Chapter - VII

Empowerment of Muslim Women
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The popular theories state that subjugation of Muslim women by their male counterparts was mainly due to their economic dependence and lack of confidence in competing with men in the society. Was the case what was the cause? A woman can be confident through education, work, earnings and also individual capacity to manage herself and her family. Education, therefore is the key to women's empowerment at 'Grass root' level. Qur'an also says that education can give a woman the necessary strength and power in the society. An account of reasons for lack of empowerment of women, followed by a discussion on measures towards empowering Muslim women is made in this chapter.

The position of women in Islam has long been a point of great controversy. The Muslim woman is seen as the ultimate symbol of subjection to male-dominance. Much evidence from early biographical and literary sources indicate that women actively participated in the life of their community in the formative period of Islam. The study of the lives of Hazrat Khadija, Fatima, and Zainab seem to support this view. Khadija was a successful business-woman and financier in her own right. She was also the first person to embrace Islam, and it was through her financial support. Islam gained its initial strength. Hazrat Fatima was renowned for her public speeches and played a vital role in the life of her community. Hazrat Zainab, the brave heroine of Karbala, was a powerful political force to be reckoned with, to the extent that the Caliph, Yazid, in fear of her creating a rebellion against his corrupt rule, exiled Zainab, as this was only means of silencing this majestic and powerful woman. Zainab was and remains to be the voice and embodiment of womanhood in Islam.

The advent of Islam marked a distinctive break from oppressive traditions. Yet the original message became diffused within firmly established, patriarchal cultures. The violations of women's and the girl-child's rights continued, only now, beneath an Islamic guise. The egalitarian, timeless message of the Qur'an addresses issues ranging from a woman's spiritual autonomy to her socio-economic and political roles.
Under the Prophet’s laws, from the 7th century A.D., for the first time in human history, women’s rights were safeguarded. Considering that Islam rose like a flame in the midst of perpetual warfare among Arab tribes, the Prophet himself was ceaselessly hounded by the Quraish tribes. It is, therefore, historically astonishing that he had time to clearly define man’s relationship to woman, giving her a few of the Hadis that have come down, equating man with woman, giving her clear rights to property, giving protection to daughters and to orphans, the right to divorce and the care of her children in the formative years.

In a society in which female infanticide was rife, the Prophet gave equal importance to daughters as to sons, the rights to maintenance from parents, the right to property in carefully designed shares which made provision for daughter, wife or widow. Further more, the Prophet had declared in the year 632 A.D., “To get educated is the solemn duty of all Muslim men and Muslim women.”

What was equally astonishing, in view of the period, the Prophet’s understanding of ordinary human nature. In the words of the Qur’an Marriage was a contract. If there was grave incompatibility between partners, both men and women were free to divorce, within a time frame to help them reconsider something otherwise irrevocable. Furthermore, on marriage, women had the right to mahr, often called a dower.

Unfortunately, the social rights granted to women in Islam have been wilfully distorted in history by a combination of the ignorance of women themselves of their own rights, and the suppression of the Prophet’s laws by the male dominated Society. The distortion was further intensified by the conflict between Islam and Christianity from the 7th century. Both religions were at their militant, missionary height, which swept across the battle grounds of West Asia, Europe and Africa, and Islam seven centuries after the establishment of the Christian church, was a calamitous new threat to Christianity. Both religions were theocratic, both sprang from what man accepted as divine revelation. Islam had no organized priesthood however, but depended for
Therefore, education should be given the utmost priority as the only viable option for combating oppressive "extra-Qur'anic" traditions which disempower women. For women's role have been determined by men on the basis of their miraculous biological ability to bear children. It seems that the vital role which men play in procreation has been overlooked, and just as the roles of men are not limited to their biological functions, it seems only logical that women should not be restricted to theirs. We must learn to appreciate and cooperate with one another on all levels of our humanity. The international community, and the Islamic world in particular, have suffered a great loss by neglecting the invaluable resources hidden within women and girls. In the words of Malcolm X,

"To educate a man is to educate an individual but to educate a woman is to educate a nation."

The issues put forward here must be taken into consideration and relevant steps to be taken to implement effective "grassroots" programs, which will further the development of women's potential in all spheres of life.

