

ROLES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN MODERN DAY NIGERIA: ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

In Nigeria, women have been subjected to promiscuity and all other forms of illicit co-habitation in their attempt to contribute their quotas toward the development of the country. As a result of this, some Muslims scholars have called for the prevention of women from active involvement in socio-political happenings in Nigeria. Hence, this paper focuses on the roles of women in Islamic history with a bid to encouraging Nigerian Muslim women toward contributing their quotas to the progress of the nation. It conceptualises women from Islamic perspective and highlights the status of women globally before the advent of Islamic civilisations especially in the Jahilīyyah (pre-Islamic Arabian) period. This paper also examines the status of women in Islam and identifies various ways by which Islam improved tremendously the status of women across the Arab land and by extension in the world entirely. It historicises the social and religio-political roles of women in Islam with relevance quotations from Qur'ān, Hadīth and Islamic history. The paper suggests ways of improving on it with due attention to the dictate of Sharī'ah (Islamic law) as well as the physiological and psychological composition of women. It highlights how Muslim women in Nigeria can effectively partake in nation building in their chosen carriers without jettisoning their roles as wives and as mothers within the limit of Maqāsid al - Sharī'ah (the objective of Sharī'ah). The paper employs historical and documentary methods in bringing out its findings and concludes by recommending some research-based approaches which includes the need for Muslim women to always avoid free mixing with the opposite sex and they must cover their entire body, do away with see-through apparent and clothes that expose or describe the shape of their body in their attempt to contribute their quotas towards the development of the country.

Keywords: Islamic civilisation, Nigerian, Muslim Women roles.

Introduction

Islam is a practical religion which provides no difference between religion and secular duties be it political, economic and social well-being of man. All are regarded as religious duties which must be done by everybody in gender neutral term by following the limit sets by Allah as documented in *Maqāsid al - Sharī'ah* (the ultimate objective of Sharī'ah). As against Islamic teachings, Muslim women in contemporary Nigeria are not well represented in socio-political activities of the country. This makes it impossible for many of them to play any important task saves natural role of child bearing. These categories of women are sometime

handicapped in the effective participation in nation building and as such constitute burden to the society, especially the women-fold. Meanwhile, subjugation of Muslim women is an illogical attempt made by some male counterparts to maintain male-domineering agenda. As a matter of fact, Islam clearly states the primary roles of women which are bearing and rearing of children. It does not rule against their active involvement or their sayings in the happenings of their environment though within the limit sets by the *Sharī'ah* (Yusuf, 2005).

Hence, this study focuses on the roles of women in Islamic history and its lessons for Muslim women with particular reference to Nigeria. It conceptualises women from Islamic perspective and highlights the status of women globally before the advent of Islamic civilisation especially in the *Jahilīyyah* (pre-Islamic Arabian) period. The study further examines the status of women in Islam and identifies various ways by which Islam improved tremendously the status of women across the Arab land and the entire world. It historicises the social and religio-political roles of women in Islam with relevance quotations from Qur'ān, Hadīth and Islamic history. The non-empirical research suggests ways of improving on it with due attention to the dictate of *Sharī'ah* (Islamic law) as well as the physiological and psychological composition of women. It highlights how Muslim women in Nigeria can effectively partake in nation building in their chosen carriers without jettisoning their roles as wives and as mothers within the limit of *Maqāsid al - Sharī'ah* (the ultimate objective of *Sharī'ah*). The study employed historical and descriptive methods in bringing out its findings and concludes by recommending some research-based approaches which includes the need for Muslim women to contribute their quotas towards the development of the country.

Islam as a complete way of Life

Islam is not just a religion but a very unique one when compared with other worldly acclaimed religions in the entire globe. Its distinctive uniqueness is that it has no associations with any particular person/people or neither country nor it is the product of any human thought as in the case of religions such as: Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism among others. Moreover, Islam is a complete way of life as it leaves no aspect of human life unaddressed. It is Allah's chosen religion as clearly mentioned in Qur'ān 31 *āyah* 14 which goes thus:

This day I have perfected your religion for you and accomplished my favour upon you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion”.

