

~~The status of Woman in Islam and other
Religions:
A Comparative Historical Analysis~~

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Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to present a comparative historical analysis of the status of woman in Islam as compared with that of woman in other religions, an analysis that takes into consideration well-established historical facts. It may be argued that the cause of woman's status in various religions has achieved remarkable progress in many religions around the world during the last century. While this statement may be valid, the question remains as to the periods that preceded the past century. What was the status of woman prior to the present period? How was woman treated in the various religions and cultures throughout history? Which religions and

cultures preceded the others in acknowledging woman's rights to equality with man? The answers to these questions will show that the cultures and religions that recognized woman's rights in the last century or so had a previous record that was not equitable as far as woman's rights to equality were concerned. There appears to be a tendency in Western scholarship to accord more attention to developments within the past century to the exclusion of the historical record the various religions had in this regard. A thorough understanding of the historical facts in this area may help reveal that certain religions and cultures historically had a good record in the area of woman's rights, yet such record is not as equitable at the present time as it was in the past. In other words, knowledge of history in this regard would show that there has been a reversal in this respect. The cultures and religions which historically had the most equitable record (such as Islam) are lagging behind these days while those that had the most dismal record in the past are nowadays championing woman's causes. It is believed that an accurate understanding of historical developments would provide explanation that the reversal referred to here was not due to a problem in the religion, but to the way in which followers of that religion understood and implemented its teachings. In other words, if we want to search for reasons why Islamic societies at the present do not have a good record on woman's rights issues, our attention should focus not on the religious factors but on the social and cultural factors in those societies. A comparison of the status of woman in Muslim societies at the moment with that of woman in early Islam will show unequivocally that Muslim woman who lived at the time of the Prophet enjoyed more liberties, was more outspoken, more forthcoming and more independent.

This paper will attempt to examine the manner in which the various major religions and cultures of the world treated woman prior to the modern

era; this analysis will reveal that at the time when Islam was revealed, woman was treated as a second-class citizen in other religions and was denied the most basic human rights such as the right of inheritance and ownership of property. For its part, Islam, as early as the seventh century A.D., recognized woman's full entitlement to these rights as well as a host of other rights. A case in point is the fact that in some other religions, married woman's right to ownership was not granted until the late nineteenth century, more than twelve centuries after Islam had fully recognized those rights.

The Status of Woman in Asian Cultures: A Historical Background

In Japanese legends, the Empress Jingo, following the death of her husband, took over the government herself, united the warring factions within the nation, invaded Korea and led her troops to victory. At the time of her death she was the ruler of the largest empire Japan ever acquired until World War II. The story of Empress Jingo of the third century A.D. presents a picture of Japanese woman that is quite different from that of weak and fragile Japanese women in later ages. All the great cultures seem to have similar stories of older times when woman was strong and self-assured. The Greeks immortalized the fighting Amazons; The ancient Britons had their warrior Queen Boadicea. The Semitic, Indian, Chinese and Korean cultures had similar stories about an ancient era of matriarchy. It appears that woman's status was good among primitive peoples. She enjoyed a considerable freedom and worked closely with her man on a basis that made them almost equals. History shows that in the tough struggle for existence in ancient times, woman was able to hold her own.

It appears that the status woman had in ancient times began to weaken with the development of civilization. Thus the comrade wife of the nomad hunter became the subservient slave or the pampered plaything of the civilized man. The history of woman's status is not one of steady development toward equal status with man. It is as though it was first a descent into slavery followed by a long period of total submission which in turn is followed by triumphal struggle for equality. However, for most of human history, woman has had to accept the conditions imposed upon her in a world created and dominated by man.

In Chinese culture, there seems to be general agreement that Confucius played a major role in the degradation of woman. Confucius was born in the year 552 B.C. to a young woman of around eighteen years of age and married to a seventy-one-year old man. The child was named K'ung

and later in life was accorded the title Fu-tse- "The Master" K'ung Fu-tse's fame spread and he became the founder of a philosophical system that was to dominate Chinese culture for almost twenty-five centuries. His name, K'ung Fu-tse, later became known to the West in its Latinized form, Confucius.^v

Even though Confucius did not say or write a great deal on the subject of woman's status, the little he said became quite influential among his disciples and throughout the neighboring cultures. Confucius based his whole teaching about human society on the patriarchal system. Within this system, the function of woman was simply to obey; woman is a creature born to obedience. ^v In childhood and early youth she obeys her father; when she is married she obeys her husband and when her husband dies she obeys her son. Her obedience must be unquestioning and absolute. Confucius's philosophy towards woman spread in neighboring cultures, in China, Korea and Japan and soon many writers elaborated on the same theme drawing up details for a woman's behavior and the inferior status she was required to accept and maintain.^{vi}

This view of woman's inferiority was reinforced by Chinese cosmology. Thus the creation of the world was brought about by the interaction of two elements, 'yang', the male principle, and 'yin' the female one. The male elements were positive and superior ones: heaven, sun, light, strength, and activity while the female ones were negative ones: earth, moon, darkness, weakness, and passivity. Biology was likewise brought into the equation whereby man was portrayed as the giver of new life, woman merely the receptacle that received and nurtured it. Man was concerned with the external world while woman's concern was with the internal - the womb, the home.^{vii}

At the time when Confucius's ideas were determining the status of Chinese woman, new religious ideas from India were penetrating. About a decade before the birth of Confucius, a son was born into the home of a wealthy prince who ruled a stretch of territory close to Nepal. The son, Siddhartha Gautama, grew up at first in a wealthy and comfortable environment. Later, he began to reflect deeply on the meaning of life and at the age of twenty-nine left his home, wife and infant son to become a wandering teacher. As he meditated under a tree, he received a spiritual illumination and became 'Buddha' the "Enlightened One" who also became one of the great teachers of mankind. Unlike Confucianism, Buddhism is a philosophy of abstract ideas, not a philosophy of daily living. Yet, both philosophies joined forces in their influence on the status of woman. While Confucianism taught that woman was basically inferior to man, Buddhism taught that she was the "personification of all evil."^{viii} "Woman," the

Buddhists said, "is a creature with the look of an angel on its countenance; but with a diabolical spirit in its inmost heart." And again, "Woman is full of sin; nothing is to be dreaded so much as a woman."^{xii}

The sacred writings of the Hindu religion (or traditions) are estimated to run at least fifteen thousand pages. In deciding what is right and wrong in human behavior, the Laws of Manu occupy the position of supreme authority.^x The Law of Manu for the Hindus was just as important as the Law of Moses for the Jews. Like Moses, Manu claimed that he received the laws directly from the Creator. Manu's fundamental concepts about women are very similar to those of Confucius by whose ideas he is influenced. However, he presents his ideas in much greater detail than Confucius. Here are some of Manu's most important teachings about the status of woman:

It is the nature of women in this world to cause the seduction of men; for which reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females. Let no man, therefore, sit in a sequestered place even with his nearest female relations. A girl, or a young woman, or a woman advanced in years, must do nothing, even in her own dwelling place, to advance her mere pleasure. In childhood, a female must be dependent on her father; in youth, on her husband; her husband being dead, on her son. A woman must never seek independence. Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a state of dependence. Their fathers protect them in childhood, their husbands protect them in youth and their sons protect them in age. A woman is never fit for independence.^{xi}

The Laws of Manu, like the teachings of Confucius, became the inspiration for later writers and interpreters. The proper behavior of a Hindu woman was elaborated in the literature that accumulated with the years. It is a sad picture of a pitiable creature-abyect and sinful. This is a picture of woman fashioned in the minds of man, a picture accepted, too, by woman herself. For Gangadevi, who was an Indian poetess, here is what she says about her own sex: "Shady places where all evil blossoms; snares that trap, as a deer is trapped, minds blinded with passion; weapons wielded by the deceiving emissaries of Desire, - How can the wise have confidence in women?"^{xiii}