Measures Towards Empowerment: General

SIGI (Sisterhood Is Global Institute) is an organisation located at Montreal, Canada concentrates on varied programs for empowerment of women.

All of SIGI's core programs - Women's Human Rights Education Program, International Dialogues, Urgent Action Alert Program, and the ongoing Outreach and Advocacy Initiatives⁸ - are centered around the objectives of promoting women's empowerment through:

(i) informing women of their basic rights and empowering them to attain the rights they consider significant, and

(ii) increasing public awareness and concern for women's human rights.

(i) Women's Human Rights Education Program:

The Women's Human Rights Education Program achieves this objective through
the implementation of its culturally relevant human rights education model in workshops in several Muslim societies. The model seeks to transmit the universal human rights concepts contained in major international human rights documents in such a way as to make them directly relevant to the experiences of grassroots Muslim women. It uses indigenous ideas, traditions, myths, and religious or other texts it renders in local idiom in relation to the prevailing economic, social, cultural, and political conditions in each target society. A fundamental characteristic of the model is that it is dialogical and participatory. It relies on participants to arrive at an understanding of their basic rights by discussing their real life situations with others who share similar experiences in a dynamic context purposefully designed to encourage action.

Based on this model, SIGI developed Claiming Our Rights: A Manual for Women's Human Rights Education in Muslim Societies. The manual, used in SIGI's workshops, was carefully designed to promote human rights awareness among women at the grassroots level. It provides a forum for women, regardless of their political, economic and social background, to define, discuss, and reinterpret their rights in the context of their respective personal and public spheres of life.

The response to the workshops and the manual has been extraordinary. During 1996 and 1997 SIGI introduced and successfully tested the manual in model workshops in several Muslim or majority-Muslim countries - Bangladesh, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, and Uzbekistan. Results from the field show that the model is an effective tool for transmitting and refining human rights concepts. Participants in the workshops began by discussing women's rights in the private domain and gradually moved to the consideration of women's rights in the public domain. This continued progression is vital because it allowed participants to begin with familiar subjects, which helped them achieve self-confidence as they moved step by step to debates and dialogues over more distant and complicated topics. The use of fiction to communicate human rights principles, and the give and take among women participants generated great enthusiasm. With enthusiasm came interest, and with interest came awareness and consciousness.
As the momentum for change generated by the workshops continues to grow, groups in Azerbaijan, Egypt, India, and Syria are presently initiating SIGI's human rights education program. In addition, groups in Russia, Somalia, Zambia, Mexico, and Chile are showing a strong interest in translating the manual and in adapting the model to local cultural religious needs in the coming months. Based on the encouraging response SIGI continues to receive to this initiative, it is clear that the campaign for women's human rights education is a movement whose time has come and that the approach SIGI is taking in preparing Claiming Our Rights is the right one.

(ii) **International Dialogues**

As part of commitment to creating opportunities for women from the Global South to participate directly in international dialogues of concern to them, SIGI convenes annual international conferences and publishes the proceedings to disseminate information on the issues discussed, and to expand the field of conversation and debate.

In 1994, SIGI convened three regional conferences that focussed on identifying and developing recommendations for inclusion in the 1995 Beijing FWCW (Fourth World Conference on Women) Platform for Action. The first conference entitled Religion, Culture, and Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World, held on September 9-10, 1994 in Washington, DC, USA, brought together women from the Muslim World to debate the form, content and nature of patriarchal organizations and processes that posit women's rights as contradictory to Islam. The conference focussed specifically on ways and means of empowering Muslim women to participate in the general socialization process as well as in making implementing, and evaluating public policy. Proceedings of this conference were published in Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World.

The second conference, Refugee Women and Children in Times of Conflict, convened on September 15-17, 1994 in Athens, Greece, enabled refugee women as
well as activists and experts from all regions to participate in discussions about the root causes of forced migration and refugee conditions in their respective regions. Debate centered around strategies to foster change in the socioeconomic structures and relationships that lead to violence and displacement of women, and ways to assist refugees in times of crisis.\textsuperscript{13}

The third conference, Integration of Women in Commerce and Industry: An Agenda for the 21st Century, (October 25-27, 1994; Lusaka, Zambia) focussed on socioeconomic development as a neglected right of people in the Third World. Discussions focussed on the obstacles and ways of enhancing women's participation in commerce and industry.\textsuperscript{14}

The recommendations that emerged as an outcome of these conferences were distributed at the regional preparatory conferences to the FWCW, and published in Women to Women Dialogues: Global Strategies for the 21st Century\textsuperscript{15}.

