

# Women's Rights: West vs. Islam

## ⇒ Introduction:

Human rights are the rights inherent to all human beings regardless of their age, race, ethnicity and gender. Among the most significant aspects of human rights is the recognition of women's rights, - not as secondary, but as essential part of universal human rights.

While Islam granted women all of their fundamental rights over 1400 years ago, it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that many western societies began to formally implement similar rights to women.

It was 8<sup>th</sup> century, when the world's first ever university was founded by a Muslim woman named Fatima al-Fihri, while there was no higher education institution for women in England until 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## ⇒ Women's rights in West:

### A long struggle:

For centuries, women in west were denied the very basic.

rights. These include right to education, right to vote, right to property and inheritance, right to equal pay, right to work, right to reproduction.

## 1. Right to Education:

By the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, around 80-100 universities were established in Europe and England. Virtually, all of these universities were exclusively for men. Women were not deemed & important for higher education.

It was thought that their role was just to bear children and take care of their husband's home. Virginia Woolf, a twentieth century England author was stopped from entering a public university just because she was a woman. Woolf describes this insulting expression regretfully in her book "A Room for one's own", published in 1929.

"But alas! A woman must have money and a room of one's own if she is to <sup>write</sup> fiction. Never will I forget my anger when the beadle bade me turn off the grass. Never will I forget the snub of being told that ladies are not admitted to the library of men's university."

: Virginia Woolf:  
A Room of one's own.

The above-mentioned event is central to the argument that women in West were not granted equal opportunities to education as men. However, a long struggle including Seneca Falls convention, 1848 and Feminist movements led to formal recognition of female right to education. keep the description of a single argument a bit brief.

## 2. Right to property.

Women in west got property rights very late in history. The long delay shows the gender inequality rooted deeply.

in Western societies. Women had no separate legal identity. They were either identified as daughters or wives. For instance, if a <sup>married</sup> woman has been granted property by her father, it will automatically go to her husband. By no means, a woman could possess it.

William Blackstone, a British lawyer and legal scholar, explained "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of women is suspended in marriage".

### ∴ Commentaries on Laws of England"

This implies the following.

- a. She could not own her property.
- b. She could not enter legal contracts.
- c. She could not sue for her rights.
- d. Her income or inheritance automatically belongs to her husband.

### 3. Right to professional recognition:

It was a very common practice for women in the Western countries to adopt male pen name. Female artist used to write under male names because the society considered them emotional, unintelligent, and weak. To name a few, Mary Ann Evans (pen name: George Eliot) and the Bronte sisters are writers who adopted male names.

In the same vein, women lacked recognition in scientific community as well. Despite being awarded two Nobel prizes in Science <sup>for</sup> which was met with scepticism, <sup>Marie Curie</sup> later mentioned

"In the field of Physics, women are still not recognized. It was almost as if woman in science was an anomaly."

∴ Marie Curie

# Professions denied to women in the West:

## 1. Law and Judiciary:

Women were not allowed to proceed legal cases as lawyer or judge until 19<sup>th</sup> century. Act of Sex Disqualification.

## 2. Medicine:

Midwifery, which was seen as inferior profession, was acceptable for women but studying or practicing medicine was out of the question.

## 3. Military roles.

Women had never been allowed to perform combat roles. In 2013, first woman was allowed in USA military.

## 4. Academia

Until 1920, the oldest university, Oxford, didn't award degrees nor allowed women a faculty position.

## 5. Public Office

#### 4. Right to equal pay:

Until mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, women had only two choices: either unpaid domestic labour or low paid service jobs.

As a result of 20 years of women struggle during the second wave of feminism (1960-1980s), women were granted equal right of pay under **Equal Pay act**, passed in **US (1963)** **UK (1970)**

#### 5. Reproductive Rights:

Reproductive rights have always been restricted to husbands. Women in western world had no autonomy to abort their child even if their lives were at stake. It was in 1970s that these rights were given in the US and UK.

## Women's rights in ISLAM:

### 1. Right to Life and protection from abuse:

Before the rise of Islam, women were abused both physically and emotionally. Newborn babygirls were buried alive. The motives were two fold:

a. Fear that increase in female population result in economic burden

b. Fear of humiliation resulting from their capture <sup>by</sup> an enemy tribe

Islam clearly rejects both these notions, and

According to a Sahih Muslim hadith

"Whoever raises two girls until they reach their adulthood, he and I will come together at the day of judgment like this, and he held his fingers close together"

(SAHIH Muslim: 2631)

Rights to life is enforced in  
Surah Al-Takwir in Quran.