It must be noted that Islam is not a new religion brought by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) into Arabia in the seventh century as believed by some people but a final form of rules that is meant to regulate the activities of mankind and brings about sanity into their affairs. The objectives of this religion, as enunciated by the Qur'ān and Hadīth, is to create and cultivate in man the quality of good faith and absolute submission to Allah's will.

Meanwhile, the term Islam evolved from an Arabic word which connotes total submission, surrender and obedience to Allah's will. It literally means 'peace' and it is through total submission and obedience to the will of Allah that mankind can achieve real peace of body and mind. Such a life of obedience brings with it peace of mind to its adherents and establishes peace in the society at large. Islam was the same religion to the whole mankind revealed to Prophet Adam (A.S) and all other prophets that came after him and was perfected during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

Concept of women in Islam

The word woman itself which is made up of two syllables “wo” and “man” is sometimes amusingly given two different interpretations, neither of which has any sound etymological basis. To them, the “wo” is short for womb meaning womb-man that is: the man with a womb or the womb that conceives and bears the man. Aside this, some scholars

also classify woman as a perpetual source of sorrow to man. Thus, from whatever perspective it is viewed, the central word is man, which makes the woman a psychological extension of man (Daniel-Inim, 2014).

Hence, woman as conceptualised by Hornby (2010) is an adult female part of the human race, who is effeminate timid or weak. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has provided detailed definition of women as can be seen in the following traditions:

He said, be kind to women for verily they have been created from a rib. The most crooked rib is the uppermost one, if you seek (entirely) to straighten it you will break it and if you leave it, it will remain crooked. Therefore be kind to women”.

Status of the Women in the Society before the Advent of Islam

Women across the ages had played distinctive roles in human development. They have played the role of daughters, wives, mothers and a distinctive member of the society all of which have been appreciated and recognised. Despite this, the condition of women across the globe prior to the advent of Islam was very pitiful and varies from one culture to another. In nearly all of these cultures and civilisations, women were given inconsiderable quantity of respects (Salman, 2019). Some religions saw woman as the satan's psychological trap for men who are unworthy of entering the paradise while some regarded them as inferior to men. They are considered by some culture as the embodiment of sin and misfortune. Others denied them of all religious instructions while some saw them as signs of shame to the family. There were communities that kept women confined like tethered animals while some societies gave a father the right to sell off his daughter(s). In some cultures, if a man murdered a woman, he was not bound to pay for her life (Akanbi, 2004).

Women in most of the ancient cultures and civilisations were generally oppressed and subjugated. In ancient civilisations (Indian, Roman, Greek and Judaism), women were denied their God given right and freedom. In Hindu scripture, a woman whose mind and body are kept in subjugation acquires high renown in this world and in the next the same abode with her husband. In early Greek civilisation women deserved no honour, they were seen as sources of all failures and misfortunes. A Roman wife was described as a babe minor, a ward or a person incapable of doing or acting anything according to her own individual taste, a person continually under the tutelage and guardianship of her husband. In India, subjugation (of women) is the cardinal principle. Day and night women were held by their protectors in a state of dependence. The rule of inheritance was mainly a male affair with total exclusion of female (Yusuf, 2005).

In most of these civilisations, there was no limitation to the number of wives a man could marry and there was no system of law that regulates the activities of a man in relation to his spouse. They were given away in marriage without their consent and divorce at will. Infact, women in this era were not allowed to seek education. Their duties were to seek the pleasure of their husband by helping them in their farms, breed children and take care of the home (Salman, 2019).

Further, the condition of women in the pre-Islamic Arabian was not different from that of the civilisations discussed above. They suffered great humiliation and were exposed to various forms of oppressions. It was a general practice of Arabs men to acquire as many wives as they desired with no set limit. Also, there was no system of law and justice that would forbid a man from committing any injustice towards his wives. They had no share in the properties left behind by their parents or husband. They were instead treated like properties which were to be shared. Worst still, in case of the death of their husbands, they became part of the properties of the oldest son if the deceased had son from other marriages (Yusuf, 2005).