In 1996, May 9-11, SIGI convened Beijing and Beyond: Implementing the Platform for Action in Muslim Societies to define practical strategies for implementing the Platform for Action, with specific focus on political leadership, decision-making, and education as areas of critical concern for women in Muslim societies. Proceedings are published in Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation: Implementing the Beijing Platform\textsuperscript{16}.

Most recently, SIGI convened Rights of Passage: An International Conference on Women's Human Rights Education, September 26-30, 1997 in Washington, DC. The conference was successful in bringing together educators, human rights activists, policy makers, and representatives from non-governmental organizations from around the world to discuss both theory and practice of women's human rights education concepts and policies. An important outcome was the interaction between panelists and audience who worked to develop strategies to communicate universal human rights principles to women in various cultural environments.\textsuperscript{17}
(iii) **Urgent Action Alert Program**

Central to SIGI's mission is the belief that nowhere in the world should women be subjected to abuses of their basic human rights, and that the international community can play a decisive role in monitoring and speaking out against such abuses when they do occur. SIGI is proud of its record as the first international organization to establish an Urgent Action Alert System to launch active campaigns of support specifically for women censored, jailed, tortured, exiled or otherwise prosecuted or persecuted for activities on behalf of women's human rights.

(iv) **Outreach and Advocacy Initiatives**

SIGI has an extensive international outreach program, and an established dynamic network of women activists, scholars, and women's rights and human rights organizations in the Muslim world, which constitutes an important aspect of the consciousness raising efforts regarding women's human rights. The outreach and information dissemination channels of SIGI are one of the most effective in the international human rights community. SIGI staff regularly respond to queries concerning the status of women in various countries. SIGI headquarters act as a liaison between women activists and scholars in various countries and regions. Scholars and journalists use SIGI's extensive global network in preparing their research and media programs. SIGI members serve on national, regional, and international boards of organizations with similar goals, thus expanding SIGI's outreach.¹⁸

In addition, SIGI produces and circulates research papers and monographs aimed at clarifying concepts, deepening, understanding, and building consensus on issues of priority to women. SIGI members have written and published books and articles in many languages in recent years. SIGI also produces a newsletter, SIGI News, which serves as a source of information about members as well as international actions and events related to women. Currently, SIGI is preparing an international anthology of the major texts on women's rights, and will be translating them into several languages in order to help further international dialogue and understanding.¹⁹
Organisations Working for Muslim Women Empowerment:

(I) Muslim Women's League (MWL)

MWL is a nonprofit American Muslim organization working to implement the values of Islam and thereby reclaim the status of women as free, equal and vital contributors to society international Muslimah Artists Network - Created by and for Muslim women artists to promote the artistic achievements of Muslim women around the world. International Organizations - Contact details for a variety of international organizations for Muslim women.

(II) Kamilat -

This is an US based non-profit organization that addresses quality-of-life issues faced by Muslim women and their families by focussing on the social, economic, academic and spiritual empowerment of women.

(III) Karamah -

This is also an US based charitable, educational organization of Muslim women lawyers who focus upon the domestic and global issues of human rights for Muslims.

(IV) Muslim Women Association -

This is an Australian community based welfare organisation established in 1983 to cater to the welfare, social, educational, religious and recreational needs of Muslim women of all backgrounds.

(V) Muslim Women’s Help Line -

This is an organisation that provides charity, counselling, mediation, support and information for Muslim women in the UK.

(VI) Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia -

This Organization facilitates co-operation between Muslim women’s groups in order to improve the status and image of Muslim women.
Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk -
This is committed to the Islamic values of justice, freedom and equality, the MYM Gender Desk focusses on gender issues in order to transform society and affirm people’s humanity through education, campaigns and the empowerment of women.

Muslimah Net -
Provides a variety of resource links for sisters.

Sisters United In Human Service -
This organization of Muslim women works in the spirit of sisterhood to promote, support, uplift and serve human concerns for the pleasure of God.

South Dakota Muslim Women’s Network -
A place for individuals interested in issues important to South Dakota Muslim Women.