The marriage manual written by Kaibara, a Confucian poet of the fifteenth century, was placed in the wedding dress of a Japanese bride if she came from a good home. The book, which was intended as a marriage guidance for the new wife, explained to the bride what was expected of her. The following are some extracts from the manual:

It is a girl's destiny, on reaching womanhood, to go to a new home, and to live in submission. The only qualities that befit a woman are gentle obedience, chastity, mercy and quietness. A woman must consider her husband's home her own. However low and needy her husband's position may be, she must find no fault with him, but must consider the poverty of the household which it has pleased heaven to give her as the ordering of fate. Once married, she must never leave her husband's house. Never should a woman fail, night and morning, to pay her respects to her father-in-law and mother-in-law. Never should she be remiss in performing any tasks they may require of her. She should abandon herself to their direction. Even if they be pleased to vilify her, she should not be angry with them. The five worst infirmities that afflict the female are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy and silliness. It is from these that arise the inferiority of women to men. Women's nature is passive. As viewed from the standard of man's nature, the foolishness of women falls to understand the duties that lie before her very eyes, perceives not the actions that will bring down blame upon her own head. When she blames and accuses she does not see that she is her own enemy, estranging others and incurring their hatred. Such is the stupidity of her character, that it is incumbent upon her, in every particular, to distrust herself and to obey her husband. A woman should yield to her husband the first, and be herself content with the second place. It is necessary for her to avoid pride, even if there be in her actions aught deserving praise... to endure without anger and indignation the jeers of others, suffering such things with patience and humility.^{xviii}

Confucius has confirmed that "It is the law of nature that woman should be held under the dominance of men. In the East, it was clear that a woman could never be trusted to take care of herself. For her own protection, she must always be under the complete control of her male guardian. The best way he could protect her from evil was to lock her up. Under the Pudah^{xix} system of India, this was done quite literally. "Women were shut away in crowded, airless and isolated rooms at the back of the house, or screened in by shuttered devices through which only faint glimpses could be obtained of the life outside. These rooms were usually overcrowded, poorly lit and ventilated - the barest and ugliest in the house. Under such crowded conditions, shut away from all cultural life, with no stimulation from outside, how could women preserve a sense of beauty? It grew to be an envied boast for a Hindu woman to be able to assert that not even the eye of the sun had ever beheld her face."^{xx}

The number of Indian women who, as a result of this system, never

saw the outside world. From their marriage day throughout the rest of their lives, was estimated as recently as thirty years ago to be somewhere between eleven and seventeen million. In these dismal places of seclusion, disease and death were frequent visitors. In Calcutta, where Purdah was extensively practiced, the death rate from tuberculosis in 1926 was five times as great for females as for males.^{xvi}

In the Chinese home, while woman was often confined to her own quarters, her conditions were much better than in India. But the same principle was in operation, and the Chinese found an ingenious device to implement it. Women's quarters of the Chinese home were not locked and barred; instead, the Chinese woman herself was chained.

There is no reliable information on the origins of foot-binding. There are indications that it started in the tenth century A.D. Some traditions trace it to an empress of an ancient dynasty who bound her feet to conceal a deformity and thus set a new fashion for the court ladies to follow whereby small feet came to be the supreme mark of quality in a woman. The practice of foot-binding is described by an expert on Chinese Culture as follows:

The deformity is produced by narrow cotton bandages about three yards long. They are applied when the little girl is six years old. One end of the strip of cotton is placed beneath the instep and then carried over the four small toes, drawing them down beneath the foot. Another twist draws the heel and the great toe nearer together. When the cloth has been used, the end is firmly sewed down, and the feet are left for a week or two in that condition. Clean bandages are now and then put on, but the change has to be very rapidly effected, or the blood begins again to circulate in the poor benumbed feet, and the agony becomes almost unbearable. Not infrequently in the process a girl loses one or two of her toes, but she feels repaid for the pain she endures by being the possessor of still smaller feet. Mothers and nurses frequently perform this duty for their daughters, and in passing a Chinese home one sometimes hears the bitter crying of a child whose feet are being bound. At last, after indescribable torture, the girl's foot becomes a mass of distorted and broken bones. She is now the proud possessor of 'golden lilies,' and can wear the fashionable shoes, just three inches long, in which the elegant Chinese lady totters painfully from room to room of the home she hardly ever leaves.^{xviii}

A comparison has often been made between the bound feet of the Chinese culture and the high-heeled shoes of the Western woman: both of which are supposed to emphasize beauty and attractiveness. A Chinese

writer, commenting on what makes a woman attractive, once wrote: "A pair of unbound feet would have completely ruined this perfect harmony of life."^{xxviii}

Foot-binding was not practiced in Japan, but woman was shut up within her quarters. The polite Japanese word for a wife is "okusama" which meant "the lady of the back parlor." In a Japanese household, servants occupied the front rooms, whereas the wife was away in the back rooms of the house. This way, she was cut off from any contact with the outside world. According to Hindu traditions, Hindu woman was not capable of protecting herself. As one writer comments, "Young Hindu women do not possess sufficient firmness, and sufficient regard for their honor, to resist the ardent solicitations of a seducer."^{xxix} The story is told of a woman's club in Bombay whose members demanded the right to take their eleven and twelve-year old daughters with them to the afternoon meetings as they were afraid to leave the girls at home and accessible to the men of the family.^{xxx} A Chinese author describes a similar situation in the home in which she lived:

In the olden days maidens took part in the spring rites. But the Kuei-tze, First lady in Authority now in the homestead, trusts neither ancient manuscript nor Western custom. Maids under her protection do not join in any festival procession which includes men - except that procession which goes to the bridegroom's door. On the holiday morning, the wives and girl children went out with the boys and men to join in the Welcome to Spring Procession. We maids of marriageable age were left inside the homestead. Kuei-tze locked the To-and-from-the-World Gate with the special key she uses on such occasions.^{xxxi}

Keeping woman in complete seclusion in the Hindu culture meant she was denied many rights, such as that of having education. The Brahmins^{xxxii} said "Educate a woman and you put a knife in the hands of a monkey."^{xxxiii} The woman was denied what is now known as basic human rights because she was believed to be inferior by nature. A Japanese writer describes this injustice to woman as follows: "The education of our women was neglected and her intelligence became more and more narrow owing to there being little or no chance for her to see things in the outer world. The next thing which was bound to happen was man's contempt and disdain for her narrow-mindedness and stupidity."^{xxxiv}

Another author characterizes the classical Japanese wife as follows:

The classical Japanese wife almost eludes characterization.

