THE STATUS OF ISLAMIC AND ROMANIAN WOMEN

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Abstract

Women’s emancipation has been talked about for decades, the woman has been the centre of attention in many areas, she has been in headlines as brave, valiant, the ‘partner’ of man, she has occupied leading positions, has entered politics. But the situation is different in other parts of the world. Millions of women still struggle worldwide to have a similar status to that of man, to involve themselves in politics or take part in decision-making processes, to have the same rights as men. The situation has changed and it still undergoes major changes in Muslim countries, as well as in Romania.

If in the developed countries of the world, women’s emancipation has been talked about for decades, woman has been the center of attention in many areas, she has been in headlines and on the news as brave, valiant, as the ‘partner’ of man, if she has occupied leading position, has entered politics, has been successful both in business and at home, the situation is different in other parts of the world. Millions of women still struggle worldwide to have a similar status to that of man, to be allowed to do the same jobs, to involve in politics or take part in decision-making processes, to have the same rights as men. The situation has definitely changed and it still undergoes major changes in Muslim countries, as well as in Romania.

The Arabic word ‘Islam’ simply means ‘submission’, and derives from a word meaning ‘peace’. In a religious context it means complete submission to the will of God. ‘Mohammedanism’ suggests that Muslims worship Muhammad rather than God. ‘Allah’ is the Arabic name for God, which is used by Arab Muslims and Christians alike.

Islam treats family, society and the whole of mankind on an ethical basis. Differentiation in sex is neither a credit nor a drawback for the sexes. Therefore, when we take into consideration the status of woman in Islam we should not think that Islam has no specific guidelines, limitations, responsibilities and obligations for men. What makes one valuable and respectable in the eyes of Allah, the Creator of mankind and the universe, is neither one’s prosperity, position, intelligence, physical strength nor beauty, but only one’s Allah-consciousness and awareness (*taqwa*). In the Western culture and in cultures influenced by it, there is an obvious disparity between men and women. That is why there is a clear need for stating the position of Islam on important issues in a clear way.

The teachings of Islam are based essentially on the Qur’an (God’s revelation) and Hadeeth (elaboration by Prophet Muhammad).

Allah the Almighty stated in the glorious Qur’an 9:71:

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The believers, men and women, are helpers, supporters, friends and protectors of one another. [1]

Islam holds women in great honor and recognizes their rights in marriage, property and inheritance. Despite the social acceptance the Qur'an forbade the custom of female infanticide among some Arabian tribes and considered it a crime like any other murder.

When the female (infant) buried alive is questioned for what crime she was killed. (Qur'an 81-8-9)

The Qur'an admonishes the distant attitudes among some parents upon hearing the news of the birth of a baby girl, instead of a baby boy:

When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a female (child) his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on (sufferance and) contempt or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on! (Qur'an 16:58-59)

Islam requires kind and just treatment towards daughters. Among the sayings of Prophet Muhammad in this regard are the following:

"Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, Allah will enter him into Paradise."
"Whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the day of judgment as this (and he pointed with his two fingers held together)."
As far as women are concerned, their right to seek knowledge is not different from that of males. Prophet Muhammad said:

"Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim."

"Muslim" is used here in the generic meaning which includes both males and females. Allah the Almighty, stated in the Glorious Quran 30:21:

[1] *Gender Equity in Islam*, Jamal A. Badawi

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Among His signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy.

One of the great signs of the Might of Allah the Almighty is to create for mankind wives from among themselves so that they are pleased, matured, and can receive satisfaction from one another. Both male and female derive comfort, satisfaction, help and support from each other. A wife, according to Islam, is one of the most essential pillars and the basis of the whole society. She is the essential foundation upon which a Muslim home is established. Islam grants her certain rights and requires her to perform certain duties.
The Qur'an states that marriage is sharing between the two halves of the society, and that its objectives, beside perpetuating human life, are emotional safety and divine harmony. Love and mercy are its bases.

