

WOMEN RIGHTS AND COMPARISON WITH ISLAM

1. Introduction

Before Islam, women in Arabia and much of the world were deprived of basic human dignity. They were considered inferior, treated as property, and in some cases buried alive at birth. Islam came as a revolution 1400 years ago, recognizing women as equal human beings, giving them rights in spiritual, social, economic, and political spheres. The Qur'an and Sunnah made women partners in faith and gave them a respected status in society, balancing equality with protection.

2. Rights in Islam

Islam, as a complete code of life, does not differentiate between men and women in granting fundamental human rights. The Qur'an and Sunnah ensure that women are given the same dignity, protection, and justice as men, while recognizing their natural roles in society. These fundamental rights serve as the foundation for women's social, economic, spiritual, and political participation in Islam.

2.1 Basic Fundamental Rights in Islam

a. Right to Life

In pre-Islamic Arabia, daughters were considered a burden and many were buried alive at birth. Islam strictly prohibited this cruel practice.

The Qur'an commands: *"Do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We provide for them and for you."* (Qur'an 17:31).

By giving the right to life, Islam recognized women as equal human beings whose lives are sacred.

Example: When a man asked the Prophet P.B.U.H which sin was the greatest, he replied: *"To kill your child for fear he may eat with you."* (Bukhari, Muslim).

b. Equality of All Mankind

- Islam declares all humans equal regardless of gender, race, or class. The only standard is taqwa (piety).
- *"Indeed, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you."* (Qur'an 49:13).
- This means women are not inferior to men in humanity or spiritual worth.

- Example: Women like Aisha (RA) and Fatimah (RA) are honored in Islamic history for their knowledge and character, showing equality in dignity and respect.

c. Freedom of Religion

- Islam forbids forcing anyone — including women — into religion.
- *“There is no compulsion in religion...”* (Qur’an 2:256).
- Women at the time of the Prophet P.B.U.H accepted Islam independently and made their own pledge of allegiance (Bay’ah).
- This ensured that women’s faith is recognized as their personal choice, not forced by fathers, brothers, or husbands.

d. Dignity of Mankind

- Islam declares human dignity for all.
- *“We have certainly honored the children of Adam...”* (Qur’an 17:70).
- For women, dignity is protected through modesty, respect in society, and safeguarding from exploitation.
- Example: Islam commands men to lower their gaze and respect women (Qur’an 24:30-31), ensuring their honor is preserved.

e. Protection of Honour

- Islam strictly condemns slander and false accusations against women.
- *“And those who launch a charge against chaste women... flog them with eighty stripes...”* (Qur’an 24:4).
- This law protected women from being defamed or dishonored in society.
- Example: The incident of Aisha (RA) and the revelation of verses in Surah Noor cleared her of false accusations, establishing this protection permanently.

f. Right to Justice

- Women are entitled to fair treatment and justice in all matters — family disputes, inheritance, marriage, or courts.
- *“Do not let hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness.”* (Qur’an 5:8).

- Women can present their cases before judges, as seen in the case of Khawla bint Tha'labah (RA), whose complaint led to the revelation of Surah Al-Mujadilah (58:1).

g. Right to Property

- Before Islam, women could not own or inherit property. Islam gave them independent financial rights.
- *"For men is a share of what they earn, and for women is a share of what they earn."* (Qur'an 4:32).
- Women can own, buy, sell, and inherit property without male control.
- Example: Khadija (RA) was a respected businesswoman who managed her own wealth and employed men, including the Prophet P.B.U.H.

2.2 Spiritual Rights

- Islam declares men and women equal in the eyes of Allah. What matters is not gender, but taqwa (piety).
"Whoever does righteous deeds, male or female, while being a believer – We will surely grant them a good life..." (Qur'an 16:97).
- Women are individually accountable for their actions on the Day of Judgment. They are not bound by the deeds of their husbands, fathers, or sons.
- Women equally share in the spiritual rewards of fasting, prayer, charity, and pilgrimage (Hajj).
- Historical example: Aisha (RA) and Fatimah (RA) were models of piety and devotion, setting spiritual standards for the community.

2.3 Educational Rights

- The Prophet P.B.U.H declared: *"Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim (male and female)."* (Ibn Majah).
- Islam encouraged women to learn religious as well as worldly knowledge.
- Aisha (RA) was one of the greatest scholars of Hadith and law; men used to come to her for guidance.
- Rufaida al-Aslamiyyah was among the first Muslim nurses, trained in medicine and serving in battles.

- This proves Islam made education a right and duty, centuries before the West even considered educating women.

2.4 Economic Rights

- Islam granted women full ownership rights. They can earn, buy, sell, and inherit independently.
- The Qur'an states: *"For men is a share of what they earn, and for women is a share of what they earn."* (Qur'an 4:32).
- Women are entitled to inheritance (though shares differ according to financial responsibilities).
- Mahr (dower): At marriage, the husband must give a gift to his wife, which is her sole property.
- Women are not financially responsible for family expenses; the husband bears the full burden. Whatever she earns or inherits is hers alone.
- Historical example: Khadija (RA), wife of the Prophet P.B.U.H, was a successful businesswoman and respected merchant in Makkah.