It is hard to say what she herself is really like, except that she is selfless. She is the real mainspring of the household, but this is almost totally obscured by her obedience, self-sacrifice, humility, and incredible patience. She is more of a pervasive presence than a person. She can best be described as the almost invisible genius of the Japanese home, always there, always busy, always smiling.^{xxv}

So, the woman in Asian cultures had to fit the role selected for her. She is deprived of personal freedom, the opportunity to be educated and basic human rights; hence, she found herself enslaved in a system determined to recognize no rights but those of man. In Asian cultures, the male is considered "the main object." Traditionally, women have been regarded as a parasite and a debtor.^{xxvi} Even though this was said concerning Japan, it can also apply to Asian cultures in general. One author lists the most fundamental of women's rights such as the right to own property, to choose a mate, to sexual equality, to divorce, and to be protected against arbitrary repudiation. In old China, this author adds, woman did not enjoy a single one of these rights.^{xxvii}

In fact, in Asian cultures, woman was treated as a piece of property; a young girl had often been sold as a slave, a prostitute and a concubine. In Korea, during the period 1000-1400 A.D., it was legal for a man to settle his debt by handing over his wife, children and servants.^{xxviii} In Thailand, the sale of a wife without her own consent, and of daughters above the age of fifteen, was not made illegal till the reign of King Mongkut (1850-68).^{xxix} According to Chinese traditions, when a Chinese man marries, one term to describe what happens is that he "takes the woman by the ear." This advantageous position gives him the right to put his wife to any type of labor he chooses. This is not to imply that these are typical situations. However, these incidents demonstrate the extent to which the abuse and inferior treatment of woman can go in Asian cultures.

Woman's Status in European Societies :

Turning to European societies, we find that women's conditions were not better off. Socrates, the great sage of Greek philosophy describes woman as "the source of all evil; her love is to be dreaded more than the hatred of men; the poor young men who seek women in matrimony are like fish who go out to meet the hook."^{xxx} The Jewish tradition gives us the Creation story that identifies Eve, the first woman, as the cause of man's fall from grace. In that tradition we also find the blessing in the Morning Prayer—"Blessed art Thou, O Lord... Who has not made me a gentile... a slave... a woman."^{xxxi} The early Church writings are no less harsh towards woman.

Roman woman was not better off than the Athenian or the Hindu

Sir Henry Maine, the great nineteenth century authority on ancient law, expresses his pessimism thus: "No society which preserves any tincture of Christian institutions is likely to restore to married women the personal liberty conferred on them by the Middle Roman Law."^{xxxvi} As E. A. Allen points out: "Athenian women were always minors subject to some male – to their father, to their brother, or to one of their male kin. Her consent in marriage was not generally thought to be necessary and she was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents, and receive from them her husband and her lord even though he were a stranger to her."^{xxxvii}

Out of the Catholic doctrine concerning the subordination of the weaker sex, we find numerous and stringent enactments, which render it impossible for women to succeed to any considerable amount of property. The complete inferiority of the sex was continually maintained by the law; and that generous public opinion which in Rome had frequently revolted against the injustice done to girls, in depriving them of the greater part of the inheritance of their fathers, totally disappeared. Whenever the Canon Law has been the basis of legislation, we find Laws of succession sacrificing the interests of daughters and

however, this trend was changed. According to Lecky: "When the Christian Church gained control, pagan laws during the Roman Empire had been continually repealing the old her of legal rights she had previously enjoyed. In Lecky's own words: "The Not only did the Church affirm the inferior status of woman, it also deprived

even the son of God had to die."^{xxxiii} God's image, man. On account of your desert, that is death, was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily divine law, you are she who persuades him whom the devil unsealer of that (forbidden) tree; you are the first deserter of the necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway; you are the on this sex of yours lives in this age. The guilt must of God Do you know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God

harsh attack on woman: is the most potent instrument of the devil."^{xxxiii} Tertullian provides another memorial of her fall. She should be especially ashamed of her beauty, for it brought upon the world. She should be ashamed of her dress, for it is the She should live in continual penance on account of the curses she has human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought that she is a woman. Fathers...woman was represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all so conspicuous and so grotesque a portion of the writings of the Lecky, the famous historian, speaks of "these fierce invectives which form

A Roman wife is described as a "babe, a minor, a ward, a person incapable of doing or acting anything according to her own individual taste, a person continually under the tutelage and guardianship of her husband."^{xxxviii} The Encyclopedia Britannica characterizes the legal status of woman in the Roman society as follows:^{xxxix}

In Roman Law a woman was even in historic times completely dependent. If married, she and her property passes into the property of her husband...the wife was the purchased property of her husband and like a slave, acquired only for his benefit. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office....could not be a witness, surety, tutor, or curator; she could not adopt or be adopted, or make will or contract.

In Scandinavian societies, women was described as being "Under the perpetual tutelage, whether married or unmarried. As late as the Code of Christian V, at the end of the 17th century, it was enacted that if a woman married without the consent of her tutor he might have, if he wished, administration and usufruct of her goods during her life."^{xi}

According to the English Common Law:

All real property which a wife held at the time of a marriage became a possession of her husband. He was entitled to the rent from the land and to any profit which might be made from operating the estate during the joint life of the spouses. As time passed, the English courts devised means to forbid a husband's transferring real property without the consent of his wife, but he still retained the right to manage it and to receive the money which it produced. As to a wife's personal property, the husband's power was complete. He had the right to spend it as he saw fit.^{xii}

The position of European woman did not start to witness any improvement until the late nineteenth century. Badawi presents the steps that were taken in the late nineteenth century to redress some of these inequities: "By a series of acts starting with the Married Women's Property Act in 1870, amended in 1882 and 1887, married women achieved the right to own property and to enter contracts on a par with spinsters, widows, and divorcees."^{xliii} Mace and Vera also quote John Stewart Mill's article entitled "The Subjugation of Women." Mill writes:

Women are wholly under the rule of men, having no share at all in public concerns, and each in private being under the legal obligation of obedience to the man with whom she has

associated her destiny. They are brought up from the earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is not government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women to make complete abnegation of themselves. We are continually told that civilization and Christianity have restored to the woman her just rights. Meanwhile the wife is the actual bondservant of her husband; no less so, as far as the legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly called. She vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar, and is held to it all through her life by law. She can do no act whatever but by his permission, at least tacit. She can acquire no property but for him; the instant it becomes hers, even if by inheritance, it becomes *ipso facto* his. In this respect, the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the law of many countries. What is her position in regard to the children in whom she and her master have a joint interest? They are by law *his* children. He alone has any legal rights over them. Not one act can she do toward or in relation to them, except by delegation from him. Even after he is dead she is not their legal guardian, unless he by will has made her so. He could even send them away from her, and deprive her of the means of seeing them or corresponding with them, until this power was in some degree restricted. This is her legal state. If she leaves her husband, she can take nothing with her neither her children nor anything which is rightfully her own. If he chooses, he can compel her to return, by law, or by physical force; or he may content himself with seizing for his own use anything which she may earn, or which may be given to her by her relatives. The sufferings, immoralities, evils of all sorts, produced in innumerable cases by the subjection of individual women to individual men, are far too terrible to be overlooked. The law of servitude in marriage is a monstrous contradiction of all the principles of the modern world. It is the sole case, now that Negro slavery has been abolished, in which a human being in the plenitude of every faculty is delivered up to the tender mercies of another human being. Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house. The moral regeneration of mankind will only really commence, when the most fundamental of the social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice.^{xviii}

Badawi cites a number of Biblical decrees which show the less-than-equal

treatment accorded to women. Of particular interest here is the Mosaic Law regarding the rules guiding the betrothal of woman. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "To betroth a wife to oneself simply to acquire possession of her by payment of the purchase money; the betrothed is a girl for whom the purchase money has been paid." With respect to the woman's consent to the marriage, the Encyclopedia Britannica further adds: "The girl's consent is unnecessary and the need for it is nowhere suggested in the Law."^{xlii}

With respect to divorce, the Encyclopedia Britannica adds: "The woman being man's property, his right to divorce her follows as a matter of course."^{xli} "In the Mosaic Law, divorce was a privilege of the husband only."^{xlii} As a result of the efforts of John Stuart Mill and other advocates of equality between men and women, England passed in 1882 the "Married Woman's Property Act," which allowed wives to have exclusive ownership of their own personal estate. On two small islands in the remote South Pacific the greatest blow of all was struck. The echo of it rang around the globe. It was a turning point in human history. In 1893, New Zealand gave women the right to vote. After this initial break-through, citadels began to topple. But not until grimly fought battles had been fought. Australia in 1902, Finland in 1907, Norway in 1913, Iceland in 1914, Denmark in 1915, the U.S.S.R. in 1917. Still the leading countries of the West held out. In England the struggle was long and bitter, with Mrs. Sylvia Pankhurst the acknowledged leader. The final victory was thus recorded in the diary of a clergyman's wife: "Tuesday, June 19th, 1917. Managed to get into Ladies' Gallery at House of Commons. Suffrage clause in Reform Bill passed by majority of 330. Only 55 against."^{xliii} Sursum Corda."

