

# International Women's Day: The 1400-Year Journey of Women's Empowerment in Islam

The rights of women in Islam, as introduced by Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), were revolutionary and transformative for their time, particularly in a society where women had little to no rights. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) is often celebrated for promoting gender equality and empowering women within a framework of respect, dignity, and spiritual equality. His teachings marked a significant departure from pre-Islamic practices, where women were treated as property or subjected to severe discrimination.

Below is a detailed exploration of the rights of women as initiated by Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W):

## 1. The Status of Women Before Islam

Before the advent of Islam, women were largely viewed as inferior to men in many societies, especially in pre-Islamic Arabia (Jahiliyyah). In this period:

- **Women were treated as property:** In many cases, they could be inherited or exchanged as part of a man's estate.
- **Infanticide of daughters:** Female infants were sometimes buried alive due to the belief that daughters were a source of shame or dishonor. This practice was prevalent in some Arab tribes, particularly in the desert regions.
- **Limited rights in marriage:** Women had little say in their marriage decisions, and they were often married off without their consent. Women had few if any legal rights in marriage and divorce.

## 2. The Initial Revelation and the Prophet's Early Teachings

The advent of Islam, through the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), brought about an immediate transformation in the status of women. The Quran, which was revealed to the Prophet (S.A.W), presented numerous verses that recognized the inherent dignity and equality of women. Prophet Muhammad's (S.A.W) teachings aimed to eliminate the abuse, discrimination, and exploitation of women and to ensure their rights and dignity.

### Key Teachings:

- **Spiritual Equality:** One of the first and most important rights that Islam granted women was spiritual equality. The Quran clearly states that men and women have equal potential to attain closeness to God through faith and good deeds. For example, in Surah Al-Ahzab (33:35), Allah states:

*"Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their chastity and the women who do the same, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so – for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward."*

This verse affirms that both men and women are spiritually equal and have the same capacity to earn reward in the hereafter.

- **Respect for Women's Honor and Dignity:** Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) spoke highly of women's dignity and respect. He emphasized that men and women are both integral to society and should be treated with kindness and respect. He stated:

*"The best of you are those who are the best to their wives."* (Tirmidhi)

This hadith highlights the Prophet's (S.A.W) insistence on treating women with kindness and respect, especially in the context of marriage.

### 3. Marriage Rights and Protection

One of the most significant changes that Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) made to the treatment of women was in the area of marriage. In pre-Islamic Arabia, women were often treated as possessions in marriage, with no say in the matter. Muhammad (S.A.W) instituted several reforms:

- **Consent in Marriage:** Islam emphasized the necessity of a woman's consent before marriage. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) said:

*"A woman may not be married until she is consulted, and her consent is sought."* (Bukhari)

This was a radical departure from the pre-Islamic practice where women had no say in their marriage. Women were granted the right to choose their life partner and could refuse a marriage if they did not wish to marry the person chosen for them.

- **Mahr (Dowry):** Islam introduced the concept of *mahr* (dowry), a gift from the husband to the wife, which was her personal property. This was a direct right given to women that protected their financial independence. The mahr was not to be taken away by the husband and was considered a symbol of respect and a way to ensure the woman's security.
- **Rights in Divorce:** Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) allowed women to seek divorce in cases of mistreatment or irreconcilable differences. He introduced the practice of *khula*, where a woman could initiate divorce by returning her mahr. This provided a means of escape for women from abusive or unhappy marriages.

*“A woman may seek divorce if she feels she cannot fulfill the rights of her husband.” (Bukhari)*

#### 4. Economic Rights

In pre-Islamic Arabia, women had no financial autonomy. They were often dependent on men for their livelihood. The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) implemented several reforms to ensure that women had the right to own property and wealth.

- **Inheritance Rights:** One of the most significant changes was the introduction of inheritance rights for women. Prior to Islam, women were not entitled to inherit property, and their role was largely seen as caretakers without ownership. However, the Quran granted women the right to inherit from their parents, husbands, and relatives. In Surah An-Nisa (4:7), Allah says:

*“For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much – an obligatory share.”*

This verse established that women were entitled to inheritance, which was an important shift in the socio-economic structure of the time. While the share given to women was typically half of that given to men (as stated in Surah An-Nisa 4:11), this was still a revolutionary change from previous practices where women had no inheritance rights.

- **Property Ownership:** Islam granted women the right to own property independently of their male relatives. Women were able to buy, sell, and control their property without needing the consent of a husband or father. The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) himself set an example by allowing his wife Khadijah (R.A) to manage her wealth independently and conduct business.

#### 5. Education Rights

Islam, through the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), placed great emphasis on the education of both men and women. The Prophet (S.A.W) said:

*“Seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim.” (Ibn Majah)*

This hadith shows that seeking knowledge is not just a right but an obligation. Both men and women were encouraged to pursue knowledge, and the Prophet (S.A.W) actively supported women's education. Women like Aisha (R.A), the Prophet's wife, were known for their scholarly contributions and became sources of Islamic knowledge.

## 6. Rights to Personal Security and Protection

Before Islam, women had little or no protection from violence or abuse. Islam, through the teachings of the Prophet (S.A.W), emphasized the protection of women's physical and emotional well-being:

- **Protection from Abuse:** Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) condemned any form of abuse toward women. He said:

*“Do not beat the female servants of Allah.”* (Abu Dawood)

This hadith reflects the Prophet's (S.A.W) position on treating women with kindness and respect. He also provided a clear example of how men should interact with their wives—treating them with tenderness, respect, and fairness.

## 7. Social and Political Rights

The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) also granted women social and political rights:

- **Participation in Public Life:** Women were allowed to take part in public matters, including witnessing contracts and participating in discussions about the welfare of the community. The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) consulted women on various occasions, including in the political decisions of the nascent Muslim community.
- **The Right to Testify:** Women were also granted the right to testify in legal matters. This right was granted through the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet (S.A.W). However, the testimony of a woman was considered equal to that of a man in certain circumstances.

## 8. Prophet Muhammad's (S.A.W) Personal Example

The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) led by example. He treated his wives with utmost respect and kindness. He shared household responsibilities, showed affection, and offered support. His conduct towards women in his personal life set a powerful example for the Muslim community.

He was known to say:

*“The best of you are those who are the best to their wives.”* (Tirmidhi)

The rights of women as outlined by Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) were groundbreaking and remain a cornerstone of Islamic teachings. His approach revolutionized the status of women, elevating them from a position of subjugation to one of respect, dignity, and equality. While many of these rights were revolutionary at the time, they continue to be a guiding framework for gender equality in the Islamic world today. The teachings of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) not only gave women rights in the private sphere but also encouraged their active participation in the social, economic, and political spheres. His legacy has left an enduring impact on the status and rights of women in the Muslim world.