

Reframing the contemporary Women's Economic Struggle through the Lens of Prophetic Interaction

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Abstract

This article explores women's economic struggle and empowerment during the Prophetic era, within the framework and boundaries of Islamic teachings. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) consistently supported women in their efforts to secure rightful social and economic status, advocating for their empowerment in accordance with divine guidance. While contemporary women may appear more economically empowered—often influenced by Western ideologies—this empowerment frequently aligns more with secular constructs of gender equality than with Islamic principles. In many cases, it grants women rights designed for men, rather than rights tailored to their distinct needs and identity as women. This divergence has led to widespread misconceptions about Islam's position on women's economic rights. The socio-cultural landscape of Pakistani society, heavily shaped by Indo-Pak patriarchal norms and Western influences, further distances people from authentic Islamic teachings on this matter. This article seeks to clarify these misunderstandings by examining the Prophet's practical implementation of women's economic rights. It highlights how the Quran and Sunnah establish a balanced model for women's participation in the economy, rooted in justice, dignity, and spiritual values. The study also addresses the practical limitations, benefits, and boundaries of this model within a contemporary context.

Keywords: Women's economic rights, Prophetic era, western culture, patriarchal

WOMEN ECONOMIC STRUGGLE IN PROPHETIC ERA:

The prophetic era is the best example of women's free and full participation in different economic professions of that time, including entrepreneurship, business, marketing, education, teaching, writing, laboring, medicine, farming agriculture, etc. Women were involved in earning their livelihood by working with men in the prophetic era, Dr Mazhar Siddiqui quotes this:

“Women of that time are found buying various commodities from men traders and whole sellers and vice versa. Various men traders have been recorded to have their businesses with women traders based on Mudaraba (partnership), leasing, and joint venture even to accept to be their marketing agents. It is also evidently recorded that they, men and women, have been doing work shoulder to shoulder in agriculture and livestock to increase the Gross domestic production (GDP).¹

There were many examples of working women in the prophetic time period which proved the active and positive participation of women in economic activities, along with their domestic liabilities.

Hz Khadijah was considered the skilled entrepreneur/businesswoman of the prophetic era. This is mentioned in detail in Tabaqat of ibn Sa'ad as follows: 'Khadijah al-Kubra was an honorable, noble, and wealthy businessperson. She used to export her commodities to Syria. Her Caravan of camels loaded with her commodities equal to that of the caravan of camels of the whole Quraysh tribe. She hired men for her trade. She used to invest her capital with others and shared the equal profit agreed upon.²

It proves that in the Prophetic era, Women were actively engaged in the trade and worked with men in buying, selling, and trading different trading products at that time.

Women were not only involved in business and dealings but also played an important role in teaching and education. The Holy Prophet PBUH asked Shifa b. Abdullah RA to teach Hafsa RA supplication (Du'a) for the disease of Namlah (Eczema) as she has also taught her writing.³ Hazrat Ayesha RA was considered as one of the best Mentors and Teacher of her time. Hazrat Ayesha RA narrated 2210 traditions. She was famous for her intellect and had a very keen interest in education. Hazrat Umme Salma was also famous for her narrations. Around three hundred Sahabah and

Tab'een have narrated several traditions from her. Umm-e-Salamah RA has been considered by the scholars among the Legal experts. Ibn al-Qayyim wrote that if her Fatawas were collected, a book may be produced. Around one hundred Sahabah and Tabi'een have narrated traditions from her.⁴

Some Sahabiat were also skilled medics, In the battle of the Trench, when Sa'ad RA was injured by the arrow, the Holy Prophet PBUH said he should be sent to the tent of Rufaidah RA so that I could visit him from nearby. Whenever the Holy Prophet PBUH passed by her tent, He inquired about the health of Sa'ad RA. O Sa'ad! How is your morning and evening? And then Sa'ad reported about his health.⁵ Hazrat Anas RA narrates that in the battles, Umm-e-Sulaym RA and other women from Ansar used to accompany the Holy Prophet PBUH, and they bring water during war dress the wounded, and give medicine to the sick.⁶ Umm-e-Atiyyah RA narrates that I accompanied the Holy Prophet PBUH in seven battles, I prepared food for Mujahidin, dressed the wounded, and prescribed for the patients.⁷ These Ahadith are proof of women's participation in different social, educational, and economic activities in the Prophetic era.