In the *jāhilīyah* period, women were ranked no better than slave girls and concubines. They had no right to own anything and were sold and bought like domestic utensils. Women were looked down upon as unworthy creatures, in their infant as baby girls they used to be buried alive soon after the delivery (Rahim, 2001). Generally, the birth of baby girls in the pre - Islamic era was considered as a disgrace to the family concerned. This practice was described in the Holy Qur'ān 16 *āyah* 58-59 which goes thus:

And when a daughter is declared to one of them his face becomes change and he is full of anger. He conceals himself from others because of the nefarious of that which is proclaimed to him. Shall he retain it with shame or bury it alive in the ground. Surely, evil is what they officially do.

Moreover, in traditional African society women have been associated with many negative cultural identities which remove from them their rights. Unfortunately, this negative cultural image reinforced by religious connotation, has remained a perpetual source of oppression against womanhood in human history (Daniel-Inim, 2014).

The Status of Women in Islam

The arrival of Islam amidst the above discussed conditions of women brought about freedom into their life. Islam came to correct misconceptions, implement justice and restored women dignities. It restored the honour of women in the society and gave them the right to make their opinions known in their various societies (Yusuf, 2005). Islam improved tremendously their mental, social, educational and constitutional status across the Arab land and in the world entirely. Islam protected the fundamental rights of woman, and granted them their God given rights in a more dignified manner. It equates the position of women to be the same as that of men and declares that women are the twin half of men, their sources of happiness and good living (Salman, 2019).

Islam regulates the men's attitude towards women and opines that women are the sources of prosperity and psychological tranquility for men. It also decrees that men's attitude toward women should be nothing but compassion. This is in line with the tradition of the Prophet (SAW) in which one of his companions asked:

"Who is most deserving of my care?" He said your mother" The man asked "Then who?" "Your mother" The man asked (fourth time) "Then who?" He said "your father".

In line with this tradition, Islam repeatedly commends the efforts of women in the sense that goodness to parents especially the mother comes directly after the command to worship Allah and believe in His oneness. Moreover, Allah puts first the mother's right over that of the father to appreciate them for hardship they endure in pregnancy, delivery, nursing and raising their children. This is contained in Qur'ān 31 *āyah* 14 which goes thus:

And we have enjoined on man to be dutiful and good to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness upon weakness and hardship upon hardship and his weaning is in two (2) years. Give thanks to me and your parents.

Further to this, the Prophet (SAW) enjoined the companions that if any one of them trained a woman he has trained a nation. Islam places the women in the most honourable position. They would be under men's protection and care right from their birth till their death. The honour accorded women by Islam as contained in the Qur'ān bear witness to their equality from the Islamic point of view. Qur'ān 4 *āyah* 1 says:

O mankind, be dutiful to your Lord who created you from a single person (Adam) and from him (Adam) He created his wife and from both of them many men and women are

created And fear Allah through whom you demand your mutual (right) and do not cut the relations of the wombs (kinship) surely, Allah is Watcher over you.

The *āyah* quoted above indicates that Allah has created both sexes from a single source. With this, Qur'ān affirms the fact that both men and women are two (2) branches of a single tree and they are like two (2) children from the same father and mother. Hence, there is no superiority in terms of qualifications between both of them and they are to complement each other. Islam also abolished all the previous unjust laws that demoted women as inferior in quality and nature. As such, every individual (men and women) in Islam is independently responsible and accountable to Allah. To this, Qur'ān 16 *āyah* 97 reads:

Whoever works righteousness man and women and has faith, verily, to him we will give a life that is good and pure and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.

This implies that Islam right from its inception has freed women from socio-political bondage of the period and accorded them the same basic right as those of their male counterparts.

Roles of Women in Islam

Knowledge is very essential for the existence of human being. It also provides its possessor with improved mental capacity and preparations for greater responsibilities. As such, for any Muslim to know the essence of his or her existence in this world, he needs to acquire knowledge so as to play the role of Allah's vice-gerent on earth. This signifies that acquisition of knowledge is compulsory for any Muslim who wishes to live, work and die as a true believer. Thus, acquisition of knowledge in Islam is expressed in gender-neutral term and it is considered as the mother of all other forms of empowerment. Islam accords women the same right as men in terms of education. Further, the Prophet (SAW) made compulsory on Muslim (male and female) acquisition of knowledge. More so, he decries that knowledge is the lost properties of Muslims - male and female. Hence, where ever he or she see it, its acquisition becomes compulsory.