In the United States, it was Susan B. Anthony who had led the attack. She did not live to see the victory won. She died in 1906. But her soul went marching on and in 1920 the Nineteenth (Woman Suffrage) Amendment was passed. Long before, in 1869, the very year when John Stuart Mill was writing his essay, the Territory of Wyoming had given women the vote, twenty-four years before any nation in the world did so. In 1868 Wyoming had been established as a territory with a temporary government. In 1869 the first Territorial Legislature granted women the right of suffrage in its first session. During the second session, an attempt was made to repeal this law, but without success. The Hon. John W. Kingman, of the Wyoming Supreme court, declared: "At our first election, before women voted, we had a perfect pandemonium. At the next election, women voted and perfect order and has prevailed ever since. In caucous discussions, the presence of a few ladies is worth more than a whole squad of police."^{xliii}

The Status of Woman in Islam: A Historical Perspective

As early as the seventh century A.D., when woman was denied the most basic human rights in others religions and cultures, Islam proclaimed its message to mankind and began its emancipation of woman, thus preceding other religions by full twelve centuries. At the time when woman was treated in the most egregious manner in other religions before and during the middle ages, Islam was already recognizing woman's inalienable rights to equality and dignity. Woman, who was equated with property that could be bought and sold in other religions, was accorded a status equal to that of man with full rights of ownership of property, self-determination and independence.

For a thorough assessment of the extent of Islam's empowerment of woman, it is necessary to examine the status of woman in pre-Islamic Arabia, an era known as 'jahiliyya' (age of ignorance). This examination will show that woman in pre-Islamic Arabia was not better off than that in other religions:

Right of Inheritance:

In pre-Islamic Arabia, woman was denied the right of inheritance which was exclusively granted to man. Hence, the deceased was only inherited by his male successors, sons, fathers, paternal or maternal uncles. In the meantime, a woman a deceased person left behind, i.e. a wife, a daughter, etc., would join the women of the heir who would treat her as he would treat his own females.

Divorce and polygamy:

The pre-Islamic wife was not entitled to any rights against her husband, nor was there any limit on the number of times a man could divorce his wife or the number of additional wives he could take. Furthermore, the oldest son might inherit his father's other wives. Should the son desire to marry his father's other wife, he could do so by casting his garment on her, otherwise, she could marry someone else. In addition to the father's other wives, this rule was also applied to the wives of brothers or children. ¹¹ Marrying the wives of one's father was common in pre-Islamic Arabia. ¹² Islam, however, strictly prohibited this type of marriage, thus "And Marry not women whom your fathers married, -Except what is past: It was shameful and odious, -An abominable custom indeed."¹³ There were some abominable practices such as when several men have intercourse with one woman and, should she become pregnant, grant her the right to choose a father for her child from among the men who had intercourse with her.

Another abominable practice was when a man allowed his wife to have intercourse with another man known for his intelligence. courage or hospitality so that the offspring of this illicit relationship would inherit the traits of the other man.^{lv} The pre-Islamic Arabs also practiced fornication with prostitutes, or with female lovers, engaged in temporary marriage which was prohibited by Islamic law. They also engaged in wife-swapping whereby two men would exchange wives.^{lv}

Burying Female Infants Alive:

Some pre-Islamic Arabs considered female infants an economic burden that they could not bear. Furthermore, prostitution was a common practice.^{lvi} They also were concerned with the possible disgrace a female might bring to the family honor and hence resorted to the abominable practice of burying their female infants alive. Even in the case the father decided to let the female infant live, he did so reluctantly and did not accord her the type of attention reserved for male infants. Some scholars believe that burying female infants alive was not practiced by all pre-Islamic Arabs and that it was only a small minority that practiced it. As evidence to this view, they give the example of the chief tribes of Mecca and the surrounding areas who did not practice this awful crime.^{lvii} The Holy Qur'an has denounced this terrible crime, thus: "Even so, in the eyes of most of the Pagans, their "partners" made alluring the slaughter of their children, in order to lead them to their own destruction, and cause confusion in their religion. If Allah had willed, they would not have done so: But leave alone them and what they have forged."^{lviii} Some pre-Islamic Arabs practiced the killing of both male and female infants for economic reasons. Again, the Holy Qur'an has denounced this heinous practice, thus: "Kill not your children for fear of want: We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily the killing of them was a great sin."^{lix}

Discrimination against woman in pre-Islamic Arabia extended to certain foods which were forbidden to women such as milk and the meat of cattle. The Holy Qur'an denounced this type of discrimination, thus: "They say: What is in the womb of such and such cattle is specially reserved (for food) for our men, and forbidden to our women; but if it is still born, then all have shares therein. For their false attribution (of superstition) to Allah, He will soon punish them. He is full of wisdom and knowledge."^{lx}

Honoring of Woman by Islam:

As seen from the Qur'anic verses cited above, Islam denounced the abominable practices in pre-Islamic Arabia and the types of discrimination they directed against woman. Islam declared in the most unequivocal terms

Woman's right to inheritance was among the most fundamental rights that Islam acknowledged, thus: "From what is left by parents and

Right of Inheritance and Exclusive Control over Dowry:

Since its inception in the earlier part of the seventh century A.D., Islam has recognized a woman's right to have full control over her assets, to engage in business, to be signatory to all types of business and financial contracts such as the sale or purchase of all types of assets. This also includes her right to appoint agents over her assets, to rent and manage property and to handle her own private assets as she pleased. No restrictions were placed on a woman's right to handle her property whatsoever. If any restrictions were imposed by the laws of the country upon the handling of assets, such restrictions applied to both man and woman. Affirming this equality between them, the Qur'an states: "To men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn. But ask Allah of His bounty for Allah hath full knowledge of all things."^{ixiv}

Equality in Civil Responsibility, Business and Contractual Obligations:

The same equality between man and woman in the affairs of life which Islam decrees also extends to her as a human being, to her faith obligations, her entitlement to rewards in the hereafter and to high ranks in paradise. Equality of man and woman as human beings is explicitly stated in the Quran, thus: "O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you. But Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted with all things."^{kv} Furthermore, the Qur'an views the creation of woman as a great blessing which man ought to appreciate and thank Allah for. The Qur'an says: "and among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect."^{kvii}

that woman is equal to man and has the same rights and obligations man has nothing that such obligations must take notice of woman's nature and constitution. The Qur'an emphasizes this point, thus: "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree over them, and Allah is exalted in power."^{kviii} This "degree" which the Qur'an says man has over woman represents the extra obligations man has towards woman such as the obligation to protect and provide for woman, but must not be used as the basis for any discrimination against woman as Western scholarship erroneously claims.

those nearest related there is a share for men and a share for women, whether the property be small or large, a determinate share.^{lxv} Similarly, woman was given full control over the dowry she would receive from her would-be husband. Such dowry is decreed as woman's full right, and that she, and no one else, is entitled to handle it except as she pleases.