Agriculture was not the common profession of Makka people, but it was the profession of Madinah, where Ansari women were also working with their men in the cultivation and cutting of crops, and vegetables, and looked after the livestock. Maulana Waheed Uddin mentioned the economic activities of the women of that time: 'In the life of the city of Madinah, such type of events is in great number. At that time, the women had not only been doing work inside their homes but also doing most of the work outside of their homes. The obvious reason for this is that men, most of the time, have been engaged in jihad and preaching of Islam and they could not spare time to take up household responsibilities. Therefore, the women of that time have been taking care of their homes, agriculture, and livestock too'.⁸

Narrated by Jabir bin Abdullah RA that his aunt was divorced, and she wanted to take care of her date palms. When it came to notice, someone criticized her (due to going out of her home during Iddah). She went to the Holy Prophet PBUH and told the story. The Holy Prophet PBUH said: why not? You may go and take care of your date palms. It is certainly possible that you spend in the way of God or do any other good deed out of the income of those date palms.⁹

Zainab RA, the wife of Abdullah bin Mas'ood RA was an expert in handicrafts and through this, she used to manage the expenses of not only her children but also her husband. One day, she came to the Holy Prophet PBUH and requested: I am an expert in handicrafts and manufacture handicraft items and then sell them. My son and husband have nothing to do a business. It is me who spends upon them and due to spending on them I cannot spend on poor and less privileged people as a sadaqah, I want to ask whether or not I will be rewarded for spending on my son and husband. The Holy Prophet PBUH replied: why not? Whatever you spend on them you certainly will be rewarded.¹⁰

All above mentioned Hadith proved the participation of women in economic activities, within the prescribed framework and boundaries, and they can play their role in the development and progress of their families and be productive members of the society also. Although Islam has not made economic activity, mandatory for women but has given them permission to participate in all economic activities.

Women's economic statistics nowadays:

In Pakistan, SDG-5 Goals affirmed gender empowerment and equality as a major task. Ensuring this, numerous initiatives have been taken at the governmental level, also many new laws have been introduced to protect women's rights. But still, the elimination of gender-based violence requires determined efforts for implementation.

Statics in Pakistan: Labor force, female (% of the total labor force) in Pakistan was reported at 23.31 % in 2022, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially recognized sources. Pakistan - Labor force, female - actual values, historical data, forecasts, and projections were sourced from the World Bank in November of 2023.¹¹

Out of 44.9% Total civilian labor force, 10.54% are females. 9.6% of females are employed while 0.94% of females are unemployed.¹²

Education level: According to the 2017 census literacy ratio, 46.5% of females are literate with 15 years of education.¹³

Contemporary Challenging Tasks against Islam:

Pakistani working women face numerous challenges in society as compared to male workers. There is no proper compensation for their efforts, also their rights are not fulfilled legally. It becomes harder for them to manage job responsibilities, workplace pressures, balance family life and job liabilities, etc. In Pakistan, women are given fewer facilities and opportunities for better jobs as compared to their male counterparts.

The study of Western feminism is based on the fact that women can get their rights if they work like a man, they consider women equivalent to men but only when they fulfill the industrial and economic responsibilities. This means

the West accepts the rights of women if they act like a man, the household women are considered as the extra burden of society having no appropriate rights and incentives.

Islam has given an appropriate status to women, clearly mentioning their rights and duties, and specifying them as an individual not depending on their male counterparts. Islam provides the rights of women as a daughter, sisters, and wives on an individual basis, and they are equivalent to men in society.

The 21st century brought the industrial and economic revolution with a threat to marketing and profit. Now everything is for sale, and with good marketing skills as a service, women are used as a marketing brand, now there is a display of women everywhere selling goods with its service of body and beauty.