Meanwhile, when a child is born into this world, he remains attached to his mother. As a result of this, the fundamental role of women in Islam is the proper upbringing of socially and psychologically balanced children. Those who could help in the advancement of the humanity: religiously, politically, socially, economically, scientifically, technically and militarily. Hence, ability to carry out the above mentioned duties by women requires quantitative education. In view of this, Islam does not take the education of women with levity so as to join the male counterpart in the advancement of humanity. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) even attached more importance to the education of women compared to that of men. He was reported to have said:

If you educate a man you educate a single soul. But if you educate a female you educate a nation (Abū Dāwūd).

Further, as regard to women's engagement in economic activity, Islam does not forsake women from taking part provided their activities do not conflict with their roles as wives and mothers. They are not forbidding to work, so long as their work does not affect their status as Muslim women. In Islam, anything a Muslim woman owns, be it money, property, land or any other possession is hers alone. Nobody else has any right to it whatsoever, this is freedom of personal possession for the Muslim woman. Furthermore, women are qualified and allowed to engage in financial dealings. According to Islamic law, women can own, buy, sell and undertake any financial transaction without the need for guardianship and without any restriction or limitation.

In essence, women are not forbidden to work. They are especially encouraged to work in fields where their skills are in demand and play the roles which are specially suited to their

nature. Thus, Muslim women are encouraged to engage in all types of occupations which do not involve free mixing of male and female. As such, the Muslim community is expected to consider it as their responsibilities to create various job opportunities for their women so that they can function effectively in the community. Islam indicates that a man who honours, respects and deals with woman justly possesses healthy and righteous personality. At the same time a man who maltreats his wife (s) is an unrighteous and unrespectable man. The Prophet (SAW) was reported to have said that: the most complete believer is the best in character and the best of you is the best to his women-folk (Al Bukhāri, 2003).

Moreover, the main purpose of creating human beings (men and women) in Islam is to serve Allah. Thus, Islam considers women worthy human beings with equal responsibilities to that of men as far as worshipping of Allah is concerned. They are both responsible for the observance of religious duties with the consequent reward or punishment for failure to carry them out. In essence, the reward of woman is not different from that of men in terms of religious obligations. This is explained in Qur'ān 33 āyah 35 which reads thus:

Certainly, the Muslim men and women, the believing men and women, the obedient men and women, the truthful men and women, the patient men and women, the humiliate men and women, the charitable men and women, the fasting men and women, the men who guard their private part and women who do so and men and women who engage much in Allah's worship For them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward

The above cited āyah provides clear-cut evidence that men and women are equal in terms of their relationship with Allah.

Further to this, Islamic practices such as: testimony of faith (*Shahādah*), prayer (*Ṣalāt*), charity (*Zakāt*), fasting (*Sawm*) and pilgrimage (*Hajj*) are required of both male and female. This is corroborated by Qur'ān 9 āyah 71, which says:

The believers, men and women are protectors of one another: They enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity and obey Allah and His messenger. On them will Allah pour His mercy: For Allah is exalted in power and wise?

Lastly, human relationships with Allah are determined by the degree of consciousness of Allah and women are enjoined to perform the sane religious duties and have the same reward for their deed.

Apart from the primary roles of women as home keepers, they are expected under obligation to exercise their civic right of enjoining what is right and forbidding evil in line with Qur'ān 9 āyah 71 cited above. In line with this āyah women have rights to participate in public affairs. They have right to vote and be voted for during election as well as right to be nominated into political offices but such offices must not affect their roles at home. Though, men are given the responsibilities of being the overall leader in the society where both sexes are presence. This is because by nature, men are more capable of bearing hardship and are gifted with greater courage than the female counterpart.