Equality Before the Law:

Just as woman was given the same rights as man with regard to ownership of assets and engagement in business and other financial transactions, woman is also equally responsible before the law and subject to the same accountability as man, thus: "As to the thief, Male or Female, cut off his or her hands, a retribution for their deed and exemplary punishment from Allah, and Allah is exalted in power and full of wisdom."^{lxvi} This type of retribution applies to all types of offenses including punishment for such crimes as murder. The Qur'an is quite specific in this regard: "O ye who believe! The law of equality is prescribed to you in cases of murder: The free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman."^{lxvii}

Equality in Reward or Retribution in the Afterlife:

The equal treatment of both man and woman in Islam was comprehensive in that it covered not only all matters related to aspects of life on earth, but also to the question of reward and punishment in the afterlife. Any human being, whether male or female, will be subject to the rules of reward and punishment in the afterlife for his/her deeds in this life. The Qur'an states:

Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will We give a life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions."^{lxviii} The same theme is reiterated with more detail in another verse: "He that works evil will not be requited but by the like thereof: and he that works a righteous deed, whether man or woman, and is a believer - such will enter the Garden (of bliss): therein will they have abundance without measure."^{lxix} This emphasis on the equal treatment of men and women in the afterlife, as important as it is, is reiterated in a host of verses throughout the Qur'an, hence: "If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, they will enter Heaven and not the least injustice will be done to them."^{lxx} Also: "Allah has promised to believers, Men and women, Gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in Gardens of everlasting stay. But the greatest bliss

is the good pleasure of Allah, that is the supreme triumph."^{ixxi}

Absolving Woman from the Responsibility for Adam's First Mistake:

As mentioned earlier, other religions have placed the blame for Adam's first sin on woman exclusively. In another demonstration of justice, the Qur'an states that the responsibility for the first sin was not Eve's alone, but was one for which both Adam and Eve shared the responsibility.^{lxxxii} Hence, the Qur'an affirms: "And We said: "O Adam! Dwell and thy wife in the Garden and eat of the bountiful things therein as ye will; but approach not this tree, or ye run into harm and transgression. Then did Satan make them slip from the Garden, and get them out of the state of felicity in which they had been. And We said: "Get ye down, all with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling place and your means of livelihood for a time." In one particular verse, Adam alone was blamed: " Thus did Adam disobey his Lord, and fell into error."^{lxxxiii}

In addition to eliminating the injustices inflicted upon woman in pre-Islamic time (jahiliyya), Islam opened the door to woman, especially in modern time, to play an active role in society, to make whatever contributions she is capable of and to avail herself of the many opportunities that are available in society in such fields as education, employment, and business, among others. From its inception, Islam has never placed any restrictions on woman's right to education or employment. If any of such restrictions existed, it was a result of social pressures on a segment of society (woman), but not as a result of any religious pressures. Any objective examination of woman's participation in today's Muslim society will show that woman makes significant contributions in the fields of education, law, medicine, academia, among others.

In the political arena, Muslim woman has played important roles and, at times, had leading positions in her community. In recent history, Muslim woman holds positions as heads of state in four Muslim countries, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Turkey, a record that has yet to be matched by Western women.

There is no doubt that Islam was centuries ahead of other religions in according woman the opportunity to be educated and in underscoring the importance of education. There is no Qur'anic verse, hadith or sunnah of the Prophet that prohibits woman from education. In fact, there is an abundance of Qur'anic verses and Prophet's hadiths that urge Muslims, both men and women, to seek education. Indeed, the first Qur'anic verse revealed to the Prophet calls on him to read, thus: " read in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, who created man out of a leech-like clot."^{lxxxiv} The

Qur'an confirms that the Prophet Muhammad was sent as the messenger. the illiterate, to mankind to recite to them the words of Allah and teach them the Book and the wisdom, hence: "It is He who has sent amongst the unlettered a messenger from among themselves to rehearse to them His signs, to purify them, and to instruct them in the Book and wisdom, although they had been before in manifest error."^{lxxxv} In the view of some interpreters of the Qur'an, the term "Book" in this verse refers to the art of writing which shares the same root (ktb) with the verb "write."^{lxxxvi} The Prophet consistently urged his companions to learn to read and write as required in the Qur'anic verse dealing with "debt" (dayn) which enjoins Muslims to write down any debt they give out or receive, thus: "O ye who believe! When you deal with each other in transactions involving future obligations in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties: Let not the scribe refuse to write: As Allah has taught him, so let him write."^{lxxxvii}

Learning to read and write was pursued by both man and woman. As history books tell, there were learned women who were among those whom the Prophet entrusted with the task of teaching other Muslim men and women how to read and write. There were also literary figures and poets among women. These learned women taught their daughters and maids how to read and write. The Qur'an and the Sunnah contain many references to the importance of learning, especially in the eyes of Allah, and how the learned are at a rank higher than that of the illiterate, thus: "Say: are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?"^{lxxxviii} Allah, may He be exalted, gives testimony on those standing firm on justice including Himself, the angels and those endowed with knowledge, hence: "There is no God but He that is the witness of Allah, His angels, and those endowed with knowledge, standing firm on justice."^{lxxxix}

Woman's right to work is another area in which Islam preceded other religions. The Qur'an has many stories about women who were engaged in work from the earliest times. We read in the Qur'an the story of the two daughters of the Prophet Shu'aib who worked as shepheresses when they met Prophet Moses, hence: "And when he (Moses) arrived at the watering place in Madyan, he found there a group of men watering their flocks and besides them he found two women who were keeping back their flocks."^{lxxx} The significance of this story is that the Qur'an demonstrates the worthiness of work especially when this is done by the daughters of one of the prophets. The Qur'an also mentions the queen of Sheba who later on embraced Islam at the hands of Prophet Solomon and ran the affairs of the state.

In addition to tending sheep and cattle, woman was also involved in

agriculture. Among the hadiths narrated about Prophet Muhammad is one that tells the story of a woman who complained to the Prophet that she wanted to cut the dates from a palm tree during her prescribed period of waiting ('idda) following her divorce but was reprimanded by a man from her tribe. The Prophet told her "go ahead and cut the dates from your palm tree for this may enable you to give to charity (sadaqa) or do a good deed."^{lxxxix}

There is abundance of evidence showing how woman in early Islam also practiced nursing and took part in wars where she tended the wounded. These examples demonstrate the independence of woman in early Islam, her sense of pride and thorough understanding of the true teachings of Islam. As is well-documented, A'isha, the Prophet's widow was considered by scholars one of the greatest narrators and interpreters of the Hadiths of the Prophet himself following his death.

