

Women's Work and Islam: The Right to Employment and Socioeconomic Participation



According to Islam, women—like men—have the right to work and earn a living. When women work, their families and their communities benefit, making it in the public interest for them to be gainfully employed. Throughout Islamic history, women have fulfilled their religious responsibility to contribute to economic, social, and political life as successful leaders and members of their communities.

Women's Gainful Employment is a Divine Right

"Islam has given women all fundamental rights such as business ownership, inheritance, education, work, choosing one's husband, security, health, and right to a good life."¹ These were the words of a chief Taliban negotiator in 2019 at a meeting with Afghan political leaders.

Women's rights have always been guaranteed in Islam; the right to gainful employment, the right to choose a profession, and the right to participate in the socioeconomic life of the community are among these rights. In the Islamic perspective, women are not required to work or provide for their families. They may, however, choose to work. If a woman earns any income or inherits any money, she is not obligated to spend her income on the household unless she chooses; her income is entirely hers and she can spend it in any way she likes.²

Women's right to work is well-established in the Holy Quran and is informed by Islamic principles such as *maqasid* (objectives of law), *masalih mursalah* (public good), and *adl* (justice). Preventing women from working is a form of discrimination and goes against these Islamic principles. Women's equality and rights are not only natural extensions of these principles, but are also explicit injunctions in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah.

Women's Economic Rights in the Holy Quran

In addition to verses on equality in general, the Holy Quran includes verses that recognize women's right to be gainfully employed, as in the following verse:

*"Never will I suffer to lose the work of any of you, be he/she male or female: you are members, one of another."*³

In Surah Nisa, the Holy Quran specifically declares a woman's economic rights, such as her rights of inheritance, earning, and engaging in economic activities outside of the home, and states:

*"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



The Holy Quran also discusses women's business. For example:

*"When he [Moses] arrived at the well of Midian, he found there a throng of people watering [their flocks], and he found, besides them, two women holding back [their flock]. He said, 'What is your business?' They said, 'We do not water [our flock] until the shepherds have driven out [their flocks], and our father is an aged man.'*⁵

The women whom Prophet Moses (a.s) meets in this verse had jobs as shepherds and they were the daughters of Prophet Shuaib (a.s). From this verse, it is clear that it was not unusual for women to have jobs and there is nothing in the Holy Quran that prevents women from being employed.

Sunnah Regarding Women's Employment

Sunnah and hadith also support the rights of women, including economic rights. In his famous sermon at the eve of the Farewell Pilgrimage in 632, Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ) specifically mentioned the mutual rights of men and women, using the word *haqq* (right) when he said:

*"O People! It is true that you have certain rights with regard to your **women** but they also have rights over you. ... Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers."*⁶

Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ) never prohibited women from working or having a career outside of their home. In fact, his beloved wife Khadija bint Khuwaylid was a successful businesswoman and employer of the Prophet (ﷺ) before they wed. She also financed him during the difficult times of his prophethood. She was known for her compassion and love of helping others, and she used her wealth to help the needy and the poor, thus contributing to the social welfare. Hadith tradition also recognizes that, while women are not required to work or spend their earnings and wealth on their families, if they do so, they will be rewarded accordingly.⁷

Zaynab bint Jahsh, another wife of Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ), also had her own work. She was particularly known for her leather work. She would skin the animals, gut them, dry them, and sew leather clothing. She sold her products at the bazaar and spent her earnings on helping the needy.⁸



Women's Socioeconomic and Political Participation as a Requirement of Maqasid and Masalih Mursalah

Women's socioeconomic and political participation is an important aspect of the *maqasid* and *masalih mursalah*, or public good. According to Islamic *fiqh*, one of the central purposes of Sharia (*maqasid al shariah*) is to promote the interest and welfare of the people (*maslaha*). Muslim jurists point out that the Holy Quran "promotes social responsibility and positive bonds between people because of their common ethical responsibility towards one another."⁹

The Holy Quran reminds Muslims that saving others from poverty and misery is a religious duty and urges Muslim men and women to improve their communal life, to support one another, and to combat poverty and all other social ills:

"Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that ye may receive admonition."¹⁰

This verse indicates an important purpose of Sharia, to do good works and pursue justice, and that every legal ruling must comply with the goals and aims of Islamic moral-ethical principles.