Meanwhile, despite the fact that the overall leadership position is given to men, it is of paramount significance to note that the decision making in the society demands the presence and active involvement of women. This is because they constitute a very significant percentage and have vital roles to play in politics. They have right to advocate beneficial

political reform and raise their voice against oppressive political policies. During the era of the Prophet (SAW), women were consulted on socio-political affairs. Though, they were kept out of public life. The consensus of opinion of Muslim (*Ijmā'u*) which involve men and women, as one of the sources of Islamic law is a very good example of the democratic tendency of Islam (Doi, 1984). The Prophet (SAW) was commanded by Allah in Qur'ān 3 *āyah* 159 to hold consultation with the Muslims (men and women) in matters of state.

In Islamic history, evidence shows that women partook in serious discussions and arguments openly with *Khulafā'* (caliphs). Women were also allowed to present their opinions on issues that could have influence on their lives and that of the Muslim 'Ummah in general. Example of this was the case of a woman who challenged the opinion of Umar bin al-Khattāb when he wanted to place a seal on dowry. This woman stood at the centre of the mosque, debunked the proposed policy, and stated its disagreement with *Sharī'ah*, and made sure the policy did not see the light of the day (Nevin, n.d). As a matter of fact, there were women who by means of strong personality or general gift were outstanding members of the society in Islamic history. They played vital roles in the political lives of the Muslims. Example of these women were Khadījah bint Khuwāylid and 'Āisha Bint Abū Bakr (both were wives of the Prophet's (SAW)). The duos participated actively in politics and were consulted by the respected companions on socio-political issues based on the directive of the Prophet (SAW) (Akanbi, 2004).

Further to this, women have been assigned a natural role of nurturing, guiding and reforming the subsequent generation of men and women. They are indeed nation builders and as such they are to change things whenever they perceive abnormalities in their community and to establish good and righteous practices. Infact, it is an established fact of history that women were included in the Avant quad of Islamic mission of the Prophet (SAW). In the life of these virtues women, there is an exemplary pattern for modern-day Muslim women to follow. These wise and learned women made great contributions to the course of Islamic teachings and helped greatly in the proper maintenance of rules, security and good public relation among the Ummah (Salman, 2019).

In essence, it is the duty of women in Islam to serve as law enforcement agent in achieving a peaceful society free of all vices and immoralities. As a matter of reverence, one can cite examples of some women who went to battle and made landmark achievements. Record shows a woman, Ummara by name, who with her husband and two sons tendered the wounded and participated actively in battles to the extent of losing one of her hands. Besides, Rufaydah - one of the female companions of the Prophet (SAW) did follow the Prophet (SAW) to the battle field (Spahic, 2016). All these battles were aimed at protecting the Ummah and defending the old and minor against external attack.

One other example of these women was 'Āisha who acted as the commander of army in the battle of camel. There were other brave women warriors who were very active in policing the Muslims and their territories. They served as law enforcement agents and proved to be courageous in the battle field. Examples of such brave Muslim female warriors were: Nusāybah Bint Ka'bah Al-Ansāri, Saffiyah bint 'Abdul Muttālib among others (Salman, 2019).

Roles of Muslim Women in Mordern-Day Nigerian

It has been established so far that the arrival of Islam in the seventh century broke all the artificial discriminations that were in existence in human society prior to its evolution. With this, various social and religio-political activities that the female companions of the Prophet (SAW) engaged in were discussed. Thus, the Nigerian Muslim women, apart from the natural roles of child bearing, are free to engage in all lawful employments where necessary most especially when there is need for them to supplement their husband's earning. Though, Nigerian Muslim women in the name of seeking for job are not allowed under

Sharī'ah to engage in works as dancers, film actress, musicians who sell their bodies to make money. In contrast, they are allowed to work as managers, teachers, lecturers, bankers, medical doctors, lawyers, computer analysts, welfare workers etc, where they have tendency of benefiting the community. During the time of the Prophet (SAW), women went about their jobs, even those in *Iddah* (waiting) period out of necessity (Yusuf, 2005).