Early Muslims acknowledged woman's independence and abilities and treated her with respect. Woman played a visible role in society, was seen in public and was not confined to her quarters as it was the case in some other religions as previously indicated. Man did not feel awkward about uttering woman's names or talking about her. The practice of treating woman's names as some form of taboo is a later development in Muslim societies which did not exist in early Islam. It is known that the Prophet was in the habit of calling some of his companions by their mothers' names, hence the son of Umm Maktoum, Suhail ibn al-Bayda, .. etc. Additionally, men talked about some physical characteristics of women in early Islam without any awkwardness, hence, the Prophet's wife Sawda bint zam'a was described as tall and strong-bodied.^{lxxxiii} These examples show that Islam treats woman as a full citizen, with free will, independence and equality with man. This means that she has control over her possessions which she disposes of as she pleases independently of man, as when she gives charity or when she goes out to work on the land she owns. History books tell the story of Maymouna, one of the Prophet's wives, who set her female slave free without the knowledge of the Prophet, as well as the story of Umm Salim Bint Milhan who gave the Prophet a present on his wedding-day; the present was offered in her name not in her husband's name. Her husband did not object to his wife's conduct, nor did anyone in town criticize Umm Salim's conduct or consider it disparaging to her husband. Instructing her son (Anas) to carry her present to the Prophet, she said "Anas, take this to the Prophet of Allah and tell him that your mother sent this to you, give him my blessings and tell him that this present of ours is too little for him, the Prophet of Allah." There is also the story of Asma' Bint 'umays who stood on her own and in the absence of her husband conversing with Umar Bin al-Khattab and with the Prophet.^{lxxxiiii}

Equally significant is the account history books present about 'Aisha Bint Zayd's wife of Umar Ibn al-Khattab, the second of the four orthodox caliphs. Umar's wife, 'Aisha, was adamant about performing congregational prayers (salat al jama'a) in the mosque despite her husband's displeasure with that. When Umar's son informed her of Umar's displeasure with her going to the mosque for congregational prayers, her response was: "If he is displeased with that, why did he not ask me not to do it?" His response was that the reason Umar did not prevent her from doing that was a Prophet's hadith which said: "Do not prevent Muslim women from attending Allah's mosques." This story and others demonstrate the level of discipline and commitment early Muslims had. They also show how insistent early Muslim women were on abiding by the laws of the religion and on protecting the rights the religion accorded to them. They were as keen on following the Sunnah of the Prophet as they were on fulfilling the obligations set by Allah's rules.

It may be important to mention here the fact that many Muslim women preceded their fathers and husbands in embracing Islam. Examples of this point can be found in history books, such as that of Umm Habiba, daughter of Abu Sufyan, who preceded her father who remained an infidel until just before the conquest of Makkah. The fact that many Muslim women preceded their fathers and husbands in embracing Islam provides evidence of the independence of those women and of their interest in playing a role in public life, including the political life at that time. The story of Umm Shurayk, a woman from Quraysh, who embraced Islam in the early days of the religion when Muslims were still a weak and vulnerable minority in Makkah. As history books relate, following her adoption of Islam, Umm Shurayk used to visit the clubs of Makkah urging other Makkah women to embrace Islam. When the infidels of Makkah knew of her actions on behalf of Islam, they confronted her and told her the only reason keeping them from punishing her was the place of her tribe.^[xxxiv]

Another aspect of Muslim woman's involvement in public life was her pledge of allegiance "bay'a" to the Prophet which had to be done in public and in front of witnesses. This is another demonstration of the independence of early Muslim woman who acted as independently as man did in declaring her Islam and allegiance to the Prophet, thus affirming her equality to man. She also participated in meetings and celebrations the Prophet held, whether in the mosque or elsewhere. History books also mention that women requested the Prophet to set aside one day for them to meet with him and present their questions to him, which the Prophet granted to them.^[xxxv]

The meetings early Muslims held to declare their allegiance (bay'a) was a form of political conference of the type that is common today. History books report that women were present in those political conferences (bay'a). Two of these conferences are known as the bay'a of al-'Aqaba and the bay'a of Radwan. Early Muslim women participated in these two conferences, considered to be among the most important political conferences in Islamic history. The annual pilgrimage (hajj) is perhaps the largest Islamic conference, one during which woman stands side by side with man to perform this very important Islamic ritual.

Examples abound of early Muslim women's participation in public and political life from the earliest days in Islam. Examples of women standing up in public meeting and presenting questions to the ruler or Caliph are too many to count. In fact, the Prophet used to urge Muslim women to attend all meetings whether in the mosque or elsewhere.

Early Muslim woman was forthcoming in expressing her opinions and giving advice whenever she deemed it appropriate. Umm Salama, the Prophet's wife, gave advice to the Prophet regarding the peace treaty of Hudaibiyya, an advice which was sound and which the Prophet accepted. Umm Salama set an example for other Muslim women in stepping forward and giving their opinion. Muslim woman, like Muslim man, is required to play a role in securing the welfare of her community and participating in its political life. Such participation may be in the form of the advice that must be offered to those in charge of the community, so that they uphold justice, enjoy what is good and forbid what is evil, which is the backbone of ruling in Islam. The Holy Qur'an addresses this point, "The believers, men and women, are protectors of one another; they enjoy what is good and forbid what is evil." ^{lxxxvi} Here the Qur'an has placed the responsibility of upholding justice, of enjoying what is good and forbidding what is evil on the shoulders of both men and women. It is important to point out here that early Muslim woman thoroughly understood this responsibility and never faltered in living up to it. When the Prophet invited women to come to the mosque, they did not show any hesitation. Rashid Rida emphasizes this point when he explains that giving advice is an essential part of faith meaning that a believer's faith and religion cannot be complete unless that believer, be it a man or a woman, is forthcoming in giving advice to other Muslims when he or she deems it necessary. Referring to verse 71 of Chapter 9 of the Qur'an, Rashid Rida stresses that this obligation is on all Muslims, males and females, and covers both verbal and written advice. It also covers criticizing rulers, kings, ^{lxxxvii} princes, and caliphs which is exactly what earlier Muslim women did.

Based on the information cited in the history books, it can rightfully

be concluded that Islamic law (shari'a) recognizes Muslim women's right to give their opinion and not to be excluded from the decision making process which the Prophet himself did when he listened to his wives and other Muslim women and adopted the opinions they gave once he realized the soundness of their views. This process may be compared to what is known in our time as 'elections' which in turn means that woman has the right to cast her vote as it is called these days. Since there is no Islamic law or ruling prohibiting woman from casting her vote, it can then be concluded that woman has this right. What is interesting here is that Muslim woman has actually been practicing this right since the earliest days of Islam. Like man, woman has practiced "bay'a" (declaration of allegiance to the ruler) which is comparable to what is nowadays referred to as the right to delegate whomsoever they choose to represent them in parliaments or national assemblies. This point leads Mustafa El-Siba'i to pose this question: "If women have the right to elect representatives, then is there any laws that prohibit them from being elected representatives themselves?"^{xxxxviii} Clearly, the answer to El-Siba'i's question is that there are no laws denying woman this right.

Parliamentary representation comprises two fundamental processes, legislation and watching over the executive authority or government. With respect to legislation, there is no law in Islam banning woman from legislation as the prophet's wives and other learned Muslim women were involved in this process from the earliest days of Islam. Islamic law requires the legislator to have profound knowledge of religion as well as of the Muslim community and its needs, but the law does not require the legislator to be a man. This fact was known from the inception of Islam which explains why so many Muslim women, especially the Prophet's wives, took upon themselves this very important task. Needless to say, both the Qur'an and the Hadith underscore the significance of knowledge for Muslims in general, be they men or women.

The other part of parliamentary representation, that is watching over governments, involves nothing other than the implementation of the teachings of the Qur'an, thus: "The believers, men and women, are protectors of one another; they enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil."^{xxxxix} In other words, the responsibility of "enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil" is one that the Qur'an requires of every Muslim man or woman without exception. It then goes without saying that this responsibility falls even more heavily on the shoulders of those elected representatives.