And among His Signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may well in tranquility with them and He has put live and mercy between your (hearts); verily in that are signs for those who reflect. (Qur'an 30:21)
(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves and pairs among cattle: by this means does He multiply you: there is nothing whatever like unto Him and He is the One that hears and sees (all things). (Qur'an 42:11)

The female has the right to *accept or reject* marriage proposals. Her consent is a condition to the validity of the marital contract according to the Prophet's teaching. If by "arranged marriage" is meant marrying the girl without her approval, then such a marriage can be nullified if she wishes. A girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad and she reported that her father had obliged her to marry without her approval. The Messenger of God gave her the option between accepting the marriage or invalidating it. In another version, the girl said:

"Actually I accept this marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right (to force a husband on them)" (Ibn Maja[2], No. 1873)

Besides all other requirements for her safety at the time of marriage, it was particularly decreed that woman has the full right to her Mahr, a marriage gift, which is offered to her by her husband and is included in the nuptial contract, and that such possession does not shift to

[2] Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Yazid Ibn Maja al-Rab'i al-Qazwini, a medieval scholar of hadith (the sayings of Muhammad). He compiled the last of Sunni Islam's six canonical hadith collections, *Sunan Ibn Maja.*

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her father or husband. The notion of Mahr in Islam is neither an actual or symbolic value for the woman, as was the case in certain cultures, it is rather a gift symbolizing love and care. The rules for married life in Islam are clear and in agreement with human nature. In consideration of the physiological and psychological structure of man and woman, both have equal rights and claims on each other, except for one responsibility, that of leadership. This is a matter which is natural in any collective life and which is reliable with the nature of man.
The Qur'an thus states:

"And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them." (Qur'an 2:228).

The husband is in charge for the safeguarding, protection, and general control of the family *(qiwamah)* within the framework of consultation and compassion. The shared addiction and balance of the roles of males and females does not mean "subservience" on either party to the other.
Islam emphasizes the importance of taking counsel and mutual agreement in family decisions. The Qur'an gives us an example:

"... If they (husband wife) desire to wean the child by mutual consent and (after) consultation, there is no blame on them..." (Qur'an 2: 233).
Beyond her basic rights as a wife comes the right which is emphasized by the Qur'an and is strongly recommended by the Prophet: kind behavior and companionship.
Not only is the woman's right to decide about her marriage recognized, but also her right to seek an end for an unsuccessful marriage. To provide for the constancy of the family and in order to guard it from quick decisions under momentary emotional stress, definite steps and waiting periods should be observed by men and women in search of divorce. Taking into consideration the relatively more emotional nature of women, a good reason for asking for divorce should be brought before the judge. If the nuptial contract allows it, the woman can divorce her husband without resorting to the court. More precisely, some aspects of Islamic Law concerning marriage and divorce are interesting and are worthy of separate treatment.
When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible for any reason, men are still taught to seek a cordial end for it. The Qur'an states about such cases:

When you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits). (Qur'an 2:231)

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Conjugal disputes are to be handled confidentially between the parties whenever possible without excesses or meanness. If disputes are not resolved then family mediation can be resorted to.

Divorce is seen as the last option, which is allowed but not encouraged. Under no circumstances does the Qur'an encourage, allow or disregard family violence or physical mistreatment and brutality. The maximum allowed in extreme cases is a mild tap that does not even leave a mark on the body while saving the marriage from failing.

Forms of marriage dissolution include reciprocal concord, the husband's initiative or the wife's initiative provided that she returns the marital gift to her husband *(khul).* The mother is given main concern for custody of young children, up to the age of about seven. A child later chooses between his mother and father for custody purposes. Custody questions are to be settled in a way that balances the benefit of both parents and security of the child.

One of the frequent myths is to associate polygyny[3] with Islam as if it were introduced by Islam or is the norm according to its teachings. While no text in the Qur'an states that either monogamy or polygyny is the norm, demographic data shows that monogamy is the norm and polygyny is the exception. In almost all countries and on the worldwide level the numbers of men and women are almost even, with women's numbers to some extent more than men.

Thus it is a realistic impossibility to consider polygyny as the norm since it assumes a demographic organization of at least two thirds females, and one third males (or 80 percent females and 20 percent males if four wives per male is the norm). No Islamic "norm" is based on an impossible supposition.