Socioeconomic Benefits of Women's Employment

Women's gainful employment and participation in socioeconomic life have important benefits to their families, communities, and the ummah and therefore contribute to *al-maslaha al-mursala*. Women make up half of the population in Afghanistan and play important roles in social progress and sustainable development of their societies. As mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, they also have significant roles in their families. As such, women's quality of life impacts the quality of life of their families and their communities. Following are some of the specific benefits of women's gainful employment and socioeconomic participation:



Supporting Their Families and Communities

- A woman's gainful employment can support and reduce poverty in her family. Studies show that when women work, they also help reduce poverty in their communities.
- For many women — including divorced and widowed women — working is not a choice but a matter of fulfilling their responsibilities toward their children and others. Especially in post-conflict communities like those in Afghanistan, where many women have lost their husbands due to decades of war, women must work to provide for their families.

Promoting Healthier and Happier Families

- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has found that women usually invest a higher proportion of their earnings in their families and communities than do men.
- When women have more control over resources, they invest in their families and the proportion of money spent on healthy food increases because women favor spending more money on nutritive and high-quality foods.¹¹

Strengthening the Economy and Alleviating Poverty

- In addition to increasing the number of people in the workforce and the national economy, women bring new skills and perspectives to the workplace and thereby make important contributions to the productivity and growth of their societies.
- Studies show that when women work, it helps businesses grow and become more effective, and it is estimated that companies with three or more women in senior management functions do better in all dimensions of organizational performance.¹²

Minimizing Foreign Dependency

- While foreign aid can have a positive economic impact on national and regional economies,¹³ dependency on aid can undermine national interests and autonomy.¹⁴ Economic development and alleviation of poverty are key requirements for reducing a country's foreign dependence which cannot be achieved without participation of both men and women in the economy.

Examples of Women Working in Islamic History

Muslim women, since the earliest days of Islam, have participated in the social and economic life of their communities. More than 300 Sunnah confirm full participation of women in social and economic activities during the time of the Prophet (ﷺ). Women participated in agriculture, owned farms, produced vegetables and fruits, and tended animals or grazed them for their owners; they traded goods and owned their own businesses. Khaula, Lakhmia, and Thaqafia traded perfumes, and the wife of Abdulla ibn Mas manufactured and sold handicrafts.¹⁵ The following are some examples of women's employment throughout Islamic history.

Women in Medicine and Health

Women have been active in the field of medicine since the time of the Prophet (ﷺ). Rufaida al-Aslania (b.620 AD) is arguably the first known female nurse and surgeon.¹⁶ She established mobile caravans to serve her community during war and peace times and was active in various community services to help the poor and needy and trained many of the Prophet's (ﷺ) companions in clinical skills.¹⁷ Another famous nurse during the time of the Prophet (ﷺ) was Al-Shifa bint Abdullah, whose real name was Layla and was given the name Al-Shifa ("the healer") because of her skills. She also was a public administrator and was granted responsibilities for public health and safety in Basra, Iraq.¹⁸ The tradition of female nurses and surgeons continued well into the 16th and 17th centuries, as the famous Turkish surgeon, Serefeddin Sabuncuoglu (1385-1468 AD), author of the manual of surgery *Kitabul Cerrahiye-i İlhanîye* illustrated.¹⁹

Women in Science and Technology

Muslim women, like Muslim men, have contributed to the fields of physics, engineering, mathematics, astronomy, and other sciences. Sutayta al-Mahamili was a tenth-century Muslim mathematician from Baghdad.²⁰ Her work in mathematics and inventing solutions to many equations has been praised by Ibn Kathir and was cited by mathematicians all over the world. Lubna of Córdoba was accomplished in many fields, including mathematics. Able to solve complex geometrical and algebraic problems, she was secretary to the Caliph of Córdoba, Al-Hakam II.