Abdallah Bin 'Ubayd Allah has narrated that "when 'Uthman's^{xc} daughter died, Ibn 'Abbas, Ibn 'Umar and I came to attend her funeral. As

Ibn 'Ubayd sat between Ibn 'Abbas and Ibn 'Umar, he heard Ibn 'Umar tell 'Amru Bin 'Uthman, the brother of the deceased to ask the women to stop weeping and he recited the Prophet's Hadith that weeping brings torture to the deceased." Following the death of Ibn 'Umar, Bin 'Ubayd Allah then mentioned to 'Aisha the Hadith Ibn 'Umar had told 'Amru Ibn 'Uthman: Aisha then denied that the Prophet had said that Hadith in the form that was narrated. She then went on to give the correct form of the Hadith which is: "Allah increases the infidel's torture when his family weep over him."^{xc1} This story has significant implications in that it shows how Aisha, the Prophet's wife, was knowledgeable on the Hadith's which the Prophet said. It also demonstrates that woman was forthcoming in matters related to religion and that she had no hesitation in stepping forward to correct any inaccuracies she might have heard.

Yet, Islamic laws remain the subject of misunderstanding and distortion in the West. Two examples stand out vividly, namely the Islamic laws on polygamy and inheritance. In the West, misconceptions are still reiterated that Islam allows polygamy without any restrictions and that it discriminates between males and females in matters of inheritance. In fact, as Zaki Abdallah emphasizes, "polygamy is allowed in Islam only as an exception."^{xc1} Abdallah goes on to remind us that only one verse in the Qur'an speaks of polygamy and that such verse "does not enjoy polygamy."^{xc1} Furthermore, the Qur'an sets some strict conditions on the right to practice polygamy. Among those conditions are the existence of "orphans to be cared for by an uncle or relative" and the ability of the man to "do justice to his wives", among others. In the final analysis, "monogamy is without doubt the right form of life under normal conditions."^{xc1}

With respect to Islamic laws on inheritance, there is the distortion that Islam discriminates against woman in inheritance. However, a careful consideration of Islamic laws on inheritance would show that the greater share Islam awards to man in inheritance is balanced by the multiple financial responsibilities a man is required to shoulder towards the female members of his family such as his mother, sisters, and other female relatives. In the meantime, woman is not required to have any type of financial responsibility whatsoever. Weighing man's financial responsibilities against the larger share of inheritance given to him, it would appear entirely equitable that man is awarded a greater share. Yet, this distinction between the shares of males and females (sisters and brothers) within one family does not apply to males and females outside the nuclear family. For example, the daughter of a deceased person will inherit more than the brother or uncle of that person. In his study on "Woman's Inheritance and the Question of Equality," Salah Iddien Sultan has shown

that there are numerous cases in which woman inherits while man does not, cases in which a woman's share is equal to that of the man, and cases in which a woman's share is greater than that of a man.^{xcv}

Conclusion:

A careful examination of the status of woman throughout history will show that Islam, from its inception, was ahead of other religions in acknowledging woman's rights and equal status to man. As was previously mentioned, the Greeks treated woman as inferior to man, hence she was under her father's control as a girl, under her husband's control as a wife, and then under her son's control as a widow. Under these circumstances,

man, be it a father, husband, or son, had the right to dispose of her or hand her over to another man before his death. Woman was looked upon as evil and often blamed for the misfortunes that befall society. Furthermore, woman was denied the right to participate in any form of public life as she was exclusively confined to the house, to fulfilling man's wishes and the bearing of children. The Romans, on their part, treated woman as incapable both physically and mentally and hence had to be placed under the full control and guardianship of men. Thus a woman was a tool of temptation that the devil used to achieve his goals of making man commit sins. Because they considered woman a mere means for man to gratify himself, the Romans sanctioned prostitution, indeed encouraged it. They even allowed men and women to practice prostitution in temples.^{xcv}

Indians treated woman as nothing more than a slave to man; she could not exercise any free will or decision making without man's permission. Since the first creation, Indian legends have assigned an inferior status to the woman. She is the symbol of temptation, the source of all the evils that befall men. She is capable of misleading not only the foolish among men, but also the most wise and sagacious. Accordingly, woman was to be treated with the utmost suspicion and circumsppection and was to be treated as harshly as possible.^{xcvii} Hindu woman was not given the right of ownership until 1956.

In the Christian and Jewish traditions, woman was not better off than in the Indian tradition. Hence, woman was blamed for Adam's first sin. Socrates, the great sage of Greek philosophy, describes woman as "the source of all evil; her love is to be dreaded more than the hatred of men; the poor young men who seek women in matrimony are like fish who go out to meet the hook."^{xcviii} The Jewish tradition gives us the Creation story that identifies Eve, the first woman, as the cause of man's fall from grace. In

that tradition, we also find the blessing in the Morning Prayer—"Blessed art Thou, O lord .. Who has not made me a gentile... a slave... a woman."^{xcix} The early Church writings are no less harsh towards woman. Lecky, the famous historian, speaks of "these fierce invectives which form so conspicuous and so grotesque a portion of the writings of the Fathers... woman was represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought that she is a woman. She should live in continual penance on account of the curses she has brought upon the world. She should be ashamed of her dress, for it is the memorial of her fall. She should be especially ashamed of her beauty, for it is the most potent instrument of the devil."

The Encyclopedia Britannica characterizes the legal status of woman in the Roman society as follows:

"In Roman Law a woman was even in historic times completely dependent. If married, she and her property passes into the property of her husband... the wife was the purchased property of her husband and, like a slave, acquired only for his benefit. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office... could not be a witness, surety, tutor or curator; she could not adopt or be adopted, or make will or contract"

According to the English Common Law: "All real property which a wife held at the time of a marriage became a possession of her husband. He was entitled to the rent from the land and to any profit which might be made from operating the estate during the joint life of the spouses. As time passed, the English courts devised means to forbid a husband's transferring real property without the consent of his wife, but he still retained the right to manage it and to receive the money which it produced. As to a wife's personal property, the husband's power was complete. He had the right to spend it as he saw fit." (Encyclopaedia Americana)

The position of European woman did not start to witness any improvement until the late nineteenth century. As stated above, "By a series of acts starting with the Married Women's Property Act in 1870, amended in 1882 and 1887, married women achieved the right to own property and to enter contracts on a par with spinsters, widows, and divorcees." (Badawi)

Contrary to other religions and cultures, Islam acknowledged woman's right to equality and dignity as early as the 7th century A.D. when it was first revealed. Accordingly, Islam abolished all the abominable violations of woman's rights that were practiced during the pre-Islamic era known as 'Jahiliyya' (age of ignorance). It recognized woman's right to

own property more than twelve centuries ahead of other religions. It also acknowledged woman's right to engage in business, to play an active role in public life and to participate fully in the political process. Since the earliest days of Islam woman has been at the forefront side-by-side with man, in battlefields, in political meetings, in the declaration of public allegiance 'bay'a' to the ruler. Her voice was heard and, as history shows, there have been poetesses, female authors, rulers, scholars and interpreters of the Qur'an and Hadith. Islam has also lifted the burden of guilt which other religions placed on woman due to the expulsion of both Adam and Eve from Heaven. Whereas other religions hold Eve alone accountable for this great sin, Islam has approached this matter with the utmost fairness and magnanimity declaring that the responsibility was a joint one to be shouldered by both Adam and Eve. In fact, some Qur'anic verses speak of Adam alone as the one solely accountable for the expulsion from Heaven.