Like many peoples and religions, however, Islam did not prohibit polygyny but regulated it and limited it. It is simply permitted and not forbidden.

The only passage in the Qur'an (4:3) which explicitly mentioned polygyny and limited its practice in terms of the number of wives allowed and the necessity of justice between them was exposed after the Battle of Uhud in which dozens of Muslims were martyred leaving behind widows and orphans. This seems to specify that the objective of its continued tolerability is to deal with individual and collective contingencies that may occur once in a while (id est., imbalances between the number of males and females created by wars). This provides an ethical, realistic, and benevolent solution to the problems of widows and orphans who are likely to be more susceptible in the absence of a husband/ father figure to look after their needs: economic, companions, proper education, and other requirements.

[3] the practice of a man having more than one wife at the same time

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If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans marry women of your choice two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then only one ... (Qur'an 4:3)

All parties concerned have options*:* to refuse marriage proposals as in the case of a future second wife or to look for divorce or khul (divestiture) as in the case of a present wife who cannot agree to live with a polygynous husband.

While the Qur'an allows polygyny, it does not permit polyandry (multiple husbands of the same woman). Anthropologically speaking, polyandry is quite unusual. Its practice raises difficult problems related to the lineal identity of children, and inappropriateness of polyandry with feminine nature.

Gentleness to parents (especially mothers) is next to worship of Allah:

Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life say not to them a word of contempt nor repel them but address them in terms of honor. (Qur'an 17:23)

And We have enjoined on the human (to be good) to his/her parents: in travail upon travail did his/her mother bear him/her and in years twain was his/her waning: (hear the command) "Show gratitude to Me and to your parents: to Me is (your final) destiny." (Qur'an 31:14)

A man came to Prophet Muhammad asking:

O Messenger of God, who among the people is the most worthy of my good company? The Prophet (P) said, Your mother. The man said then who else: The Prophet (P) said, Your mother. The man asked, Then who else? Only then did the Prophet (P) say, Your father. (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

Among Muslims there is a big gap between the models of the real. Cultural practices on both extremes do exist. Some Muslims imitate non-Islamic cultures and take on the modes of dress, unlimited combination and behavior resulting in corrupting influences of Muslims and endangering the family's honesty and power. Parameters of suitable reticence for males and females (dress and behavior) are based on revelatory sources (the Qur'an and authentic Sunnah[4]) and as such are seen by believing men and women as divinely-based procedure with legal aims, and divine knowledge behind them. They are not male-imposed or collectively

[4] Religious actions that were instituted by Muhammad during the 23 years of his ministry

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imposed limits. The concept of near total isolation of women is unfamiliar to the prophetic time. Explanation problems in explaining isolation mirror, partially, the cultural influences and status in different Muslim countries.

The Romanian society both differs and resembles the Muslim one. Not only a daughter but also a wife, mainly in rural families is expected to be submissive. The daughter is told whom to marry, and the choice of the parents chiefly resides in the fact that the future husband is expected to have vast possessions of land in order to ensure the prosperity of the family. Thus, little choice is left for the young girl in deciding whom to marry, love may play an insignificant role in such a relationship. The young wife may have too little liberty in deciding about family issues on her own, the husband being the one who dictates the course of family life. The overall view of this situation, however, has slightly diminished since the Romanian revolution of 1989, but in many areas of the country it still prevails, this being mostly the case of remote villages, where people have little contact with urban life. When children occur, the woman is expected to take care of them, do the household chores and also involve in agricultural work. This may slightly differ, as recently agricultural work has been significantly simplified by the use of machinery, but it still prevails in the cases of poorer villages where the inhabitants have a low financial status and the use of machinery is beyond their possibilities. This brings to mind the famous works of modern Romanian novelists, like Liviu Rebreanu or Mihail Sadoveanu.