Today in many Muslim-majority countries, women advance their communities' knowledge, science, and technology. One example is the UAE: The chairperson of United Arab Emirates Space Agency (UAESA), the fifth space agency working to reach Mars, is a woman who also served as the Minister of State for Science.²¹ At UAESA, women make up 80% of the scientific team.²²

Women as Preachers, Religious Scholars, and Judges

Some argue that women cannot be Islamic scholars and leaders because men are superior to women in intellect. Both the Holy Quran and practices during the time of the Prophet (ﷺ) contradict this argument. In addition to many verses that point to equality in creation, piety, rewards, and excellence, the Holy Quran provides leadership examples of women such as Mary, who reached the highest level of human virtue and spiritual authority, and Queen of Sheba, who is praised for her excellent leadership qualities and wisdom.

Since the time of the Prophet (ﷺ), women have served as Islamic scholars and preachers. Umm Waraqah, for example, was instructed by the Prophet (ﷺ) to lead the men and women of her home and her village in prayer. She was also one of the few to hand down the Holy Quran before it was written. Hadith tells us that the Prophet (ﷺ) visited the residence of Ummi Waraqah, appointed a person to recite the adhan, and ordered her to lead her family in the prayer.²³ Based on this hadith, some *ulemas*, such as Imam Ibn Jarîr alThabarî Abu Tsaur, Imam Mazni Qâdhi Abu Tayyib, and al-'Abdar, are of the opinion that women may lead prayers.²⁴ Sayyida Nafisa, the great-granddaughter of the Prophet (ﷺ), who taught Islamic jurisprudence, tutored many students, including Abu Abdullah Muhammad al Shafi. Al Shafi founded the Shafi'i School of *Fiqh*, and when he was a student, Nafisa was his financial sponsor. Aisha bint Sa'ad bin Abi Waqqas, a jurist and scholar, taught Malik bin Anas bin Malik, founder of the Maliki School of *Fiqh*.

Many Islamic scholars recognize that there is neither a prohibition nor obstacles to women serving as judges. Some of the famous Muslim jurists in Islam argue that women have equal rights to those of men in the judiciary.

Sheikh Muhammed al-Ghazali (1917-1996) of Al-Azhar cited examples of women whose actions and policies led to the improvement of their countries and stated, "Welcome to any women who can do what men fail to do."²⁵ Al-Azhar scholar Yusuf Qaradawi (b.1926) concluded that, because there is no explicit text that prohibits women from carrying out either role, a woman can be a judge or a candidate for the presidency.²⁶ Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Muhammed Tantawi²⁷ and Mufti of Egypt Ahmad al Tayyib²⁸ also determined that there is no explicit statement in the Holy Quran nor the Sunnah that prevents a woman from becoming a judge. They invoked the principle of *maslaha* to conclude that appointment of women as judges serves the interest of the public and should be permitted.

Many Muslim countries have recognized that women can be judges. In Indonesia in the 1950s, the ministry of religious affairs determined that appointment of a female qadi (judge) did not constitute a threat and concluded that, due to lack of qualified qadis, it was permissible to appoint women to the position. In 1964, the first female qadis were appointed (primarily part-time) to the Sharia courts. In 2011, 15% of all judges in Indonesia were women. Women are also allowed to head Sharia courts in that country.²⁹

Women have been allowed to serve as judges in civil courts in Malaysia since the 1960s, but women were not allowed to serve in Sharia courts until more recently. In 2016, Malaysia made history when two women were appointed as Sharia high court judges. In 2019, Tengku Maimun Tuan Mat, an ethnic Muslim Malay woman, became the country's first female chief justice.³⁰