Nigerian Muslim women can establish their own farms and man poultries, fish ponds and even animal husbandry, especially those who study Agriculture in the universities or Colleges of Agriculture. Also, Nigerian Muslim women who study Nursing or those who study Medicine can solely or jointly establish hospitals. This in the opinion of the researcher can even give them the opportunity of employing more Nigerian Muslim women into various units in the hospital. Also, Nigerian Muslim women have every right to partake in the political activities in the Country. Though, there are glaring dichotomy between Islamic political system and that of Nigeria. They only need to take cognisance of the dictates of Islam and see it as a means of serving Allah. They must have good intention of putting sanity into the society and make positive impacts in the political life of the led.

Muslim jurist differ in their opinion as regards given women's position of head of State, governor of a state and leadership in *Jihād* (fighting in the course of Allah). However, Imām Abū Hanīfah is of the view that women can be appointed as a judge where she can adjudicate in civil and commercial cases and nothing more. In the Qur'ānic context, Balqīs, the queen of Sheba who successfully ruled her people was a woman political head. She was a just, energetic and righteous female leader but known for worshipping of heavenly bodies. She later embraced Islam and led her followers to Islam (Q. 27:23-44). This shows that leadership is not meant for only men. Though, in modern-day, Nigeria the practice of holding midnight political meeting has the tendency of discouraging serious minded Muslim women from active participation in politics. From the foregoing, it must be noted that limiting the positions to be held by the Muslim women in Islam law is not aimed at undermining the personality of women in Islam. It is rather related to the natural differences in the biological and psychological make-up of individual sexes.

The head of a state in Islam is not a mere figure-head. He leads people in daily *Salawāt* (prayers) as well as *Jum'ah* (Friday) prayers and *Īd* (feast) festivities. He is continually engaged in the process of decision making pertaining to security and total well-being of his followers. Such a demanding position and responsibilities such as: commander-in-Chief of Army, position of *Amīr* (Muslim leader) among others is generally inconsistent with the physiology and psychological composition of women in general.

It is medically proved that during women pregnancy and menstruation period they undergo different psychological and physiological changes which may occur during emergency situation. Thus, this affects her decision especially some decisions that demand or require a maximum of rationality and a minimum emotionality as requirement which may not concede with the instinctive nature of woman. Consequently, Islam gives men the responsibility of being the overall leader of the society where both sexes are present. Thus, one sex (female gender) is expected to play a complementary role with the other (male gender) for effective continuity of life.

Conclusion

Muslim women in Nigeria are not well represented in socio-political activities of the nation, thereby reducing the numerical strength of the Muslims in the nation building. Some Muslims have made tremendous efforts at encouraging Muslim women to take part in nation building within the limit of *Sharī'ah* while a few of Muslims kept on discouraging them, thereby limiting their activities to natural roles of child bearing and rearing. Despite the subjugation of women by a few Muslims, efforts are repeatedly ongoing until a degree of success is attained. It is in contribution to these efforts that this current work reflected on the

social and religio-political roles of women in Islamic history with a bit to encourage Nigerian women on the need to make their impact known in nation building within the limit of *Sharī'ah*. In doing this, the study examined the status of women in various civilisations prior to the advent of Islamic civilisation and put on record, ways by which the status was tremendously improved by Islam. It also highlighted the social and religio-political roles of women in Islam with due attention to their physiological and psychological composition.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for improvement. Women are allowed to work in any field that suit their nature or aspire to make their impacts known in the public, if they so wish. But:

- i. they must cover their entire body, do away with see-through apparent and clothes that expose or describe the shape of their body.
- ii. they are also expected to do away with any fragrant substances that can provide a pleasant smell which can attract men.
- iii. they must avoid free mixing with the opposite sex but rather portray themselves well and stay in offices or places meant for them.
- iv. the divine condition for the guidance of Muslim women such as: consciousness of Allah, observance of Islamic mode of dressing, avoidance of undue mingling of sexes are worthy of consideration by serious minded Muslim women.
- v. more importantly, Muslim leaders should involve female the more in Islamic education, so as to expose them to the dos and don'ts within the limit of *Sharī'ah*.

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