In the meantime, Islam recognized woman's own nature and has therefore sought to accord her the respect and decency she deserves by decreeing that man has a 'degree above woman' by which is meant the added responsibility man has towards woman to provide for her and protect her dignity. This 'degree' that Islam granted man over woman does not in any manner take away from the full equality that woman has with man in the eyes of Islam, equality in rights and duties. Thus, woman has the same rights and obligations of man before Allah, in the afterlife, in the performance of religious rituals, in the accountability with respect to matters of reward and punishment on the Day of Judgment. This equality in rights and duties could not have been complete without giving woman the right to have total control on her assets, to dispose of them as she pleases. This right of control over her assets extends to the wealth a woman has when she is married, for while a woman may decide to share in the household expenditure, her sharing remains fully optional. The full responsibility, financially and otherwise, for the household falls entirely on man's shoulders. In the words of Abdallah in his pivotal study on Islam, "Islam places women on par with men with regard to all human rights, but Islam holds man responsible for protecting her physically and supporting her financially. In this sense only man occupies a position higher than that of woman, Allah Almighty says:"

Despite the superiority Islamic laws have enjoyed throughout history over other religions with respect to the status of woman, it cannot be denied that the past three centuries witnessed an erosion of the civil society in the lands of Islam. Such erosion negatively affected issues of human rights and equality in Muslim societies including those related to the status of woman. We have seen Muslim societies that do not appear to function well in that

the citizens in those societies feel left out and alienated, which in turn creates a state of apathy in those citizens. Such apathy stems from the inequalities and inequities the great masses in those societies suffer at the hands of a privileged few who enriched themselves at the expense of the great majority of the population who constituted the working classes. To these inequities may be added the existence of corrupt and repressive political systems which lack a democratic political process based on free elections and fair representation.

Searching for explanations for the deterioration in civil liberties Muslim societies have experienced in the past three centuries, one can easily see two reasons: First, the penetration of Muslim societies by Western imperialist powers in the 19th and 20th centuries and the persistent efforts by these colonial powers to incorporate the Muslim societies into the European capitalist system. Second, the emergence of bourgeois and elitist groups who were willing to act as agents of the western powers at the expense of the citizens of their own countries, a process which left them extremely wealthy and the great majority of the population extremely impoverished. These elitist groups manipulated the political process to their advantage, giving rise to corrupt political systems based on nepotism and favoritism. With the creation by Western powers of several nation-states in the area and the growing dependency of such states on the West, Muslim societies have grown even weaker and more vulnerable.

Clearly, looking at Islamic history, we can safely conclude that the current weakness, dependency and vulnerability of Muslim societies referred to above, the erosion of civil liberties and human rights in those societies may be traced to the sociopolitical factors mentioned above and to Western hegemony over Muslim societies. It certainly cannot be attributed to religious factors. The history of early Muslim societies provides testimony to the superiority of Islamic teachings and laws which set a unique example in equal treatment of men and women as early back as the 7th century A.D. The rights and privileges which Islam accorded Muslim women at that time were unknown to women in other religions and continued to be denied to them for many centuries.

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End Notes

- i 3. The term 'Amazons' refers to a race of female warriors of Greek mythology. (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Edition, 2003)
- ii 4. In 60-61 A.D. Queen Boadicea of Britain (then named Anglia) defeated the Romans who occupied her country and destroyed the capital of Roman Britain. (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 14th Edition, 1999).
- iii 5. Mace, David and Vera, op. cit., p. 66.
- iv 6. Mace, David and Vera op. cit., p. 67.
- v 7. Ibid., p. 67.
- vi 8. Ibid., p. 67.
- vii 9. Ibid., p. 67.
- viii 10. Lang, Olga. "Chinese Family and Society," p. 44.
- ix 11. Takaiishi, Shingoro. "Introduction to Kaibara Ekken, Greater Learning for Women," p. 15.
- x 12. According to Hindu mythology, Manu is the progenitor of the human race and the giver of the religious laws known as the Laws of Manu.
- xi 13. Mace, op. cit., p. 69.
- xii 14. Macnicol, Margaret (ed). "Poems By Indian Women," p. 71.
- xiii 15. Mace, op. cit., p. 74.
- xiv 16. The term 'Purdah' refers to a screen, curtain or veil used in India for hiding women from the sight of men or strangers. The term also refers to the seclusion of women. (Webster's New World Dictionary, op. cit.)
- xv 17. Hauswirth, Frieda. "Purdah: The Status of Indian Women," p. 66, 94.
- xvi 18. Mace, Op. cit., p. 75.
- xvii 19. Bryson, Mary I. "Home Life in China," pp 100-3.
- xviii 20. Yu-tang, Lin. "Moment in Peking," p. 46.
- xix 21. Buboys, J. A. "Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies," p. 210.

xx 22. Mace, op. cit., p. 77

xxi 23. Wain, Nora. "The House of Exile," p. 12.

xxiii 24 The term 'Brahmins' refers to a Hindu of the highest caste traditionally assigned to the priesthood.

xxviii 25. Hauswirth, op. cit., p. 147.

xxiv 26 Takasishi, Shingoro, op. cit., p. 12.

xxv 27. Cressy, E. H. "Daughters of Changing Japan," p. 77.

xxvi 28. Faust, Allen K. "The New Japanese Womanhood," p. 21.

xxvii 29 Lang, op. cit., p. 54.

xxviii 30. Won-Yong, Kang. "A Study of the Family System in Korea," p. 35a

xxix 31 Thompson, P. A. "Lotus Land," p. 69.

xxx 32. Mace, op. cit., p. 80.

xxxi 33. Charles, R. H., The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English, Vol. 1, p. 170.

xxxii 34. Lecky, W. E. H. "History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne," Vol. 2, Ch. 5.

xxxiii 35. Tertullian, c.160-225 A.D., a prolific early Christian author from Carthage in the Roman Province of Africa. He has been called the father of Latin Christianity. (Webster's New World, op. cit.)

xxxiv 36 Lecky, op. cit., Ch.5.

xxxv 37. Ibid., Ch.5.

xxxvi 38. Maine, Henry. "Ancient Law," p. 170-71.

xxxvii 39. Allier, E. A., History of Civilization, Vol. 3, p. 444.

xxxviii 40. Ibid., p. 550.

xxxix 41. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th Ed., 1911, Vol. 28, p. 782.

xl 42. Ibid., p. 783.

- xii 43. The Encyclopaedia Americana (International Edition), Vol. 29, p. 28.
- xiii 44. Badawi, Gamal A. "Islam, Its Meaning and Message," p. 133.
- xiiii 45. Mace, op. cit., p. 82.
- xliv 46. Badawi, op. cit., p. 134.
- xlv 47. Encyclopaedia Biblica, op. cit., p. 2947.
- xvii 48. Encyclopaedia Britannica, op. cit., p. 782.
- xviii 49. Vera Britten, *Lady Into Women*, p. 41.
- xviii 50. The Phrase "Serum Corda" is from Latin and it means "lift up your hearts," the opening words of the Preface of the Mass (Christian prayer).
- xlix 51. Mace, op. cit., p. 85.
- i 52. By the "father's wives" here is meant wives the father took in addition to the son's mother.
- ii 53. Tafseer al-Tabari, 3rd edition 1388 H, Vol. 4, p. 307\.
- iii 54. As mentioned earlier, this refers to wives other than the son's mother.
- iiii 55. The Holy Qur'an, Ch. 4, V. 22.
- liv 56. This abominable type of marriage was referred to as "Nikah al-Istibda'."
- lv 57. Ash-Shukani, "Nayl al-Awtar," Vol. 5, p. 2.
- vi 58. Abdallah, Zaki. "Islam from a Contemporary Perspective," p. 200.
- vii 59. al-Muqaddim, M. A. Ismail. "al-Mar'a Bayna takreem al-Islam wa ihanat al-Jahiliyya," 2005, p. 63.
- viii 60. The Holy Qur'an, Ch. 6, V. 137.
- lix 61. Ibid., Ch. 17, V. 31.
- lx 62. Ibid., Ch. 6, V. 139.
- lxi 63. Ibid., Ch. 2, V. 228.