Sudan has allowed women *qadis* since the 1970s, and in 1987 four women held judicial positions.³¹ The first female chief judge of the Sharia courts was appointed there in 2019.³² Pakistan appointed the first women to the state's High Sharia Court in 2013.³³ Other Muslim countries that allow women judges include Syria, Libya, Pakistan, Tunisia, Indonesia, Morocco, and Egypt. In Turkey, women may become preachers.³⁴

Women as Warriors, Negotiators, and Peacemakers

Islamic history offers numerous examples of courageous Muslim women who fought in wars, stood up to the commanders of invading armies, mediated conflicts, and reconciled opponents. Women have participated in negotiations, advised the Prophet (ﷺ) and his companions, and participated in key decision making. Aisha, wife of Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ), led the battle of Camel and negotiated a peace treaty. In her role protecting the Prophet (ﷺ) during the Battle of Uhud, Nusaybah bint Ka'ab illustrated that women were allowed to fight for the good of their society. Ibn Qunfudh of Morocco recorded an incident in which one of the women he studied with, Lala Aziza of Seksawa, negotiated a peace deal and reconciled a conflict between two rival groups.³⁵

After the assassination of fourth Caliph Ali, 16 women traveled to the capital of the Muslim world, Damascus, to demand justice. Known as wafidat, or delegates, the women, who were present at the Battle of Siffin in 657, went to Caliph Mu'awiyah to demand their rights and exercise their freedoms.³⁶ Among them, Umm Sinān bt. Haytama approached the caliph to negotiate the release of her unjustly imprisoned grandson. Sawda bt. 'Amāra sought justice as a delegate for her community, pointing to the actions of her region's governor and asking for his dismissal. The caliph approved her request.

Women as Political Leaders and Public Servants

Women have served in political and leadership positions since the early years of Islam. The Holy Quran provides the example of Queen of Sheba, who was given authority and wisdom, and praises her for the consultative way she managed her own affairs and the affairs of her people.³⁷ The wife of Salahaddin's son, Dhayfa Khatun, was the regent of Syria (d.1242);³⁸ Razia Sultana ruled Delhi (d.1240); and Nana Asma'u was the poet princess of Nigeria (d.1864).³⁹ All of these Muslim women ruled successfully and justly.

In the contemporary era, many women have assumed leadership roles in the Muslim world. In 2019, based on careful examination of Islamic sources, Sheikh al-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, advocated for addressing

women's issues more broadly and said on Twitter, "Women represent half of society. If we don't care for them it's like walking on one foot only."⁴⁰ Muslim countries that have had women presidents or prime ministers include Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Senegal, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo, Mali, Northern Cyprus, Mauritius, and Singapore. The most recent addition to the list is Tanzania: Samia Suluhu became its first woman president on March 19, 2021.



Left to right:
Dr. Fawziya Abikar, Hanifa Mohamed Ibrahim, Tengku Maimun Tuan Mat

In 2018, a record number of women were elected in Bahrain, with a total of six women chosen as legislators on the Council of Representatives.⁴¹ Women also play an important role in political life in Somalia. In January 2021, the prime minister affirmed that 30% of seats in parliament would be reserved for women; as of March 2021, Somali women hold other national leadership positions: Dr. Fawziya Abikar heads the ministry of health and human services and Hanifa Mohamed Ibrahim leads the ministry of women and human rights development.⁴² UAE ranked number one in the female parliamentary representation index of the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook 2020. As the result of a 2019 directive to increase representation, half of the UAE's 40-member Federal National Council is now women.⁴³ Sheikha Manal bint Mohammed, president of the UAE Gender Balance Council, says, "Gender balance was among the principles on which the UAE was founded nearly five decades ago, stemming from the late Sheikh Zayed's belief that women are equal partners in achieving sustainable development."⁴⁴

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