Sufi Women Organization -
Part of the International Association of Sufism, the SWO is devoted to creating a harmonious cooperation, friendship and direction to honour the works of Sufi women.

World Council of Muslim Women Foundation -
A non-profit organization dedicated as a living memorial to the women of Bosnia and other women who have suffered the degradation of rape, torture and death - with a focus on education of women’s rights, global peace and interfaith education from a worldwide perspective.

Measures in India:
The more important issue is to review the existing approaches and strategies, to identify those areas for minority uplift that require immediate attention.

The Central government allocated Rs 9,568.68 crore in the ninth five year Plan (1997-2002) for the ‘empowerment’ of the 145.31 million Muslims, Christians Sikhs, Buddhists and Zorastrians. The ministries of human resources development and social justice and empowerment also administer a number of welfare schemes for them.
The Maulana Azad Foundation, with a corpus of Rs 30.01 crore, exists for promoting education, so does the National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC) for providing concessional finance for setting up self-employment ventures. To introduce sciences and mathematics in the curriculum, government funds are allotted for modernising ‘maktab’ and ‘madrasa’. In the 41 minority-concentrated districts, the community polytechnics and the industrial training institutes are supporting the educational and vocational needs. 380 NGOs offer training to Muslim candidates to compete for various jobs. 27,770 candidates have already benefited from this scheme.

There are adequate schemes for those, who show interest in education. NMDFC, for example, claims to have disbursed credit worth Rs 114.70 lakhs. Surely, a government seeking to empower the minorities as the agents of socio-economic change and development must not abdicate its responsibility of undertaking surveys and preparing status reports.

Indeed, now that the tenth five year Plan is being discussed, it is up to the government to initiate, with the help of academic institutions and NGOs, extensive surveys and field reports on the social and economic profile of the minorities. The vice-chairman of the Planning Commission may be reminded that such an exercise was last undertaken in 1983 by Gopal Singh. That is when the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, had stated: “The India of our dreams can survive only if Muslims and other minorities can live in absolute safety and confidence.”

Gopal Singh report pointedly referred to a rather alarming percentage of the poorer sections among the Muslims in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The report also furnished information on widespread illiteracy and a higher drop-out rate at the elementary stage of education. The average literacy rate among Muslims was 47 per cent, less than half the national average of 52.11 per cent. Muslim women—more than half the total Muslim population—did not receive even school education, let alone higher education.

It may not be appropriate to describe the Muslim communities as “the hewers of wood and drawers of water”, but the harsh reality is that there is not much to write
about their progress since 1983. It is true that regional variations exist, especially where Muslims, along with Christians, enjoy benefits in the shape of liberal institutions and scholarships, or in Bihar where job opportunities have increased after Urdu earned its rightful status.

In general, however, widespread illiteracy, low income, irregular employment and high incidence of poverty point to a low level of human development. The literacy level is on an average 10 per cent less than the national level: in states like Bihar it is as high as 98.1 per cent in rural areas compared to 21.8 percent in Kerala. In Jammu & Kashmir, the percentages of illiteracy among Muslims in rural and urban areas are 86.9 per cent and 43.2 per cent respectively. The ninth Plan document itself concedes that the Muslims, their women and girls included, remain educationally backward and their traditional institutions like ‘madrasas’ are yet to adopt the modern syllabus to get integrated into the mainstream education.

In 1983, the Muslims were not only grossly under-represented in public services, but were predominant in the ‘self-employed’ category. The report of the subgroup on minorities (1 996) constituted by the Planning Commission illustrates that there are no signs of any significant improvement. Whether it is the police or the railways, the state or the all-India services, the representation of Muslims is very low. Relatively, fewer urban muslims work for a regular wage or salary, and their representation in the ‘casual labour category’ is higher than any other communities. Abusaleh Shariff’s seminal study reveals that, in urban India, 53.4 percent of Muslims are self-employed as against the figure of 36 per cent amongst Hindus. In rural areas, the annual household income for Muslims as a social group is below the all-India average, as well as below that of the Christians.23

To sum up, notable efforts have been made towards empowering muslim women by government, non-governmental organisations and through international dialogues. Such efforts over several decade have contributed to the growth rate of education and employment of muslim women. Some of them have shown outstanding performance in different walks of life which is discussed in the next chapter.