

# WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ISLAM



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## CHAPTER 16

# WOMAN AND EMPLOYMENT

### I - VERSES OF THE QUR'AN

Though earning of sustenance for the family is basically the duty of man, yet Islam does not prohibit a woman to engage in any employment, business, profession or vocation, to earn or contribute in the income of the family in case of need. Following verses of the Holy Qur'an are ordinarily quoted to support woman's participation in this field:-

1. And in no wise covet those things in which Allah hath bestowed His gifts more freely on some of you than on others: 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. (4 : 32)
2. And when he 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): He said: "What is the matter with you?" they said: "We cannot water (our flocks) until the shepherds take back (their flocks): And our father is a very old man," (28 : 23)
3. That man can have nothing but what he strives for; that (the fruit of) his striving will soon come in sight; then will he be rewarded with a reward complete; (53 : 39-41)

### II - AHADITH OF THE HOLY PROPHET

The Traditions of the Prophet (PBUH) of Islam on the subject are quoted below:-

1. Jaber reported: My maternal aunt was divorced thrice. She then intended to get fruits of her palm trees. A man threatened her for her coming out. She came to the Prophet

who said: Yes, take your fruits of palm trees. It is perhaps you will make gift or do some good act. (Muslim)

2. Umme Atiyyah reported, "I accompanied the Prophet of God in seven battles. I remained in the rear for their luggages, prepared food for them, nursed the wounded and attended the sick." (Muslim)

### III - WOMEN'S RIGHT TO EARN INCOME

Earning of livelihood for the family is basically a duty of the man. Islamic society makes the man responsible for providing bread and butter for his wife and children and meeting their expenses. However, there may arise situations where the women have also to work for earning livelihood. So the Qur'an does not debar them from working. This right of earning income through lawful (*Halal*) means is granted to a woman by the Revealed Book when it says: "...to men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn"-(4: 32). Earning signifies the reward of good deeds in the next world as well as earning of provision for the family in this world.

The incident referred to by the Qur'an in verse 23 of chapter 28, according to most of the Commentators, pertains to the daughters of Hadrat Shoaib,<sup>1</sup> one of whom later became the wife of Prophet Moses. Hadrat Shoaib was an old man and could not look after his flock of sheep. His young daughters tended the sheep and worked for grazing and watering the flock. Prophet Moses, one day reached Madyan and found there some men watering their sheep when two women were holding back. He offered his services and watered their sheep. After-wards, he was employed by their father with the condition that he would be married with one of the girls in consideration of his services. From this incident reported by the Qur'an, some scholars infer that women can engage in the earning of bread for the family under economic compulsions.

1. In Tafsir Ibn Kathir, there is a lengthy discussion about the old man of Madyan. Some scholars hold that he was Hadrat Shoaib, while others hold that he was some other pious old man.

According to some authentic Traditions of Prophet Muhammad (may Allah's peace be upon him), he permitted the women to earn for themselves and for their family. A Hadith quoted in *Sahih Muslim* states that the Prophet permitted a woman who had been divorced, to visit her garden and take her fruit. According to another Hadith reported by Umme Atiyyah, the Prophet allowed the women to render services in *Jihad* like preparing food, nursing the wounded etc. From this we can conclude that the women can adopt the profession of a nurse and of a doctor.

Hadrat Saudah, the wife of the Prophet (PBUH), was skilled in tanning the skins of the animals and used to make a considerable amount of earning from this vocation. Abdullah-b-Mas'ud was mostly engaged in religious work and had no time to earn for the family. So his wife used to work as artisan to earn livelihood for the family. When the Prophet came to know about it, he assured her reward for this in the hereafter.<sup>1</sup> Khaulah-b-Thalabah also used to meet the needs of her husband who was a poor man and earned nothing and she told this thing to the Prophet.<sup>2</sup>

A lady named Qailah was a trader and bought and sold goods. Once she met the Prophet and asked him some questions about trade. It is also narrated about Asma-b-Makhramah that she received perfumes from her son in Yemen and sold them.<sup>3</sup>

There are many such incidents reported in the books of history which establish that the women used to work in the days of the Prophet to support their families and the Prophet never objected to their such engagements. From such incidents we cannot resist the conclusion that the Muslim women can engage themselves in lawful professions to earn income for supporting their families in case of need provided they

1. (Tabaqat Ibn Sa'ad quoted by Encyclopaedia of Seerah).  
2. (Tabaqat Ibn Sa'ad quoted by Encyclopaedia of Seerah).  
3. (Tabaqat Ibn Sa'ad quoted by Encyclopaedia of Seerah).

comply with the instructions of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* regarding modesty.

#### IV - VIEWS OF THE EMINENT SCHOLARS

1. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* says: "Islam does not restrict the economic activity of women; what it restricts are those factors which might encourage or incite the spread of obscenity in society. If women take proper care of these things and observe *Shari'* instructions, they are not barred from engaging in any lawful activity outside their houses which is necessary for their livelihood, for *Allah's* Messenger explicitly permitted this in these words: "O women! You have been allowed by *Allah* to go out for your needs." (*Bukhari*)
2. Dr. Hamidullah writes: "In every epoch of Islamic history, including the time of the Prophet, one sees Muslim women engaged in every profession that suited them. They worked as nurses, teachers, and even as combatants by the side of men when necessary, in addition to being singers, hair-dressers, etc. Caliph 'Umar employed a lady, Shifa' bint 'Abdallah, as inspector in the market at the capital (Madinah), as Ibn Hajar (*Isabah*) records. The same lady had taught Hafsa, wife of the Prophet, how to write and read. The jurists admit the possibility of women being appointed as judges of tribunals, and there are several examples of the kind. In brief, far from becoming a parasite, a woman could collaborate with men, in Muslim society, to earn her livelihood and to develop her talents." (*Introduction to Islam*)
3. Justice Aftab Hussain, in his book "Status of the women in Islam" writes: "Careerism among women is not hobby. The object of some in choosing a career is to make themselves useful to the society. For them money is a secondary consideration. For others there are economic compulsions. The uneducated widows or deserted wives generally earn money by sewing and needle work but literate women avail of their talents in finding many vocations for living honourably. During this age of inflations and unpredictable rise in the costs of living many an educated women assist their husbands,

parents, brothers and sisters by putting to use their talents for earning honest money, to make the two ends meet. And then the question is why they should not turn out to be useful members of the *Ummah* or society. One thing which is common among these ladies is that with few exceptions, in fact much fewer than males, they entertain considerable love and reverence for Islam, the Prophet (PBUH) and the saints. They are generally chaste and guard their modesty. No scandal is attached to them. They marry, have children but persevere in their careers."