The emancipation of women in rural areas is regarded as a whim due to the fact that family life resides on hard work, the submissiveness of the wife, the breeding of animals and the working of the land in order to provide food. Thus, there is little room for emancipation, as it is not needed in order to live family life, to raise children or to do household chores, not to mention the fact that many women refuse emancipation as a result of the teachings of the Bible. Church attendance in rural areas by far surpasses the one in towns. This leads to a stronger belief that the woman's status in a family is the one described above. Women are expected to do a man's work, schooling is regarded as unnecessary, because agriculture and survival need no school.

From this point of view, urban life differs considerably from rural life. A young woman in the town is not expected to marry the spouse chosen by the parents, more freedom of choice is given to the daughter. As urban life does not revolve around the household or around agriculture, schooling is highly regarded as necessary for a better life, this giving the opportunity to the girl to enter different social strata. A very high percentage of Romanian girls attend college and university with the hope of having better career prospects. A young woman very frequently sets out on the paths of life on her own, doing her best to pursue a

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dream and have a career before settling down. Thus, the average age at which town women get married is significantly higher than that of urban girls. A mother in town is not expected to do the same things as one in the village. Urban mothers can take a two-year maternal leave in order to raise their child, but many return to work before this period expires in order not to be on the same career level when they get back. They prefer to hire a nanny who may also look after the house and perform minor household chores than to stay away from work for such a long period.

Nowadays, fathers are also allowed to take paternal leave, but such cases are rather rare and only occur when the wife is paid a higher salary than the man.

With such busy mothers, however, the family has little benefit in the long run. Children are brought up by nannies, maids, grandparents who are less strict than parents would normally be. The new generation of youngsters brought up after the revolution, already lacks many of the 'rules' supposed to be learnt at home, due to the fact that mothers are away for the major part of the day, and little energy is left in the evening for a normal family life. Pursuing a career is one of many women's dreams nowadays, and many enroll in jobs normally taken by men a few dozens of years ago, but rarely can a mother succeed in having both a family life and a career.

In Romania women are regarded as more well-suited with their conventional roles than as politicians, business women or independent professionals. Men believe women are more sensitive and sensible, but less interested in public interaction. Only few men consider women suitable for managerial positions in public administration. A lot of people are still of the opinion that women are too busy with family duties, which prevent them from taking part in the managerial process. As patriarchal cultures rest upon the obvious supremacy of the man, one can easily conclude that women are considered weak, sensitive and in need of protection. In early childhood, the gender differentiation is legitimated through the roles of the parents and even through playing practices. With advertising and mass media, pictures of women as objects of desire and pleasure are broadly sold to the Romanian public, supplementary enhancing the conventional role of the woman. As long as women do not stand up for themselves, gender issues will remain inside the sphere of surveys and studies. Accepting the stereotypes and acting in agreement with them only serves to strengthen them. Change cannot come from above, and it cannot be anticipated. Certainly, it is not enough for the European Union to impose its equal chance principles as a necessity for accession, as an alternative, these standards have to come into view from women themselves. Women do not participate actively in the political fight, people exclude any one female candidate running for leading positions in the senate and are still reluctant when it comes to casting their votes for a woman

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candidate. Women are depicted as wives, colleagues or supporters. So far, no candidate has spoken on the matter of sexual equality. Nevertheless, it is also true that no woman has challenged the political candidates on this topic. With growing support for left-nationalist candidates, sexual equality is less possible to be a main concern after the elections, because their political principles rest upon traditional stereotypes, patriarchal symbols and prototypes.

Progress perspectives depend on many factors: starting with a more active participation of the civil society representatives (parties, trade unions), up to emphasizing the efforts of determining managerial factors in all domains to incorporate, as a main concern, respecting, guaranteeing and promoting the principle of equal opportunities between women and men on their program. Sexual discrimination persists, although the 1991 Constitution stipulates equal rights for all people. But in everyday life we face discrimination attitudes and behaviors addressed to women, as a result of a certain type of social construct, structurally based on valuing the masculine representation. The aspiration of equal contribution to information and profits allocation is not only a motto emptied of content. It is the thought that the progress of a nation depends on the equal co-participation of human resources, represented by men and women equally to the process of integration to a normal human dimension.

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