a meaningful and ethical alternative to contemporary feminist movements by harmonizing empowerment with responsibility, dignity with duty, and rights with accountability.

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