Islam made women stay in the house, safe and protected from the impacts of bad views and abusive behaviors. They are considered as the queen of their houses with the authority of their household parameters. Islam never appreciated women as a marketing brand or her body or beauty would be used for selling or buying goods. Feminism originated from Western culture, which is famed for women's rights but also has not completely adopted the theory of equal pay for both genders per study by Working Women Magazine reported that although women's salaries in the United States are starting to catch up with men's in recent years, still women earn 5 to 15 cents less on the dollar than men working in a similar job.

The women are compensated with a low pay scale with respect to their male counterparts. Especially in Asian countries working women are getting low pay scales and their salaries and benefits are comparatively lower than the male persons. According to research” In many Asian countries like Pakistan working women are still suffering from market discrimination. Their social status, value, place, and society are still being compressed by underpaid, overworked, and low job status.¹⁴

Islamic teachings clearly define women's rights, especially their economic independence and empowerment. Women were given rights in the Quran to contribute to the economy by owning and selling property 1400 years ago.

Verse 4:32 emphasizes the equality of men and women in the economic growth of a society.

Translation: Men shall have a benefit from what they earn, and women shall have a benefit from what they earn. (Surah Al Nisa 4:32)

This is a very important verse regarding gender equality. It gives the right of earning to women but also it provides the theory of “equal pay for equal work for both men and women”. This means that work done by men or women should be compensated regardless of their gender. If women would receive lesser compensation than men, it would be considered as the exploitation of women's rights in Islamic teachings.

Due to the Indo-Pak history, Pakistani Muslim families are influenced by Hindu Patriarchal culture and norms. Generally, Muslim women are deprived of their basic economic rights of owning and selling their properties. They are not allowed to spend their own money they earn. They have been discriminated against on a gender basis, and sometimes be exploited on their own earnings and belongings.

Islam has given women all rights like men, proving no discrimination among genders. It not only supports women the right to earn and become financially independent but also provides them resources to get financially strong with the right of inheritance from their close relatives.

Translation: Men shall have a portion of what the parents and the near relatives leave, and women shall have a portion of what the parents and the near relatives leave, whether there is little or much of it; a stated portion.](An-Nisaa' 4:7)

In Islamic law, women have an absolute right to own property, sell or rent property, and make use of it by their own will. This is a right that cannot be challenged after marriage. She is not bound to consult anyone or forced by any close relative as well.

One of the main challenging tasks by women is harassment, as they are considered to be an easy target by males, who harass them with inappropriate comments, staring, making fun of them, or might cross their limits in the form of sexual harassment. Usually, women remain silent and patiently ignoring the issue for the sake of their respect and job protection. They are hesitant to complain about the culprits as they do not have proper support. Although there are strict laws and punishments for such culprits in Pakistan. However, women are not encouraged to report such complaints. Sometimes women are victimized or they switch to another job where they might have suffered the same problem.

In Pakistan, due to unawareness of rights and legal issues working women are forced to do illegitimate tasks, and for the sake of job protection, women are more sensitive to job switching so they are forcefully continuing their jobs. Many

researches reveal that working women are Consistent with SOS theory and other previous conceptualizations; teachers have a set of illegitimate task experiences in two ways; unreasonable and unnecessary tasks.¹⁵

Islam has given women a very respectable status in society, where they are protected and safe in a modest environment. Working Women either married or unmarried of different age groups face numerous stereotypical challenges at the workplace which cause stress, depression, and lack of confidence and are more susceptible to being harassed psychologically which leaves them unable to maintain the balance between work and family life with job security issues.¹⁶

Nowadays women's economic activities are directly related to the fashion industry and brand inspiration. Working women are deeply indulged in fashion, makeup, and brands. It's a symbol of working women showing off their branded dresses, shoes, and other accessories, spending a big amount on such spoiling materials they are part of an unlimited race of fashion, makeup, dresses, shoes, and other things. Islam condemns such activities and bounds a woman to some limitations of Satr and hijab.