2.5 Social Rights

- **Marriage & Consent:** Women cannot be forced into marriage; their consent is a condition. The Prophet P.B.U.H said: *"A woman who has been previously married has more right to her person than her guardian, and a virgin should also be consulted."* (Bukhari).
- **Dignity & Protection:** Islam strictly forbade female infanticide that was common in pre-Islamic Arabia. *"And when the infant girl buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed."* (Qur'an 81:8-9).
- **Motherhood:** The Prophet P.B.U.H gave mothers the highest respect, saying: *"Paradise lies under the feet of mothers."* (Nasa'i).
- **Respect & Kindness:** Women must be treated with gentleness. The Prophet P.B.U.H said: *"The best of you are those who are best to their wives."* (Tirmidhi).

2.6 Political Rights

- Women were part of the Bay'ah (pledge of allegiance) to the Prophet P.B.U.H, showing their political inclusion.
- They were encouraged to express their opinions and were consulted in state matters.

- Example: Umm Salama (RA) advised the Prophet P.B.U.H during the Treaty of Hundaybiyyah, and her suggestion saved the day.
- Women took part in battles by nursing the wounded and even participating in defense (e.g., Nusaybah bint Ka'ab (RA) fought in the Battle of Uhud).
- Islam thus recognizes women as active contributors to community and political life, while maintaining modesty and family responsibilities.

3. Comparison with the West:

While Islam granted women rights more than 1400 years ago, the West only began recognizing women's rights in the last two centuries. The Islamic system is based on divine guidance (Qur'an & Sunnah), ensuring balance, dignity, and family harmony. By contrast, Western rights developed through human struggles and feminist movements, focusing mainly on absolute freedom and equality, sometimes at the cost of family values.

3.1 Historical Background

- Islam: From the 7th century, women received inheritance, consent in marriage, right to education, and spiritual equality.
- West:
 - Until the late 19th century, women were denied voting rights and property ownership.
 - The Married Women's Property Act (1870, UK) gave women the right to own property.
 - Women in the US gained the right to vote only in 1920.
- This shows Islam was centuries ahead of the West.

3.2 Spiritual Position

- Islam: Women are equal before Allah; piety (taqwa) is the only standard of superiority (Qur'an 49:13). Women like Aisha (RA) and Fatimah (RA) are role models.
- West: Religion played little role in women's emancipation. Secular feminism dominates, leading to equality in rights but often ignoring morality and spirituality.
- Contrast: Islam gives both equality and spirituality, while the West emphasizes freedom without religious limits.

3.3 Educational Rights

- Islam: The Prophet P.B.U.H made education obligatory for women. Historical examples include Aisha (RA), Hafsa (RA), and Rufaida al-Aslamiyyah.
- West: For centuries, women were excluded from schools and universities. Only in the 19th and 20th centuries did education for women become common.
- Contrast: Islam gave educational rights much earlier; the West gave them after long struggles.

3.4 Economic Rights

- Islam: Women have the right to earn, own, and inherit property independently (Qur'an 4:32). Husbands bear financial responsibility; women's wealth is their own.
- West:
 - Before the 19th century, married women's wealth was controlled by their husbands.
 - Today, women share equal economic responsibilities but also bear financial burdens.
- Contrast: Islam provides financial independence without burden; the West gives independence but expects women to equally share financial obligations.

3.5 Social Rights

- Islam: Protects women's dignity through modesty, prohibits infanticide, grants marriage consent, and honors mothers. Family is the core of society.
- West: Focuses on individual freedom; women have full choice in lifestyle, marriage, and divorce. However, this has led to rising divorce rates, single parenting, and weakening of the family institution.
- Contrast: Islam balances freedom with responsibility; the West emphasizes absolute freedom, sometimes harming family values.

3.6 Political Rights

- Islam: Women pledged allegiance (Bay'ah), advised the Prophet P.B.U.H, and participated in social and political matters. Their leadership in mixed societies is debated but participation is allowed.

- West: Women gained voting rights in the 20th century (e.g., US in 1920, France in 1944). Today, women can become presidents and prime ministers.
- Contrast: Islam recognized women's political role from the beginning, while the West only recently granted political equality.

3.7 Concept of Freedom

- Islam: Grants women freedom within the boundaries of Shariah. Rights are balanced with duties, ensuring dignity, family stability, and protection from exploitation.
- West: Promotes absolute freedom. While this gives women independence, it has also led to commercialization and objectification of women (e.g., in advertising and media).
- Contrast: Islam safeguards honor and dignity; the West risks reducing women to commodities in pursuit of "freedom."

4. Conclusion

Islam granted women a status of dignity, equality, and honor more than 1400 years ago, at a time when the world denied them even basic human rights. Through the Qur'an and Sunnah, women were recognized as equal partners in faith and were given rights in life, property, education, spirituality, society, and politics. The Western world, on the other hand, only began granting women such rights after long struggles in the last two centuries, often emphasizing absolute freedom at the expense of family and morality. Islam's approach is superior because it strikes a balance: it provides women with equality while also safeguarding their honor, protecting their dignity, and preserving the harmony of family and society. Thus, Islam not only uplifted women but also created a system where their rights are secure, timeless, and divinely protected.