The following verse shows the gravity  
of burying girls.

And when the girl who  
was buried alive is asked  
For what sin she was killed?

Surah AL-Takwir (8-9)

try to add the arabic of quranic ayats.

The verse shows that on the day of  
judgment, the murdered girl shall  
be given the voice to question her  
killer

## 2. Right to Education:

While western countries  
had no proper educational institutes  
for women until 18<sup>th</sup> century, in  
7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Islam made  
education a basic right of both genders.

Seeking knowledge is an  
obligation of both men  
and

"Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every muslim"

(Ibn-e-Majah-224)

muslim, here is gender neutral meaning it is for both men and women.

Prophet (P.B.U.H) personally taught women, and welcomed questions and discussions.

Some women said to the prophet Men have Taken all our time.

Appoint us a day so that we may come to learn from you separately. The prophet said aside a day and taught them.

∴ Sahih Bukhari 7310

The hadeeth proves that 6-7<sup>th</sup> CE

Islam was so progressive that there were exclusive sessions for women.

Hazrat Aisha (ra) stands as an evidence that Islam advocated

female education. Aisha (r.a) was a scholar and knowledgeable women. Even the companions of prophet would consult her on complex matters. She taught many ansaar women.

The women of ansaar are not ashamed to ask question on religious matters

∴ Sahih Muslim

Islam empowered women so much in education that world's oldest operating educational university. University of Al-Qadisiyah was founded by a Muslim women. Fatima - al-Fihri

too lengthy description.

### 3. Right to inheritance and property

#### a. Inheritance of daughters:

Sad bin Rabi (r.a) died in battle of Uhud, his wife came to prophet and said

O Messenger of Allah, the

the two daughters of Sad  
had not been given any  
inheritance by their uncle.

Prophet PBUH said:

Give the girls  $\frac{2}{3}$ , give  
the mother  $\frac{1}{8}$ , and  
give the rest to the  
uncle."

b. Right of sisters:

It was revealed in  
Surah Nisa to give share to sisters  
in inheritance.

If a man dies and leaves  
no parent and children, but  
has a sister, she gets  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  of what he leaves.

Share according to # of siblings

⇒ 1 Sister	2+ Sisters	Brothers + Sisters
↓	↓	↓
$\frac{1}{2}$ share	$\frac{2}{3}$ equally	Male gets twice of sisters

#### 4. Right to Professional recognition.

There are countless examples of muslim women who were appreciated by their counterparts in professional life.

##### (i) Khadija RA : a Businesswoman

In 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E., it was common for women to manage trades. Khadija RA, wife of prophet (PBUH) was known for her excellent business and leadership skills.

##### (ii) Shifa bint Abdullah : Market Inspector

Shifa bint Abdullah, a knowledgeable woman was appointed as market inspector by Caliph Umar (ra) to check on market regulations in Madinah.

##### (iii) Aisha RA : scholar and jurist:

Male companions like Abu Huraira and Uswa ibn Zubair consulted her on legal and religious matters.

## 5. Right to choose spouse

While forced marriages are still a common practice in western societies, Islam strictly prohibited it 1400 years ago.

Prophet declared forced and nonconsensual marriages as invalid.

A woman who has been previously married has more right to choose her counterpart than her guardian, and an unmarried woman must also be consulted.

:: Sahih Muslim

# Women's rights in Islam vs West:

## A comparative timeline

### ISLAM:

610 CE Women active participation in spreading/teaching Islam.

620 CE Women like Aisha RA became teachers and advisors

632 CE Inheritance rights granted to women (Surah Nisa).

7<sup>th</sup> C Prohibition of female infanticide and right to <sup>33:</sup>whale (Quran 35)

8<sup>th</sup> CE Women became founder of religious and higher education institutes (Fatima AL-Fihri).

Medieval era Muslim Women emerged as poets (i.e. Aisha al-Bauniyya)

# WEST: a prolonged struggle.

Late 1700s

Female.

Enlightenment thinkers.

raised voice for rights

i.e. Mary Wollstonecraft.

1848

✓ Seneca Falls: yet another struggle for basic rights for women.

1920s

women granted right to vote.

1973

✓ Feminism call for workplace and reproductive rights in Europe.

2010 -

2020s

Continued struggle for equal pay, representation in leadership.

end the answer with conclusion.

good attempt! but the answer is lengthy and will affect time management.