Islam has given women the responsibility of housekeeping and bringing up children. Their duties are mainly encircled the house where it is free from earning and other outdoor liabilities and only concerning the house chores and children. Allah has made this system to less burden a woman so that she is free to nurture their children without any extra load of earnings and outdoor activities. If women are honestly fulfilling their indoor duties, they might not get extra time for outdoor tasks. Although Islam has not made economic activity mandatory for women, women are allowed to perform outdoor tasks and adopt any occupation that would be feasible for them along with the dual responsibility of the family. Women's first priority would be their family and children because their role as working women can be done by other women, but their role as a mother is irreplaceable. No one can perform the duties of a mother. The role of a mother is inimitable for their children. Ignoring children because of the job is the worst mistake of a mother because mothers are not only responsible for the upbringing of children but also in charge of the character building of their children. Avoiding this responsibility will pay off in later time for the children with lots of lacking and disorders in their personalities.

For some time, it has been observed that working women are avoiding the birth of children, not exceeding the number of children from one or two to be lesser responsible and answerable for mother duties.

It is against the nature of Islam that family planning would be done by resourceful individuals. Educated women will better bring up their children with good moral values and qualities. If these women would nurture their children, they would be productive individuals in Muslim society. But they only do the job unless it is an emergency or their participation is mandatory. There is no legal provision in either the Qur'an or the Sunnah, which prohibits women from seeking jobs. However, the most significant role for a woman is that of motherhood and household management; if there is a conflict between this and a career, Islam says motherhood should take precedence because of its importance to society and the family system.

It is required that women are treated and nursed by women and that female children are educated by women teachers at primary and advanced levels. Women are permitted to adopt the occupation like men. However, it is better for women to adopt professions wisely as per their dual responsibilities of family and children.

Suggestions:

Islam has given a complete framework of rights and duties to everyone which need to be followed properly. Women need to be aware of their rights and duties and must follow the rules and regulations of Islam.

Islam has given women a particular status where their rights are clear. They are not inferior to men or being discriminated against on a gender basis.

Women should have self-respect and should not let them down by adopting the ways of being a marketing brand, and a market product.

Women should be aware of the protection policies when they are out in the market for job purposes, they should be brought up with confidence and self-respect, not being an easy victim of harassment and bullying.

Women must know their responsibilities and liabilities towards their families and society. Their first priority would be family-centered, the upbringing of children, and character-building them is the responsibility of women.

The Government is responsible for eliminating gender discrimination stereotypes in society through proper planning and strategies.

Incentives and benefits would be enacted by governmental policies for women to support them with part-time employment, remote working, and flexible working hours. It allows women to reconcile working hours and family responsibilities in a managed and disciplined way.

The government must guarantee a safe and protected environment for working ladies by ensuring strict enforcement of harassment rules and regulations.

Conclusion:

Islam has a very clear and authentic concept regarding the status of women in the society. Quran and Hadith also proved witness to the fact that the role of women is vital in society like men. She is not considered inferior to men but has the same rights as men. Usually, women have the responsibility of housekeeping and upbringing of children within the family paradigm, but they are allowed and free to participate in economic activities like business, agriculture, and industries and adopt other productive occupations. She can earn money and own property just as men can do and therefore, she may, if she feels the need, follow any profession. Islam binds women to some restrictions and obligations when she involved in economic activities. These boundaries are for the sake of women's protection and benefits. Unfortunately, contemporary feminism and women's rights are based on rules and regulations derived from the West, which are somehow in contrast to Islamic teachings. The West has given rights to women when they are involved in activities like men. The West made women a marketing brand, everything is sold and bought on the basis of women's bodies and beauty. It makes women a product that needs to be polished with brands and showing off. Now the working women are forcibly adopting the ways of Tabbarujul Jahilliyah. Under the flag of the West, family life, morals, and ethics are not been important to women but materialism is ruling everywhere. Without family support, women are easy victims of harassment and bullying and being involved in such activities which are becoming a burden to women. Contemporary Muslim women must follow Islamic teachings, find the right path, and be aware of their rights and duties to prosper in this world and the life hereafter.

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